“FOSTERING COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING LIVED EXPERIENCES OF URBAN HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS IN AN UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAM”

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“FOSTERING COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING LIVED
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ADMISSIONS COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAM”

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the remarkable women in my family who have been unwavering pillars of support since the day I was born. Firstly, to my Granny on my maternal side, whose selfless dedication allowed me to engage in various educational activities—from after-school programs to Upward Bound and College Summit. Granny, your sacrifices during your 30s and 40s are the foundation upon which this academic achievement stands. This victory is as much yours as it is mine. Rest in honor.

I extend heartfelt gratitude to my mother, who stood by me throughout this journey. Your belief in me, your prayers, and the spirit of resilience you instilled in me have been my guiding lights. Your unwavering support propelled me to the finish line, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

To my great-grandmother, paternal grandmother, and all my aunties, I express my deepest thanks. Your collective influence molded me, ensuring that any goal I set my mind to was achievable. You provided not only wisdom but also the tools and resources necessary to broaden my horizons beyond the mountains of West Virginia.

This dissertation is dedicated to those individuals whom the system unjustly dismissed based on academic ability or test scores. It stands as a testament to resilience and determination. To all those who may have faced discouragement, I hope this work serves as an inspiration. Regardless of your learning abilities, believe in yourself, seek out resources, and find a supportive community to navigate through your academic aspirations. This victory is for you too.
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I express my sincere gratitude to my professors and dissertation committee for their invaluable contributions to my academic journey. Their constructive feedback and guidance have played a pivotal role in shaping me into the educational leader I am today. Thank you for generously pouring into my cup. I am eager to build upon this research foundation as I continue my scholarly pursuits.
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“FOSTERING COLLEGE KNOWLEDGE: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING LIVED EXPERIENCES OF URBAN HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS IN AN UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAM”

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ABSTRACT

This research contributes to the discourse on the crucial role played by admissions and enrollment managers in fostering student success. The study dives into the lived experiences of students engaged in an admissions-led college access program funded by the Office of Admissions. Notably, the program's overarching objective was to scale city-wide impact by elevating the college-going rate among Cincinnati Public High School System students.

In enrollment management, historical data often informs decisions, guiding recruitment and admissions strategies. However, there is a gap in considering the firsthand experiences of students navigating our systems and programs. This research seeks to address this gap through a case study approach by exploring students' experiences within the program. The primary aim is to shift the paradigm from creating programs through a deficit lens to one that leverages students' strengths, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of our educational initiatives.
SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Nelson Mandela

Background

College access and student success for underrepresented student populations\(^1\) (USPs) becomes a topic for P-20 leaders and policymakers when an institution finds itself in the middle of racial controversy. Although the research on college access and student success continues to increase, new programs and efforts have been created through institutional crises to support USPs, there is still a gap in the research. My study encourages us to think about college access for USPs through a critical lens, as there is a need to provide additional support for this population, and oftentimes people do not care about diversity, until a crisis happens. We must move from being reactive, to being proactive, and authentically engaging these students utilizing their capital. The fact of the matter is college access and student success remain an unlevelled playing field for USPs (Comeaux et al., 2020). Oversimplified, 159 years since the establishment of higher education, Black, Latinx, low-income, and first-generation college students still do not have equitable and access to postsecondary

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\(^1\)For this study, I use the term *underrepresented student populations* instead of listing each specific group. In the admissions field, the term *underrepresented student groups* is often defined by historically underrepresented and/or minoritized populations not represented within an institution's student demographics. In this study, when using the term *underrepresented*, I am referring to Black, Latino/Latinx, Bi-racial, low-income and first-generation students collectively. While I acknowledge the importance and differences in experiences amongst each population, I will focus on common components and experiences among the groups for this study.
education, and oftentimes are faced with challenges that stem from them not having the cultural capital to navigate a system that was not created to support them.

For example, the University of Missouri (Mizzou) 2015-2017 protests forced the Mizzou system to address racial injustice and inequalities (Trachtenberg, 2018). The demonstrations resulted in national attention, a sharp decline in enrollment, and Mizzou’s system president’s resignation. This example highlights university leadership and policymakers’ need to identify improvement areas related to inequities in college access and student success opportunities for USPs.

Institutions must be proactive about their role in the fight against racial injustice and inequalities. As such, higher education can aid in this fight by improving compositional and community diversity through college access and student success opportunities for USPs. Such environments enrich educational experiences, challenge inequitable processes, and aid students from all backgrounds in effectively navigating a world composed of different cultures, people, and experiences.

At the conclusion of this research, I will offer postsecondary institutions a viable college support and transitional program model that celebrates and leverages the strengths of students who attend urban public high schools, while also looking at ways to enhance college access and student success for this population. In his work from 2010, Conley defines college access as a systematic comprehension of the postsecondary educational system, a process intertwined with learning environments that equip students with the essential knowledge and social capital skills needed to
navigate the college enrollment process and thrive within the college environment (Bethea, 2016; Conley, 2010; Freeman, 2005; Perna, 2000; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Venezia et al., 2003; Welton & Martinez, 2014). On the other hand, student success has been described as encompassing "academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college performance" (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 7). To capture the impact of both meanings, I will use the term 'college success' to encompass college access and student success. This pathway has been mentioned in the literature for several decades and is often referred to as college support and transition programs².

Like Mizzou, the University of Cincinnati (UC) fell into the center of an institutional and national racial controversy because of the Samuel DeBose shooting. Through this crisis, UC developed a college transition and support program, the Cincinnati Public High School College Ambassador Program (CPS College Ambassador Program), to promote college success for urban public high school students. This program is known to be the first of its kind because it is embedded in an undergraduate admissions office. It is rare for undergraduate admission

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²In this study I am examining a college access program that assists students with the college transition process and provides support post-enrollment until graduation. Broadly speaking, a college transition and support program can be a type of college access program. For this study, I choose to use the terms college transition and support programs as a type of a college access program.

³The University of Cincinnati system comprises three campuses. Two regional campuses (Blue Ash and Clermont) and the Uptown Campus (main campus) located in and Uptown (Clifton Heights).
departments to create programs designed to support USPs throughout the college enrollment process and college lifecycle as one effort to combat college success inequities.

I hope to provide postsecondary institutions with a possible pathway for the fight against inequities in college access and student success opportunities for USPs (I use the term ‘college success’ hereafter to encapsulate both college access and student success). This pathway has been mentioned in the literature for several decades, *college support and transition programs*. Like Mizzou, the University of Cincinnati (UC) fell into the center of an institutional and national racial controversy. Through this crisis, UC developed a college transition and support program, the Cincinnati Public High School College Ambassador Program (CPS College Ambassador Program), to promote college success for urban public high school students. This program is known to be the first of its kind because the program is embedded in an undergraduate admissions office. It is sporadic for undergraduate admission departments to create programs designed to support USPs throughout the college enrollment process and college lifecycle as one effort to combat college success inequities.

To understand the CPS College Ambassador Program, one must first understand the historical moment that influenced this program’s creation. To provide context about the creation of the CPS College Ambassador College Program, I will first examine preceding events at UC. Next, I will offer information on the research
purpose and the gaps in the literature. I will introduce the research questions that will guide this study alongside the conceptual, theoretical framework, limitations, and definitions of key terms. This section concludes with this study’s significance and contribution to praxis, policy, and future research.

**Racial Unrest**

Summer 2015 changed UC forever. On July 19, 2015, Samuel Dubose, an unarmed Black man, was fatally shot by an officer from the UC Police Department (The Guardian, 2020). This shooting sparked civil unrest and protests throughout the city and on UC's campus. Students arrived at school later that summer, ready to initiate change in the campus community.

On August 31, 2015, the "hijacking of #theshottestcollegeinamerica" (a social media hashtag the university used in marketing channels) would be flooded on social media by a unity statement from Black students, faculty, and staff in response to the Samuel Dubose killing (The Irate 8, 2020). Later that fall, a Black student organization, The Irate 8, was created to raise awareness of Black students' experiences at UC's campus and connect these experiences to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. At the time, UC's percentage of Black students on campus was 8% - 9% — influencing the "8" in "The Irate 8" name. On October 15, 2015, The Irate 8 presented a list of demands to the university leadership. This list included ten demands suggesting changes UC should consider to campus policies, budget, and procedures to increase institutional diversity and a more welcoming and supportive educational environment for Black students.

**University Leadership Responds**
University leadership responded to the list of demands on October 28, 2015 (The Irate 8, 2020). However, one demand would shift the work of the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. Demand number 7, "We demand the University of Cincinnati double the amount of Black Students on the main campus over the next three years, starting today, October 14, 2015" (The Irate 8, 2020). Demand number 7 resulted in former President Dr. Santa J. Ono creating a subcommittee (the Diversity Recruitment Committee) on the President's Diversity Task Force Council. Chaired by enrollment management leaders, the subcommittee consisted of campus leaders, faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, while not explicitly listed at the time, this demand would uncover the lack of representation from Cincinnati Public High Schools (CPS) Black students on the Uptown campus.

The Diversity Recruitment Committee met throughout spring 2016 to evaluate practices and policies related to the admission, recruitment, and representation of Black and minority students on campus, emphasizing enrollment at the Uptown campus (B. Marshall, personal communication, April 21, 2016). The committee presented nine recommendations to former President Dr. Santa J. Ono that provided solutions and enhanced efforts to increase USPs on the Uptown campus (B. Marshall, personal communication, April 21, 2016). This memo's first recommendation focused on the CPS High School Liaison Program (B. Marshall, personal communication, April 21, 2016). The program goal was vague; however, this program would potentially be one of few programs in the undergraduate admission space and serve as a significant component of what would later become CPS Strong. CPS Strong is a P-20 partnership with UC and Cincinnati Public High Schools. This partnership is a part of President Dr. Neville Pinto's
(the current university president) strategic direction "Next Lives Here." The University of Cincinnati's website describes the institution's commitment to CPS by stating:

Our city is only as strong as our public school system. CPS Strong is working to establish an institution-wide model to engage and empower Cincinnati Public School students. By aligning programs and services to ensure readiness, create access, and foster success, we can achieve educational transformation and positively impact the future of our university and our city (University of Cincinnati, 2020).

The creation of the High School Liaison Program, now formally known as the CPS Ambassador College Program, created a new approach in how admissions leaders approach college access and student success broadly. It also influenced how university leadership, admission practitioners, and P-20 leaders approach partnerships to increase college access and student success for USPs.

**CPS Ambassador College Program**

The CPS Ambassador College Program has morphed since its creation in March 2017. The CPS Ambassador College Program is a collaboration between UC and the CPS (University of Cincinnati Document, 2020). The program's goal is to increase college access, knowledge, and support through curriculum, coaching, and support (University of Cincinnati Document, 2020). This peer-to-peer program is known to be the first of its kind (University of Cincinnati Document, 2020). The philosophy of the program is peer-based and grounded in the following themes: commitment to college pathways, center on increasing the number of CPS students who are pursuing postsecondary education; peer-coaching, center on leveraging the strengths and talents of rising high school seniors to serve as coaches for 9th-12 graders; Research-based curriculum, center in student center practices, self-authorship, and sense of belonging (University of Cincinnati Document,
The CPS College Ambassador Program explores college readiness, financial planning, determining "best fit," navigating the college search and transition process (University of Cincinnati Document, 2020).

The CPS Ambassador position is a ten-month (July-May) position, and students can earn up to $1,000. Upon completing the program, if a CPS Ambassador selects UC as their postsecondary education institution of choice, students receive a financial grant for $2,000 towards their cost of attendance (University of Cincinnati, 2020). The CPS Ambassadors College Program has soft goals that include: 100% retention rate of CPS Ambassador's participation in the program, 60% of CPS Admissions admitted to their first college choice, increased applicants for the CPS Ambassador Program, to have two CPS Ambassador selected from 13 CPS High Schools, four ambassadors led programs per each CPS High School, and to develop more substantial measurable outcomes for the CPS Program (University of Cincinnati Document, 2020).

Ambassadors are selected from 14 Cincinnati Public High Schools (i.e., Aiken, Clark Montessori, Dater, Gamble, Hughes, Oyler, School for Creative and Performing Arts, Shroder, Taft, Walnut Hills, Western Hills, Withrow, and Woodward). Although the training is offered at UC's campus, the CPS Ambassadors facilitate programs in all 14 CPS High Schools throughout the academic year. Each CPS high school is unique. For example, Walnut Hills is ranked number one in Cincinnati, Ohio Metro Area High Schools, ranked number two in Ohio School, ranked 112 in National Rankings, and only 16% of the student population is economically disadvantaged (USNEWS, 2020). On the other hand, the School for Creative and Performance Arts emphasizes the arts, is located in downtown Cincinnati, ranked number 23 in Cincinnati, OH Metro Area High Schools,
ranked number 2,588 in National Rankings, and total economically disadvantaged student populations are 51% respectively (USNEWS, 2020). Offering this context is not to cause harm or speak negatively about any CPS High School, but rather to provide context on while these students may be a part of the same public high school system and the CPS Ambassador College Program — how the program rollouts and supports them looks very different in each of their high school environments. In 2018-2019 the CPS Ambassador College Program cohort makeup included 23 ambassadors from 11 CPS high Schools: Aiken (2), Clark (4), Dater (2), Hughes (2), Gamble (1), Olyer (1), SCPA (2), Shroder (1), Taft (3), Withrow (3) and Woodward (2), 10 students identified as female and 13 identified as male, cohort overall GPA 3.35 unweighted (University of Cincinnati Document, 2020). During the 2018-2019 school year, the CPS Ambassadors facilitated 30 college access programs across the 11 schools, with 360 CPS students participating.

Statement of the Problem

There is a healthy body of research on how institutions can adapt to foster inclusive environments and promote college success for USPs (Bethea, 2016; Cabrera, et. Al., 2006). There is limited qualitative research on admissions-led college transition and support programs designed to increase college access for urban public high school students. Ultimately, the hope is to embrace the way social capital is used in this process and correlate this approach to other key aspects of a student’s success, for example, how we engage with students around retention. That office's admissions office and agents serve as the “gatekeepers” of institutions. If there is to be impactful change, that change must start with the group of people deciding who is accepted at
an institution. This is important to note and also catalyzed my decision to do this research using a qualitative approach, as little is known about students’ attitudes toward admissions-led initiatives designed to promote college success for USPs. Rarely are the voices of students centered, and this qualitative study uses social capital to ensure that students’ voices are honored and respected as they pertain to their lived experiences. In addition, most of these programs are framed from a deficit lens. The problem to be studied is the CPS Ambassadors’ attitudes toward college success facilitated through an admissions-led college transition and support program. This is important as these CPS Ambassadors are central to the program’s approach of engaging prospective students through peer interactions, and these ambassadors are the key to this being successful. Understanding their experiences will allow us to better understand the experiences of the students we will engage with at UC.

**Problem in Practice**

The gap in current empirical studies on USPs’ attitudes towards admissions-led college transition and support programs may cause admission professionals to continue perpetuating the notion that data metrics alone are enough to inform college success programming for USPs. This gap also furthers the narrative that increased compositional diversity is enough to combat college success barriers (i.e., simply meeting metrics and “butts” in seats vs tackling the gaps). When, in fact, compositional diversity and strategic programming to foster support and community work hand in hand in promoting college success for USPs.
Barriers within the higher education ecosystem still prevent students from accessing and successfully navigating postsecondary education. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and highly racialized campus incidents such as the shooting of Samuel Dubose and the University of Missouri 2015-2016 protests highlight the need for institutions to evaluate their roles at large to foster inclusive environments and promote college success for USPs. Unfortunately, college access and the rewards associated with it remain uneven. In the United States, only 36% of both Black and Latinx populations enroll in college, significantly less than their White (41%) and Asian (65%) peers (Martinez et al., 2020). This is problematic, as the research has established the healthy and positive role college education plays in students navigating life. As such, higher education professionals must ensure USPs have equitable college success opportunities and are equipped with the skills and support to navigate the postsecondary education system.

Undergraduate admissions offices are essential to the contemporary discussions about enrollment and student success strategies for USPs (Bastedo & Bowman, 2017). Admission practitioners must think critically about efforts, such as college transition and support programs, to achieve the institutional goals of enrollment, persistence, and retention for USPs.

**Purpose of the Study**

Little is known about college transition and support programs embedded in an institution's undergraduate admissions department designed for urban public high school students. The CPS Ambassador College Program is one of the only programs in the
nation where an undergraduate admission office promotes college success opportunities for urban public high school students. The program's intent to equip students with skills and social networks beyond just college application is also novel. More information is also necessary to understand how these programs create access and student success opportunities, specifically how they may foster college knowledge and shape USPs' social capital skills, skills deemed necessary to navigate postsecondary education.

Many postsecondary institutions allocate resources to underrepresented student recruitment and P-20 partnerships to promote college success (Domina & Ruzek, 2012; Tafel & Eberhart, 1999). Further, the projected increase in underrepresented students attending college and the outcry for racial and social justice across systems results in institutions thinking differently about their role and influence in promoting college success. This was especially true for an institution like the University of Cincinnati (UC), that is designated as an urban campus. The research has shown that USPs who graduate from local urban public high school districts are often less likely to obtain educational attainment (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Grawe, 2018; Hurtado et al., 2020; 2018; Nienhusser & Ives, 2020). This is relevant to note as the UC is in an urban environment. One of the observations made was that the university was not embracing students who graduated from urban high schools in Cincinnati and given the information needed to engage with UC intentionally about the different pathways that could encourage students from these urban high schools to attend UC.

Although the scholarship draws attention to the positive outcomes of college transition and support programs, the scholarship about USPs' attitudes toward college transition and support programs led by admission leaders is scant (Hallett et al., 2019;
McCurrie, 2009; Noone et al., 2007). It is important for administrators to embrace the value and importance the voices of the students we serve bring to our campuses. This qualitative case study describes students' experiences who served as ambassadors in this program. The ambassadors are trained to assist their peers in navigating the college enrollment process, but they also live this experience for themselves. Due to the ambassadors' unique interconnected realities of providing college access while obtaining their educational attainment, they are paramount to this program's success. With this in mind, I generated two research questions that assisted me in formulating my study.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were used to guide this study and assisted me in creating the questions used to gather information from the participants about this program.

1. How does participation in the CPS College Ambassador Program build college knowledge for the program Ambassadors?
   a. What role does social capital play in recruiting and retaining students in the program?

2. How do CPS ambassadors talk about their experiences with the program?

**Significance of the Study**

I have had many conversations with higher education practitioners, K-12 leaders, and students about the college-going process and college experience throughout my almost 16 years of working professionally. Overall, it is clear that admission leaders have to do a better job evaluating and utilizing institutional research methods that inform their approach to college success. Students who experience these programs and processes
know how to inform and transform educational practices and policies around college access and student success (Jaramillo et al., 2019).

The method of thinking of students as objects incapable of generating context or knowledge that informs policy and practices reflects the societal structure of oppression and serves as an instrument for student fortification (Jaramillo et al., 2019). Quaye and Harper (2014) support this notion by suggesting that all postsecondary institutions create routines and pathways to explore and document students' voices to understand the nature and quality of their experiences.

**Conclusion**

This study will fill the scholarship gap around ways to humanize admissions and institutional research that informs institutional policies and recruitment efforts for USPs. As such, the current study's exploration of how an admissions college transition and support program fosters college knowledge and shapes social capital may provide foundations for understanding this phenomenon. It may contribute to a more contemporary understanding of admission practitioners' role in facilitating college success for USPs.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

This section is aimed to clarify terms that may be frequently used throughout this study:

**College access**— Conley (2010) describes college access as a systematic understanding of the postsecondary educational system. A process combined with learning environments that provide students with the college knowledge and social capital skills necessary to navigate the college enrollment process and college
environment (Bethea, 2016; Conley, 2010; Freeman, 2005; Perna, 2000; Perna & Thomas, 2006; Venezia et al., 2003; Welton & Martinez, 2014).

**College enrollment process**— refers to students beginning their college search process and transitioning to college post-high school graduation.

**College Success** — in the context of this study, college success combines is the combination of two terms, “college access” and “student success” – the uniqueness of the CPS Ambassador Program aims to provide access while supporting student success, as such, I will often refer to the two terms as college success.

**College Transition and Support Programs** In this study, college transition and support programs and college access programs interchangeably. A college transition and support program can be a college access program. This study examines a college access program that assists students with the college transition process and provides support post-enrollment until graduation.

**Enrollment Management and Undergraduate Leaders** — For this study, I choose to use undergraduate admission practitioners and enrollment management leaders interchangeably. The enrollment management model is proliferating. Operationally, enrollment management is a divisional model in which institutions combine enrollment-related offices such as admissions, financial aid, new student orientation, and academic support services. The institution's chief enrollment officer typically leads this division. However, every institution does not have an enrollment management division, but professionals from enrollment-related offices and chief enrollment officers can be classified as enrollment management professionals.
**P-20 Partnership**—P-20 partnerships consist of partnerships between a school district and a postsecondary institution. This partnership is composed of efforts between the school district and postsecondary institutions that can begin at pre-K until college graduation.

**Social Capital**—“networks of people and community resources” (Yosso, 2005).

**Student Success**—"academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college performance" (Kuh et al., 2006).

**Underrepresented student populations** (USPs)—For this study, I use the term underrepresented student populations instead of listing each specific group. In the admissions field, the term underrepresented student groups is often defined by historically underrepresented and/or minority populations not represented within an institution's student demographics. In this study, when using the term underrepresented, I am referring to Black, Latino/Latinx, Bi-racial, low-income, and first-generation students collectively. While I acknowledge the importance and differences in experiences amongst each population, for this study, I will be focusing on components and experiences that are common amongst the groups.
SECTION TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

It is no secret that a college achievement gap exists for USPs (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2020). Practitioners must focus on efforts to close the gap. With this study, I hope to provide a model for postsecondary institutions to improve access and student success for USPs. As such, this study involves broad topics that do not commonly intersect in the current scholarship—admissions, college access, and student success. I unify these broad topics by examining a college access program embedded in an undergraduate admissions office at a public Research One institution in Cincinnati, OH. I also examine admission professionals' role in creating access and student success opportunities by deepening college knowledge through a social capital lens. Our program was designed to have students and families engage with our CPS Ambassadors through a wide range of programs in the admissions office, and our CPS Ambassadors were working in admissions simultaneously while doing this. College knowledge and social capital are necessary for students to navigate the college enrollment process and persist through college (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Historically, undergraduate admission leaders have played a limited role in college access and student success. As such, this program is potentially one of its kind, establishing a leading role in creating college access for urban public high school students while setting up a line of support throughout their college experience.

This section will begin with a review of social capital, specifically Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study. I will then fold in some broad perspectives around student success as elements of the student success framework can overlap and tie into social capital’s framework. I will
also discuss the concept of college access, college knowledge, and the demand higher education administrators and admission professionals face related to college enrollment. I will close with a review of the scholarship on transition and support programs; these programs help illuminate the similarities and differences in addressing barriers while creating college access and student success opportunities through a social capital lens.

**Social Capital**

Over the years, the scholarship on social capital has expanded. Social scientists have also offered multiple definitions of social capital (e.g., Thomas 1996; Puntnam 1995, Woolcock 1998). For example, Baker (1990) defines social capital as a social structure individuals use to pursue their interests. Portes (1998) adds to this concept by suggesting that social capital is a network in which individuals can secure benefits for personal gain. Brehm and Rahn (1997) build upon the research suggesting social capital as a web of cooperative relationships between individuals that foster the resolution of collective action programs. Lastly, Naphapiet and Ghosal (1998) define social capital as existing and potential resources within a social network where assets are mobilized to individuals as part of the social network.

The most often cited definitions of social capital draw from Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986). Coleman defines social capital as a public good, and individuals can utilize this good for their advantage, such as educational and career attainment. For Coleman, social capital is about the function in which a social network can serve an individual. Coleman categorizes social capital in the sphere of individual decision-making. Rogosic and Barnovic agreed with this approach to social capital, and shared that, capital influences an individual's education and is "more evenly distributed than
other types of capital in society (financial and human)" (Rogosic & Baranovic, 2016, p. 85). More simply, Coleman suggests that social capital is widely available, and any individual can use it to make connections and advantage.

Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 248). Like Coleman (1988), Bourdieu argues that individuals maintain their social status because their social capital helps them maintain privileged social networks that increase opportunities and advancement. Bourdieu indicates that the foundation of all social capital is economic capital, noting the cause and consequence of possessing social and cultural capital. In contrast to Coleman, Bourdieu implies that capital at large is distributed unevenly in society.

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is shaped and accessed by individuals belonging to networks beyond the family, arguing that external family social networks assist the family at large in building collective capital. Oversimplified, Bourdieu's theory focuses on socioeconomic status and educational attainment rather than on an individual's ability to maintain social capital, as Coleman's theory mentioned. Although they present differing perspectives, both Bourdieu and Coleman situate social capital as a tool for individuals to use for specific goals and advancement. Rogers (2012) sums up social capital as "who and what you know and what is valued by the majority group, however, social capital is not easily accumulated" (Rogers, 2012, p. 16).

**Facilitating Social Capital for Student Success**
As it stands, the scholarship notes that social capital is not easily accumulated. Persistent racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disadvantages continue to widen the gap in access to social capital for underrepresented student groups (e.g., Hill et al., 2010; Jun & Colyar, 2002; Roderick et al., 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). As a result, the gap in access to social capital may prevent underserved student populations from successfully navigating postsecondary educational environments (Corwin et al., 2004; McDough, 1997; Hooker & Brand, 2010). More specifically, college-qualified USPs tend to be embedded in social networks that afford them less access to postsecondary education than their White peers (Hill et al., 2015). USPs' social capital is critical during the college-going and transition process. There are several key players (e.g., counselors, teachers, community members, and higher education personnel) who are instrumental in USPs successfully applying, enrolling, and persisting through college (Freeman, 1997, Gonzales al., 2003; Hurtado et al., 1997; Nelson, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2020; Williams, et al., 2014). One study defines the critical players noted above as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) or individuals who can connect with USPs and access information and resources to transmit and negotiate students' opportunities (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Institutional agents develop college-going environments, classrooms, and college access programs to promote social capital development.

Social capital is necessary throughout the college enrollment process and beyond. For example, Martin, Stefl, Cain, & Pfirman's (2020) recent study examined first-generation and continuing-generation relationships. They found that social relationships and networks are critical to students enrolling and persisting through college. Another study examined the role social capital has on students' studying habits. The study
revealed the ability to navigate peer-to-peer and faculty relationships through social
capital directly and indirectly positively impacted students' studying habits during the
first year (Brouwer et al., 2016).

These studies expand upon the positive benefits of social capital aiding student
persistence. Scholarship on admissions professionals shaping social capital through peer-
to-peer programs is scant. Additionally, more research is needed on the programmatic
factors embedded in a program related to social capital. The extant literature has yet to
generate consistent conclusions about the nature of admission professionals building
social capital skills through recruitment and retention strategies. As such, this study aims
to examine how, if at all, a college access program shapes social capital for students from
an urban public high school district.

Yosso’s (2005) Cultural Wealth Model helps unpack the participants' experiences in this
study. I chose this model as it encompasses a wide array of approaches to understanding
the experiences of individuals who have lived experiences that are impacted by the
different environments and variables that make our lives unique and similar at the same
time.

**Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model**

The work of Tara Yosso also allows me to examine social capital through the lens
of five additional capitals that impact students' experiences in this population. In Yosso's
(2005) cultural wealth model, the six components of cultural capital are aspirational
capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and
resistance capital.

According to Yosso (2005), whether directly or indirectly, educational leaders use
these six types of capital to frame their interactions with students. This is especially
relevant to bridge programs that maintain a connection between K-12 school systems and the impact this connection has on a seamless transition to college. Yosso (2005) shares that the most important aspect of utilizing capital to engage with students is to ensure that they are empowered and feel included in their life’s success because, unfortunately, when students of color are discussed, it is often through a deficit lens. Yosso’s model allows us to shift that narrative and focus on how these students from often marginalized communities add value to the spaces they occupy. Throughout her writings, Yosso encourages educational leaders to dig deep and identify the experiences, strengths, and values that students of color bring to the campuses they will call home. Yosso’s model is embedded in a framework that seeks to unpack how students of color narrate their college experiences through a strength-based engagement lens.

*Aspirational Capital* focuses on the hopes, dreams, and future desires of the students we engage with. Yosso (2005) shares in her work that African-American and Latina/o students are taught at an early age to dream. Black and Brown children and their families aspire to grab onto their share of the American dream, even though they are plagued with education inequities and barriers that make navigating college and even the K-12 system daunting.

*Linguistic Capital*, in Yosso’s model, centers around the diverse languages and communication skills that students bring with them to their collegiate experiences. Refers to the various language and communication skills students bring to their college environment. According to Yosso (2005), linguistic capital embodies the nuances of tone, rhythm, cadence, and the oral history of students of color. She notes that storytelling has been an intricate part of their lives and, as such, their lived experiences. While there is a
thin line between cultural awareness and cultural appropriation, educational leaders can better connect with their students if they have a broad understanding of the linguistic culture and capital of the students they serve. Then, they can remove some of the barriers that will likely be associated with connecting to students.

*Familial Capital* encompasses the personal and social human capital students access in their precollegiate toolkit or environment. This is typically drawn from their communities and/or villages and centers the communal environment of the student before they come to a college campus. Ultimately, educational administrators should focus on leveraging the relationships that students have with their communities and families to prepare them for success.

*Social Capital* is not a new term in the field; however, Yosso’s definition adds a twist that emphasizes how students engage their peers and other social groups to help them navigate the intricacies tied to college access. This is particularly true for them navigating real and perceived barriers that can often serve as a deterrent to enrolling and progressing through college.

*Navigational Capital* in Yosso’s model focuses on a student’s ability to function in spaces that are identified as social successfully. This includes but is not limited to educational spaces. For example, a student new to a college campus may need the tools to help them better navigate the times associated with meals being served when the library closes and things of that nature. Navigating these things successfully will be paramount to their success on their campuses.

*Resistance Capital* is centered on the notion that the inequities that have surrounded the experiences of students of color and their communities have been and will
continue to be a significant barrier. However, perseverance and the ability to navigate and resist the weight of these barriers have been instrumental in these communities, working collectively to acquire and secure equitable access and a form of collective freedom. It is not uncommon that these students are tied to the work of their ancestors and those who came before them.

**College Access**

The value of higher education is still critical and competitive for the job marketplace. Nearly 80% of high school graduates will need some form of postsecondary education for career attainment and advancements to develop skills to navigate complex economic, cultural, social, and political environments (Museus & Quaye 2009). Although some question the value of higher education, the scholarship indicates that higher education will continue. For example, Bloom (1987) describes higher education as a valuable process and environment that allows students to live morally good and successful lives. Tsoi-A and Bryant (2015) refer to postsecondary attainment as the vehicle for reducing poverty and closing the wealth gaps between underrepresented groups and their White counterparts.

As a result of the importance of educational attainment, more than ever, USPs are enrolling in college compared to historical trends in the past (Kezar & Kitchen, 2020; Roderick et al., 2011); however, there is still a college access gap for these student populations. Postsecondary attainment still matters; educators and policymakers must pay closer attention to underrepresented student populations and higher education access. Higher education can reduce poverty, enhance cultural capital, and promote career advancement (Aud et al., 2010; Bangs et al., 2011; Bethea, 2016; Gladieux & Swail,
2000; Tierney, 1999; Tierney & Jun, 2001). As the scholarship suggests, if higher education is important, educators must continue to explore pathways to decrease college access barriers and increase student success opportunities.

Educators must continue to recognize that some groups are underrepresented and aim to create and improve systems to ensure everyone has a chance at educational attainment (Cherilien, 2020). Improving college access and success for USPs requires all stakeholders to think comprehensively about outlining support pathways throughout the college enrollment process. The disparities in college access for underrepresented populations indicate there is still much work to help marginalized populations obtain the skills and information necessary for college attainment. Given the pressures to remain competitive in the global economy, administrators must act now to increase the number of students with access to educational achievement. Closing the gap in college access and furthering student success will be a continued collective effort. However, as the gatekeepers of higher education, admission professionals must create non-traditional admission strategies to increase college access. Having more stakes in students' pre-college and campus-based experiences will develop systems to support students throughout the college-going process and beyond admissions (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Freeman, 2012). These support systems will deepen college knowledge and social capital to earn their college degree and career readiness skills to obtain career placement (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

**Student Success**

More than ever, higher education is in a state of transition. COVID-19 has impacted our world as we see it today. However, there are many takeaways from a
worldwide pandemic. Evidence suggests student success should be central to higher education (Illanes et al., 2020). Before COVID-19, higher education was in a state of transition; as enrollments increased for some, they declined for others (Amey, 2006). Pressures from external stakeholders, such as boards of directors and state governments, continue to grow (Zusman, 2005). The decrease in government funding continues.

Simultaneously, there is a need to increase recruitment, retention, persistence, and graduation while defining student success. This study examines admission professionals' role in creating access and student success opportunities for USP by deepening college knowledge and building social capital. Next, I will discuss student success broadly as the research on this framework has some parallels that will strengthen how I utilize my framework that comes from Yosso's Model.

In their book on success in higher education, Wood and Breyer (2017) demonstrate how success has different meanings depending on the stakeholder. For a student, it could mean acceptance and degree completion. Success could mean enrollment, retention, and graduation rates for an institution. On the national level, success in higher education could translate into individuals impacting society, bringing wealth and stability to the world, and increasing human capital (Wood & Breyer).

Because success is interchangeable depending on the stakeholder, institutions often need help to define and measure student success. Regardless of the definition, individual, institutional, national, or global, they all impact the student. Parnell (2018) supports this notion by suggesting that positive retention, persistence, and graduation metrics do not confer student success. Even when metrics look positive, students could have graduated from institutions without having a successful college experience.
Early research on student success described it as the student's responsibility. For example, Craven (1892) suggests that students must possess the ability to retain information through memory, a concentrated mind, a desire to succeed academically, and keep educational attainment at the forefront. Craven's (1892) concept is nearly 130 years old. The notion of student success being the individual's responsibility echoes throughout the recent scholarship. For example, a 2008 study conducted by ACT highlights critical data practitioners should examine concerning student success. This study provides multiple factors that determine and contribute to students' success in college, beginning with the college enrollment process to success after college (ACT Inc., 2008). The study outlines recommendations for students, such as taking higher-level mathematics and science courses, working hard to improve study habits, and choosing a college major that fits their interests as closely as possible (ACT Inc., 2008). All of the recommendations assume student success is the student's responsibility. I agree that students have to play a significant role as the drivers of their educational attainment; however, the scholarship emphasizes the students' responsibility instead of the collective responsibility between the student and the institution.

Furthermore, student success is often tied to academic readiness, preparedness, and performance when discussed in the scholarship. Academic cognitive factors such as GPA, academic preparedness, and standardized test scores (i.e., ACT) have historically served as student success indicators. For example, ACT scores are often seen as a reliable indicator of academic preparation, translating into student success in postsecondary institutions (Allensworth & Clark, 2020). In addition to test scores, a student's high school academic performance and rigor can also significantly predict a student's ability to
matriculate and graduate from college (Gilkerson, 2020). Researchers Allenworth and Clark (2020) argue a need for emphasis on high school course grades instead of standardized test scores such as ACT. Their examination of high school GPAs and ACT scores correlating to college completion found that ACT scores were not as reliable for college completion as high school GPAs (Allensworth & Clark, 2020). The use of academic cognitive factors contributes to student success. However, researchers must further examine student success through cognitive and non-cognitive theoretical lenses as academic preparedness before college is a relatively small part of a student's educational attainment journey (Strayhorn, 2016).

Academic factors contribute to student success, and Craven’s (1892) assumptions about student success as the student's responsibility have merit. However, systems and environments foster success. The ownership should not solely live with the student, as the scholarship has implied. The scholarship on the transition of ownership and the definition of student success continues to expand. For example, Strayhorn (2015) examined the role that college academic advisors have in contributing to student success and argues that academic advisors are cultural navigators in higher education who assist students with navigating college and contribute to students' success. This study supports the notion that institutions have to own student success while also respecting the role that social capital plays in their success. Strayhorn's research (2009; 2015) also reveals that all students want to succeed but often do not due to factors not their own; thus, student success should not be the student's sole responsibility.

**College Knowledge**
Many students aspire to attend college. However, a large number of USPs have very little knowledge of the academic and social preparation required to apply, enroll, and graduate from college (Hooker & Brand, 2010). For example, a student may be highly qualified for postsecondary education from an academic perspective but lack the know-how to navigate postsecondary education systems (Soland, 2017). Students must have autonomy in understanding cultural knowledge to navigate the college environment. Students must also understand academic, social, and career workforce expectations to obtain education and career attainment (Hooker & Brand, 2010). This type of contextual awareness and understanding in the scholarship is referred to as college knowledge (Conley, 2005, 2008; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Soland, 2017; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

In its simplest form, college knowledge is a student's ability to possess interpersonal and social skills that enable them to navigate postsecondary education systems and environments (Conley, 2010). Conley (2010) explicitly notes:

- college knowledge includes the understanding of the following processes: college admissions including curricular, testing, and application requirements; college options and choice, including the tired nature of postsecondary education; tuition cost and the financial aid system; placement requirements, testing, and standards; the culture of colleges and the challenge level of college courses including increasing expectations of higher education. (p. 7)

Hooker and Brand's (2010) work builds upon the research, suggesting that students must acquire practical information about the college enrollment process and develop a college-going identity through awareness and exposure to the world of postsecondary education.
They insist "college knowledge is a critical component in ensuring that young people, especially first-generation and low-income youth, are able to progress to college and into careers" (p. 75). For example, Soland (2017) mentions a study where low-to middle-income families completed their tax returns with H&R Block. H&R Block provided an option for federal loan application submission on families' behalf and offered additional information on financial aid eligibility. Students from families receiving support were substantially more likely to complete the financial aid application and enroll in college the following year (Soland, 2017). These findings suggest that if students and families can build their college knowledge, they increase their chances of surviving the college enrollment process and postsecondary education.

The lack of college knowledge can discourage, frustrate, and derail students from applying and enrolling in college (Conley, 2010). Additionally, the lack of knowledge could impact students' post-college enrollment process and even prevent them from academically and socially integrating into the college environment, resulting in a departure from college (Aljohani, 2016; Conley, 2010; Williams et al., 2014; Strayhorn, Kitchen, Williams & Stentz, 2013).

College knowledge is a critical focal point in college enrollment and student success. However, it is not easily obtainable for underrepresented and economically underrepresented students, as access to this information is sometimes withheld. While the research on college knowledge is expanding, much of the research has been quantitative and uses predictable measures such as test scores, GPAs, and academic performance. Although some researchers have examined students' attitudes and beliefs and their connection to the college enrollment process (e.g., Cury et al., 2006; Durlak et al., 2011;
McKillip et al., 201; Schaefer & Rivera, 2016; Soland, 2017), few qualitative studies explore how students can deepen their college knowledge. Another gap in the scholarship concerning the deepening of college knowledge is how college access program activities can impact the overall success of students, especially those from USPs. This study hopes to build upon the literature by examining which programmatic components of a college access program deepen college knowledge.

**College Transition and Support Programs as a Strategy**

Scholarship on college transition and support programs is scant. Attention to college transition and support is not a recent issue. In fact, over the past 100 years, scholarship and practitioners have raised concerns about the college transition process (Hallett et al., 2019). Factors described as homesickness, newfound independence, higher academic expectations, social isolation, and lack of high school structure have been commonly identified issues affecting traditional college students (Hallett et al., 2019). Post-World War II USPs who historically had not attended college began enrolling. Naturally, these populations brought a new set of transition issues layered on the existing ones experienced by traditional college students (Hallet et al., 2019). Topics include college knowledge, social capital, lack of belonging, and code-switching (Hallett et al., 2019). These barriers contribute to USPs accessing and navigating the college-going and enrollment process.

Much of the scholarship encourages institutional and community agents to design holistic college transition and support programs to increase student and family readiness for the college enrollment process (Cabrera, 2006; Hallet et al., 2019). Holistic college transition and support programs allow students to research colleges, request publications
and search guides, attend college information sessions, sign up for test preparation, and go on a college tour. Additionally, comprehensive college transition and support programs can provide students with support throughout their college careers. For example, quantitative studies have found that comprehensive support programs positively impact students’ academic and social integration for first-generation college students (Nova, 2010).

The development of transition and support programs has increased college enrollment opportunities, options, financial aid, and university support services. Some widespread transition and support programs are TRIO (Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Support Services) and GEAR UP. These two of the largest federally funded organizations provide information about the college enrollment process and support students throughout their college matriculation (Perna & Scott, 2002).

While many transition programs occur before college admission, many occur post-admission. These programs include but are not limited to summer melt initiatives, new student orientation, extended orientation, first-year experience, and/or summer bridge programs. The research on Summer Melt initiatives is expanding (e.g., Arnold et al., 2015; Castleman & Page, 2013, 2014, 2015; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020; Rall, 2016) as institutions begin to think critically about providing support to students who lack college guidance and support during the summer before college. For example, Castleman et al. (2015) found that 13% more students who received support in the summer were likely to enroll in college through a partnership with a high school district and a public university.
Transitional programs such as new student orientation, extended orientation, first-year experience, and summer bridge programs have been deemed beneficial and provide students with pre-college experiences. For example, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (2015) reported that 65.2% of colleges surveyed indicated they offered extended and ongoing orientation programs. Authors insist that transitional programming creates a positive tone for new students (e.g., Boening, Miller, 2005; Jamelske, 2009; Rode, 2000; Sablan, 2013). Rode (2000) writes that “new transitional programming has a powerful influence on the first-year developmental phases for new students” (p. 7). Transitional programming positively impacts social and academic integration, directly and indirectly promoting student persistence and educational attainment (Soria et al., 2013). Although transitional programming is known to be effective, many of these programs occur post-college admission. Also, much of the research focuses on academic metrics such as GPA. Much of the reported data has studied populations that do not reflect the people I address in this study. We have to produce more research around admissions roles in college transition programming, specifically, pre-college experiences and research reflective of USPs. If administrators are creating strategies, policies, and funding to support USPs, the informed data and findings to further this goal must include the very population we are trying to help.

College transition and support programs are known to increase the likelihood of college enrollment, college-going norms, and potential college persistence (Conley, 2010; Gullat, 2002; Perna, 2002, 2015; Tierney, 2001). Although the scholarship around college transition and support programs continues to expand, a gap remains in the literature
concerning admissions professionals' role in increasing college access, specifically, their role in using a college transition and support program model to increase college access. Facilitating the development of social capital and college knowledge (Le et al., 2016; Perna & Titus, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2010) could result in increasing underserved populations, low-income, and first-generation students' ability to navigate the college search and enrollment process and persisting through college to graduation.

**Existing Literature Gaps**

My study focuses on college success (college access and student success). College access and student success are often used interchangeably throughout the scholarship (e.g., Bermeo & O'Brien, 2006; Castleman & Page, 2013b, 2014, 2015; Conley, 2007; Kitchen & Williams, 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017; Milner, 2012). However, the research describes cognitive and noncognitive factors as connecting college access and student success (Conley, 2007; Farrington et al., 2012; Tichavakunda, 2019). Cognitive factors are students' academic indicators such as test scores, grades, and academic preparedness. Noncognitive factors describe and examine students' mindsets, behaviors, and motivations (Conley, 2007; Farrington et al., 2012; Tichavakunda, 2019). Non-cognitive factors remain under-researched and align with my study because social capital falls under the definition of a non-cognitive factor; and I will be using social capital as the lens through which this research is explained.

Navigating higher education systems and environments is nuanced for USPs and often leads to premature college departure (Kitchen & Williams, 2019). The development
of noncognitive factors such as college knowledge and increased social capital aid USPs in their educational and career attainment (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Aydin, 2017). In an interview, Conley describes college knowledge as students having a complete understanding of everything involved with the "process of selecting a college, applying, securing financial aid, and then getting along with professors and students with diverse opinions" (Richardson, 2010, p.29). Social capital refers to resources and information embedded in social networks that individuals can access and utilize to achieve a standard or specific goal (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 1995; Hill et al., 2015).

**Summary**

As noted, college knowledge and social capital are vital, especially for USPs. Therefore, educational practitioners should continue to create college transition and support programs to foster college knowledge and social capital (Hooker & Brand, 2010). However, the scholarship on unifying research around college access and student success in the context of undergraduate admissions is scant. This study contributes to the scholarship by providing practitioners with an asset-based model that could increase college success for USPs.
SECTION THREE: THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study explored how the CPS College Ambassador Program at the University of Cincinnati positively impacted the lives and experiences of USPs. This exploration was done using Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Model, specifically as it pertains to social capital and how it impacts the successes of these students. I further explored how the components of social capital enabled students to persist in their commitment to attend college while discussing how leveraging students' engagement with our campus can assist them in successfully navigating the college campus community (Coleman, 1988; Braxton, 2000).

Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Model

Yosso (2005) explains the critical need for institutions of higher learning to recognize the myriad of strengths among USPs. By acknowledging these strengths, academic institutions are prepared to engage in the wide-ranging battle against social and racial injustice (Yosso, 2005). Pierre Bourdieu (1977), as reported by Yosso (2005), states that historically, knowledge considered valuable to a hierarchical society was those of the upper and middle classes, and the members of society who possessed those particular kinds of knowledge could more easily matriculate through formal schooling. Bourdieu’s perspective has been used to illustrate why USPs, who lack upper- and middle-class knowledge, often struggle academically and socially (Yosso, 2005). In higher education, Bourdieu’s notion has influenced the deficit-based assumptions of specific institutions, which believe that USPs enter the collegiate experience disadvantaged, knowledge-deprived, and less than capable (Yosso, 2005). Anzaldua
(1990) suggests that just as theories like Bourdieu’s have been used to define, minimize, and diminish the capabilities and power of USPs, theory can be used to empower them.

Yosso (2005) identifies a prevalent pondering among respected pedagogical and cultural theorists, including Ladson-Billings and Bernal (1998, 2002). These scholars thoroughly examine which pieces of knowledge count and which knowledge are discounted regarding social mobility and success in our society. Examinations of these queries substantiate that race and racism persist in impacting academic and social success outcomes for USPs (Yosso, 2005). A 2015 study of the influence of social support and social capital among Black students revealed that racial minorities in academic environments perceived a significant connection between their ability to effectively interact with faculty and their academic success (Carter-Francique et al., 2015).

Yosso’s (2005) Community and Cultural Wealth model identifies six kinds of capital (i.e., aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, resistance) that USPs possess and that can be used to empower students whose knowledge has been historically diminished. Yosso’s framework is a strength-based resource designed to highlight the cultural experiences, strengths, and assets that USPs bring to institutions of higher learning when they arrive. Scholars Kniess, Buschlen, and Change (2020) examined the ways that structured, life-skill development programs amplified the types of social capital that USPs inherently possess to have a positive impact on the ways that USPs can successfully navigate and persist through the collegiate experience (Kniess et al., 2020). These authors suggest that the social capital USPs possess, coupled with the guidance and support of structured programs, can significantly increase student success.

**Yosso’s Social Capital**
This research aims to understand if and how the CPS Ambassador College Program builds social capital. A healthy body of scholarship examines social capital and its relationship to college access and student success. To understand the inequalities of access to higher education, we must understand these populations' access to college (O'Connor et al., 2010). Other definitions of social capital are present in the literature. For example, Putnam defines social capital as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (1995, p.67). While there are parallels between this definition and Yosso’s (2005), Yosso’s was better suited for my study.

For this study, I will use Yosso's definition of social capital to examine the data gathered from CPS Ambassadors who participated in the study. Yosso defines social capital as "networks of people and community resources" (2005, p.79). This definition will be used to guide this study. Again, in the context of this research, Yosso’s approach to social capital informed how I approached this study, as it captured the program through the lens of the CPS Ambassadors.
SECTION FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The gap in current empirical studies on USPs’ attitudes towards admissions-led college transition and support programs may cause admission professionals to continue to perpetuate that data metrics alone are enough to inform college success programming for USPs. As such, this study hopes to “understand the meaning people have constructed and make sense of their world and experiences they have in the world.” In the context of this study, I want to provide a space in which students' voices and experiences can inform program implementation around college success for USPs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This gap also fails to acknowledge the vital role USPs play in their success and the contribution they can make to improving college transition programs.

By conducting this research, I was able to have a better understanding of the nature of the CPS Ambassador Program and what it means for the ambassadors “to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 p. 15). Thus, a qualitative research method is the best approach for this study. Finally, the scholarship notes that qualitative research gives voice to underrepresented students in higher education, which is the intent of this study (Ardoin, 2013; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Research Design: Case Study

This investigation uses a qualitative case study approach to explore the attitudes and experiences of the CPS Ambassadors. This study aligns well with the purpose of a qualitative case study as I seek to understand how the CPS Ambassadors construct, interpret, and make meaning of their experiences in the context of the CPS Ambassador Program. The goal of this qualitative case study is to focus on a specific population, such
as the CPS Ambassadors, and to explore “how people make sense of their world and experiences they have in the world to delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making and to describe how people interpret what they experience,” (Ardoin, 2013; Merriam, 2009, p. 13-14).

The literature defines a case study in numerous ways. For example, Yin (2018) defines a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be evident" (p. 16). Stake (1995) describes a qualitative case study as “a study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p.2). However, for the context of this study, I adopted Merriam & Tisdell’s (2016) definition, which articulates a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37).

Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) case study approach focuses explicitly on the delimitation of the case. In addition, this approach provides many more specifications to consider when designing a case study compared to Yin (2014) and Stake (1995). For example, Merriam and Tisdell see the case as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 38). Further, they explain that a case can be “a person, a program, a group, a specific policy,” (p. 38). which provides a more comprehensive list compared to Yin (2014) and Stake (1995). In contrast, Stake (1995) notes his definition is suitable for studying programs and people. However, it “is less beneficial to study events and processes” (p. 40). Stake's (1995) approach conflicts with the overall CPS Ambassador Program investigation because it is presumed that college success, college knowledge, and social capital are potentially encouraged through events and processes.
the program facilitates. Yin's (2014) definition and approach seem to be best suited for a program evaluation, which is not the intent of this investigation. Also, Yin's (2014) approach provides less flexibility in analyzing the data compared to Merriam and Tisdell (2016).

As mentioned, I used a descriptive, collective case study methodology. To conduct a case study, the researcher must assess the boundedness and the data collection process (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). If there is no limit on the number of people involved in the interview process, then the study would not qualify as a case. In this study, the CPS Ambassadors are collectively the case study, as regardless of when they enter the program, the process of becoming a part of it is the same. I can examine their experiences in the context of a case study because the CPS Ambassadors are bound within the context of the CPS Ambassador Program and the Cincinnati Public High School system. In addition, this study focuses on the CPS Ambassadors’ descriptive experiences as opposed to the impact of the ambassadors and the program on the students who participate in the program. A case study approach allows for selective sampling strategies and multiple methods of data collection and seeks to provide a richer understanding of the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study participants are CPS Ambassadors who were classified as underrepresented (first-generation college students, low-income, Black, and Latinx) and served in a CPS Ambassador's role throughout the 2017-2020 student cohorts. This cohort consisted of students who were (a) currently serving as ambassadors, (b) entering their first semester of college, and (c) enrolled at UC and/or about to graduate from UC, an urban university. A total of five participants were interviewed for this study. Participants were recruited based on their participation in the
program between 2017-2020. Emails were sent to potential participants, and the study participants were the ones who agreed to engage with me as a participant in this study.

**Positionality**

Researchers should critically examine their beliefs, personal values, and assumptions before beginning research (Creswell, 2009). I acknowledge my position as the researcher influenced how I made meaning of the data. First, my previous professional role involved overseeing the implementation of the CPS College Ambassador Program. I am a former administrator of UC and a student at the University of Missouri. Many of the incidents I describe at these universities were experiences I lived through as a higher education professional and graduate student. Lastly, I am a Black first-generation college student who is a product of college transition and support programs (Upward Bound, College Summit, and a STEM pre-college program). These pre-college experiences played a significant role in my educational navigation and attainment. Without participation in those programs, navigating the college enrollment process would have seemed unattainable. These experiences inform my passion for equal college access opportunities for underrepresented student populations. I share these personal experiences to illustrate how interwoven the work around college access, specifically for underrepresented students, is with my life, which could influence how I make meaning of the data.

I also acknowledge how the relationship between the CPS Ambassadors and I can influence responses to interview questions. First, participants may perceive that my study proves the CPS Ambassador College Program's relevance, which may influence students to communicate their experiences differently to position the program and themselves
positively. Additionally, students may be hesitant to share transparent experiences deemed harmful that could impact their salary-funded positions or roles within the undergraduate admission office. Furthermore, it could be difficult for me to foster a safe space for students to share intimate details about their experiences due to my previous role at UC and social power position. Although I may consider myself a member of an underrepresented population, I possess privileges and positional power different from the students. Lastly, I may be considered an outsider to the UC community despite my positive relationship and previous affiliation with the UC and the CPS Ambassador College Program. This could lead to the perception that I am out of touch with the UC culture and vision.

This study is closely intertwined with my professional and personal experiences and passions. I hope to provide context around the students' experiences we are asked to serve and guide. This study can be used to advance admission practitioners' work around college access and student success. Also, this study will provide insight into different models that can be adapted to create successful P-20 partnerships for urban public high school students. As always, I aim to expand the literature on different pathways that educational leaders can explore to aid underrepresented groups with academic and career attainment.

**Setting**

The CPS Ambassador College Program occurs in multiple Cincinnati, Ohio locations. The first is UC, located a couple of miles away from the center of downtown Cincinnati. Three campuses comprise the UC System (Clifton Heights, Blue Ash, and Clermont), and most of the training occurs on the Clifton Heights Campus. This campus
is located at the university’s “uptown” property. UC’s campus is a traditional, modern college campus with manicured green spaces, renovated sports facilities, and state-of-the-art architecture. This traditional campus setting is mere steps away from the city of Cincinnati, which surrounds it.

**Participants**

The study participants are CPS Ambassadors who were classified as underrepresented (first-generation college students, low-income, Black, and Latinx) and served in a CPS Ambassador's role throughout the 2017-2020 student cohorts. This cohort consisted of students who were (a) currently serving as ambassadors, (b) entering their first semester of college, and (c) enrolled at UC and/or about to graduate from UC, an urban university. A total of five participants were interviewed for this study.

**Data Collection**

The scholarship encourages multiple qualitative research methods of data collection to strengthen a case study methodology; asking, watching, and reviewing are considered central to qualitative research (Ardoin, 2013; Kratwohl, 2009; Jamshed, 2014; Mertens, 2010; Yin, 2018). This study used five semi-structured interviews and document analysis. First, I distributed an initial form to the CPS Ambassadors to collect demographic information (i.e., current grade, major in college, grade point average, etc.) and open-ended question prompts that allowed CPS Ambassadors to reflect on their experiences participating in the program. Second, I requested any documents UC provided to the CPS Ambassadors that were distributed to ambassadors throughout their duration in the program.
Lastly, for this study, I conducted five semi-structured interviews. Interviewing offers precious insight when researchers do not have the advantage of directly observing behaviors, feelings, and interpretations of a phenomenon (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews are a valuable source in qualitative research studies because they allow us to understand the "hows" and "whys" of phenomena (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Yin, 2018). They are often used when a researcher gathers information to support a finding that is assumed to be established (Yin, 2018). In this study, college access and student success are presumed to be at the core of the CPS Ambassador College Program. However, we are unaware of how this translates to the CPS Ambassadors.

I conducted 60-minute semi-structured interviews with the CPS Ambassadors (see Appendices for interview-related documentation). The interview questions were guided by the components of my literature review and Yosso's (2005) Social Capital model. The interviews created a space where CPS Ambassadors could share their experiences and interpretations of the CPS Ambassador College Program related to college knowledge and social capital. This information sheds light on structures and relationships that facilitate or inhibit the deepening of college knowledge and shaping social capital through the CPS College Ambassador Program. Each of my interviews was transcribed verbatim.

**Data Analysis**

This study was guided by Merriam’s and Tisdell’s (2016) qualitative case study method approach. I used Williams and Moser’s (2019) data analysis approach to complement Merriam’s and Tisdell’s approach. As such, I conducted open, axial, and
selective coding. The open, axial, and selective coding strategy allows researchers to examine thoughts, feelings, and perspectives around a research topic. Additionally, open, axial, and selective coding requires researchers to be present and self-aware of the data's connectedness and relationship to the study and selected frameworks (Williams & Moser, 2019). Williams & Moser describe this relationship as "a reciprocal relationship...it requires a constant interplay between the research and the data" (p. 47).

This method allowed me to understand the CPS Ambassadors' intimate perspectives on college knowledge and social capital. Open coding is an inductive approach to qualitative research that differs from a traditional deductive approach (Williams & Moser, 2019). Historically, deductive studies hone in on components that allow examiners to focus on "causality and testing theory" (p. 47). In contrast, inductive studies focus on "generating theory from collected data" (p. 47) — for this study, I generated data from the initial demographic survey and semi-structured interviews. Researchers indicate that open coding procedures must be defined, rigorous, and consistently applied throughout qualitative research's validity and reliability standards.

Also, to effectively advance the research process through this coding strategy, we must recognize the interdependent relationship within the data organization, categorization, and meaning development (Williams & Mosers, 2019). To achieve these goals, during open coding, I meticulously examined the transcripts from my interviews to identify and name concepts, phenomena, and categories emerging from the text. This step involved breaking down the data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences across the transcripts. I coded the transcripts line-by-line to look for patterns, themes, and categories. This process generated a list of initial codes,
which I then used to guide axial coding. Following open coding, axial coding was used to reassemble the data in new ways by connecting categories and subcategories identified during open coding. This step involves a more focused and directed approach, where I organized and linked codes into thematic clusters. Axial coding helps identify relationships between categories. This process facilitated the development of a more coherent and refined understanding of the data. Finally, I focused on integrating and refining my findings during selective coding to build a coherent set of findings from my overall analysis.

It is worth noting that I also kept Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model in mind while coding. Thus, though I pursued an open, axial, and selective coding approach with a focus on what emerged from my data, my theoretical orientation toward Yosso’s model supported my identification and interpretation of emergent concepts.

**Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls**

This study has multiple limitations. One limitation is UC's undergraduate admissions leadership landscape. Since my departure, the department has undergone several leadership changes. This means the program goals and implementation could differ from the start of this study leading up to data collection and analysis, as a change in leadership could impact the overall goals and outcomes of the CPS Ambassador program.

A second limitation of this study is the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which affected higher education through campus closures, program disruption, and staffing changes. Due to the pandemic, much of the training and relationships that would have been established physically on campus throughout the summer did not occur for the 2020 cohort. Additionally, because many high schools moved to virtual learning for the
2020-2021 academic year, program implementation for the final year looked different than any other cohort. The pandemic also influenced how cohorts navigated college in ways that differed from the traditional student journeys represented in the literature.

A third limitation was the ambassadors' openness in sharing their lived experiences of the program. This program is assumed to be important to the CPS Ambassadors, and some who opted not to participate in the study felt their candid feedback could impact the program's longevity. In their assessment, even though they love the programs, some aspects of the program need some additional work, and they felt comfortable enough to share that with me. From an ethical standpoint, I wanted to avoid pushing these students to engage in conversations around these concerns because they were not included in the study and did not believe their concerns were severe enough to warrant further action. It was essential to include this as a limitation, as I have no idea what they would or could potentially share and how this new information could impact the study.

The fourth limitation was accessibility — the interviews had to be conducted virtually, and some potential participants could not access technology. Hence, they were unable to participate in the study. The fifth limitation regards the participant samples. This study focused only on students who enrolled at UC. All ambassadors did not attend UC; thus, researchers may want to consider understanding the lived experiences of those participating in a similar program but attending another college.

**Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, this study will meaningfully contribute to our understanding of this outreach and academic support program and can be duplicated on
other college/university campuses. At the heart of this research are equity and college access. This study's significance goes beyond creating college access opportunities to increase the number of students applying to college.

This research explores a program's function and its potential impact on underrepresented high school seniors' holistic development of college knowledge and social capital. P-20 educators in the field of admissions, college access, and P-20 partnerships need systems and policies to begin thinking beyond what is required to apply to college. College knowledge and social capital are necessary to apply to college, enroll, succeed in, and graduate from postsecondary education (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

Furthermore, this study will offer a narrative of another component often not represented or heard in our "well informed" admission practices related to college access and student success strategies — the "student voice." Our traditional institutional research approaches must begin to shift in a direction inclusive of students' voices because these are the voices that are impacted by the decisions we make around college access and student success in the admissions field (Javed et al., 2018).

This research may open the door to conversations that inform future P-20 partnerships focused on college access and student success. For example, it may provide insight into how students impacted by said partnerships perceive their experience vs. the impact administrators "think" the partnership has on students' college access and success. It may encourage postsecondary institutions with a lack of presence in public high schools to evaluate their role in college access and student success for underserved student populations. Additionally, it may spark national, statewide, and institutional funding opportunities for P-20 and postsecondary institutions to support college access.

programming. Furthermore, this study may provide insights for practitioners to inform policies and practices around student success and enrollment strategies to increase underrepresented student populations, resulting in a cultural and meaningful academic experience.
SECTION FIVE: FINDINGS

The overall purpose of this case study is to examine how The University of Cincinnati’s College Ambassador Program leveraged students’ cultural strengths to foster college knowledge and social capital. This research was structured to determine the experiences of these student leaders, who all served as ambassadors in the CPS Ambassador Program. A particular focus was on how these ambassadors felt their time as an ambassador impacted their experiences navigating the college-going process and their time in college.

These participants were also asked to unpack, in detail, how they felt the CPS Ambassador Program, in general, could potentially serve as a program model for other colleges to assist students with navigating the college experience, specifically through a peer-led approach that ties into Yosso’s (2005) Social Capital approach which has an impact on the success of students. I used Yosso’s (2005) concept of social capital as a guide to unpack the participants’ experiences in this study. The social capital approach of this model was chosen as it examines how students navigate their peers and other social groups to help them navigate the intricacies tied to college access and success while also encompassing the experiences of these individuals who have shared lived experiences.

As a reminder, Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Model has six components. I felt it was vital to highlight the components of the model here. The model consists of:

- *Aspirational Capital* focuses on the hopes, dreams, and future desires of the students we engage with. This aspiration can present itself at any point during the student life cycle, and the first question of the interview was a tool to collect the dreams and future desires of these students.
• **Linguistic Capital** hones in on the diverse languages and communication skills that Black and Brown students bring to their holistic college experience. It includes but is not limited to, their tones, rhythm, and cadence, which embodies the culture of their lived experiences.

• **Familial Capital** comprises the social and personal human capital students can access while navigating their collegiate journey. The lived experiences of these students are made up of their engagement with their families and communities and everything in between.

• **Social Capital** emphasizes how students navigate their peers and other social groups to help them navigate the intricacies tied to college access and success. This is particularly true for them navigating real and perceived barriers that can often serve as a deterrent to enrolling and progressing through college.

• **Navigational Capital** focuses on a student’s ability to function in spaces that are identified as social successfully. This includes but is not limited to educational spaces.

• **Resistance Capital** is centered on the notion that the inequities that have surrounded the experiences of students of color and their communities have been and will continue to be a significant barrier. However, perseverance and the ability to navigate and resist the weight of these barriers have been instrumental in these communities, working collectively to acquire and secure equitable access and a form of collective freedom.

Throughout this study's coding process, I maintained awareness of these definitions. However, as I started to examine the data, it became clear that centering Yosso’s social capital concept was the best option to gather a better understanding of these students’
experiences. As a reminder, pseudonyms were used throughout the quotes shared in this findings section. It is also important to note that based on the narratives shared, I had multiple questions that landed in more than one of the themes discussed throughout this document.

This study had five participants (see Table 1 for participant information) who were each asked the same 15 questions during an hour-long interview. Five distinct but interconnected themes emerged as my participants reflected on the CPS Ambassador program. These themes (a) understanding the system, (b) building bridges to success, (c) the importance of presence, (d) seeing students as individuals, and (e) identifying and removing barriers, all connected to social capital and are outlined below. The excerpts in each section exemplify participants’ lived experiences in each thematic area. Below I have included a table (table 1) that allows me to share the pseudonyms and demographic information of each participant.

Table 1

Demographic Information for Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonyms/Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enrolled Fulltime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andy/Participant 1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>Sophmore</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen/Participant 2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlotta/Participant 3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James/Participant 4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael/Participant 5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding the System
All five participants reflected on their significant engagement with students who shared their capital regarding how the program contributed to their overall success on campus by helping them understand the various systems they were navigating. Andy shared that their peers were critical in helping them better understand the system they were now in and shared with them additional options that they were unaware of and wished they had access to before deciding to attend UC. For example, there needed to be further information provided to them about paying for college or even that there were other paths to explore further than college. While coding the data, it became clear that this lack of information extends beyond financial information and includes various other topics, like their mental health, belonging, and navigating campus as a whole. This gap in access to information was reiterated by another participant who shared that “how the program provides information about and discusses other options outside of traditional college or even including other pathways to paying for college like ROTC would be important.” Andy went on to share that,

I feel like that [this] would be important too because then I feel like we'll put the mindset of people just like, oh, your next step is college, and it has to be college and stuff like that. When we, necessarily, we're preparing somebody for failure because, honestly, that's not something that they're dreaming of. But instead of us letting their hand go, at the same time, we're just like we're going to still hold your hand, but we're going to find you a pathway. Where do you want to go? And even at the same time if that involves including the ROTC on campus. You want to go to the military; you can still go to school and be in the military. But that was certain things that wasn't informative at the time. But now that I think about it, I
would've taken a different route, but still connected to the program in some type of way, or something like that.

In talking to Andy, it became clear that we have to be mindful of how we discuss access to college with students, particularly the different paths to this opportunity, because while some students have the desire and dream of going to college, others do not, and how can the developers of this program ensure that they (i.e., those with no desire to attend college) have a space in this program or one like it to assist them with transitioning from high school to the next step in their lives. This is particularly crucial when discussing the impact that understanding this information can have on the discussions students have with themselves and their families about college attendance.

A second participant, Michael, reaffirmed this in their responses, as throughout their interview, they discussed at length the complicated nature of the college-going process and how the engagement with peers who shared their capital assisted with this. This participant went on to share the following during their response to this question,

It's quite complicated. You got to have some assistance with that if you've never had anyone in your family go to college because they require so much information about you, your family. That was a huge help as well, being able to talk to the financial aid department at UC, having them come in, giving us advice, giving us advice about loans, the difference between subsidized, unsubsidized, which a lot of us wouldn't have known, then interest rates, stuff like, and also knowing the difference between grants, loans, scholarships because grants are money you don't have to pay back, same for scholarships.
While the purpose of the program was to recruit students to UC via this program, I believe there is value in having broader conversations with these students about the education system itself and the options (outside of UC or a traditional 4-year institution) that are available to students post high school graduation. Doing this is one of the ways we can ensure that students who engage with programs like the one at UC can remain on a path to success after high school. Knowledge is power, and based on these findings, higher education has pushed us to engage sooner and provide them with a wide range of information about opportunities, even if those opportunities do not exist on our campuses. We also must ensure that we engage in conversations around support when they get to campus. For example, Karen narrated their struggle with navigating housing. They shared that,

A hurdle that literally just came and went. And that was mainly getting to know people and moving into the dorms. The reason why I say that was because again, there were colleagues of mine that moved into the same dorm as me, which gave me access to people that I already knew, not really feeling too isolated or uncomfortable. Another thing would be... Actually, I think that's really it, because I can't say. For the most part, I've had a pretty smooth transition going in the school. From May when I graduated, most of that stuff was just now the wait area. To see, okay, you got everything filled out, your class has been registered, you know exactly how to do. In fact, there we go. I answered my own question now.

This study emphasizes the need to not only equip students with the knowledge they will need to navigate the unknowns of higher education, but the environments they are
currently in as helping them through this will assist with their overall transition to our campuses.

To close out this theme, I would like to reiterate the importance of speaking to students and centering their needs and, in essence, their voices as they pertain to their futures and their overall cultural capital in a way that reflects their ability to unpack the sometimes “foreign” things we are saying through individuals and processes that they can relate to and understand.

**Building a Bridge to Success**

Another theme centered on students’ preparation to attend college. All five participants highlighted that lacking capital, access, and preparation can be challenging for them.

James indicated the stress they felt while deciding on a college. Throughout their interview, they shared how this was new to them because no one in their family could assist them with this process. They also alluded to the fact that their family and community were only exposed to the concept of college through the information they received from the CPS Ambassador program. They shared the following,

Yeah. And then at the same time, like I said, the program was very great. And it was an experience that I can't take back. But at the same time, yeah. By that point, I was just not motivated to go to school. And I was motivated by the program to actually go to school and stuff like that. But I feel like there's more information that sometimes is hidden that it's not revealed at the time being that needs to be revealed.
This hidden information that this participant is referencing is the nuance associated with the lack of capital needed to navigate all the intricacies of the college preparation, application, and acceptance process. Students and their families “don’t know what they don’t know,” and often, they find themselves at an impasse, not knowing what their next steps should be. That uncertainty can also occur when the time to act regarding the college application process has passed. Implementing these programs means that we are creating a “bridge” to close the gap that exists for underrepresented students when thinking about college as an option. Carlotta, supported this argument by stating,

Yes. So for example, the program taught me time management. So when I got to college, I understood time management. Or the program taught me, because we were doing training in the residence halls, I knew how to find my way around campus when I got to college. So was there anything that the program did that even though we didn't say, "Hey Kim, now that you're in college, here's your roadmap," but that you were like, this is what I learned and I'm going to apply it to being a student?

In essence, Carlotta’s experience as a CPS Ambassador, gave her access to capital she did not have prior to going through the program. They wanted to share with me that an important step in their experience was obtaining the capital they were missing.

Conversations with their peers and those in charge of the program allowed them to grasp the processes associated with applying for scholarships and grants, in addition to feeling supported, and valued. These tangibles have been instrumental in their success as a student at UC. Kim reiterated the importance of early engagement, outreach and connection by stating that,
Then I was also taking courses during the summer as well that was preparing me for college. It was a summer bridge program through UC. I believe I got recruited because I was an ambassador. I think that's why I got reached out to because of that ambassador connection. I participated in that because I was super nervous about starting college. I didn't think I had the intelligence at the time because of the high school I came from, the curriculum wasn't structured. I feel like I was weak in some areas in terms of math and science, and I was trying to go into an engineering degree. I would say that was going on.

This incubation of information and access to processes and policies that make the college-going process more seamless is the key ingredient of Yosso’s social capital model and manifested itself as a tool to the success of this program throughout the interview and coding process of this research. Conversely, the remaining participants viewed the changes in staff in a different way. They discussed how they were able to have an appreciation for the community-like support and family-type atmosphere that was created by the program.

In closing out this theme, I wanted to share that in the minds of most of the students, even when key staff members left, the tools that they shared with them were still valuable and helpful in them forging on. Throughout the interviews, the participants all alluded to this connection and this feeling of family that they had while engaging in the program. The participants also discussed how the tools provided allowed them to develop a level of social capital they did not have before engaging in the program.

**Being Present for Students**
Another theme centered on the participants identifying someone who assisted them with navigating the UC campus. All five participants' consensus across the board was that this community supported them, and building individual and group relationships helped them transition to college. Again, this ties in with how Yosso describes the impact of social capital on students' experiences from USPs.

However, there is also a downside to this that emerged from the data: the loss felt when a staff member or a peer group member leaves UC. Kim repeated their sentiments about key staff members leaving, which made them feel as if the family-oriented environment they had come to love was shattered. Kim shared the following,

Okay. So, for example, yeah, it prepared me to get my foot in the door with college, but not necessarily take another few steps into college. Just because, well, this is on a different level at the same time because it deals with our program. So, with our program, a lot of the people that were, for me, the pillars to that program left. Or life started to change a little bit. So, us being so used to certain people like yourself, and you, and the UC team, and other people that we were so used to having, , it kind of took away that little natural feeling, like I can open up to you more because I know you so well. Or you know where I stand.

They also commented that,

Staff member B was my go-to. And then, until he left as well, because he left early as well. That kind of hurt. Staff member B was my go-to because he was a little bit of the younger mindset. He knew what we were thinking. He knew what we had planned. So that kind of gave me a welcome, like you're welcome here. I know what you're going through. So, I can help you. So that was kind of cool to
actually have staff member A on my end. Staff member B, and Staff member C. Staff member C, she was a great help as well, just because she kind of, I guess the thing that she saw on me was kind of like I kind of wanted you to take the leader role in this situation because you're a student. So, you would know how to interact with students more than me basically. That's what I got from her.

Carlotta shared that the relationships they had established with some of their peers were still stable, but the fact that others left meant some gaps. They shared that,

I don't know, I didn't even want to go through with college sometimes during that summer just because when I was taking the classes, I was getting the feel of how they were going to be. I was like, "This is a lot of work, definitely not what I'm used to. It's definitely different from college in terms of studying," which I was trying to gain all those skills, studying, reading, getting back into that which it did help because it helped me kickstart my first semester, just taking advantage of like tutoring programs, just giving it all I had that first semester. Then just helping me through because I was basically going through trauma for the next few months after that which was affecting my motivation for college. Getting enrolled, taking advantage of the CAPS program which is the program for psychological services, taking advantage of that... It was a lot that first year.

Relationships and the impact these have on social capital are key when engaging with these students. This was further enhanced when Michael explained how staff supporting and leaving had them experiencing this feeling of loss [of social capital] that had been a key component of their decision to attend UC and participate actively in this program. They went on to share sentiments around the loss of capital but through the lens of how
COVID-19 made them feel as if they were not getting the whole college experience when compared to their peers who had engaged with the program and campus before the COVID-19 pandemic shutting everything down.

To conclude this theme, it is essential to note that all of the participants addressed the impact that connection to their peer groups had on their overall experience and how, in the absence of these relationships, their ability to engage with the UC campus became a little more complicated.

**Seeing Students As Individuals**

This theme related to how students processed their engagement with their peers and staff at UC while engaging with the program. One of the participants responded by raving about the individual care they received from staff and their peers. In responding to the question, James shared that,

[The program] helped me overcome certain aspects because I remember staff members advocating for me to get in-state tuition. Because I was getting out of state tuition. And if I would've been just a stranger applying for UC, nobody would've really fought for me. Nobody would've really cared. But me opening up to staff members like, "Hey, staff member, this is what I learned from training. But this is what I'm getting. How is that possible?" And that's when he pulled strings for me. "Hey, this is a person that's been with the CPS Ambassadors. He's part of CPS and stuff like that. Why is he getting out of state?" And then we talked to financial aid. We even went up to the president. We pulled a lot of strings. And then at the end of the day, it helped me to get in-state tuition. But then at that point, that's where funding was even still a problem. A lot of
scholarships that UC offered wasn't necessarily for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students, or in words like... What is this called? The CPS grant, or something like that.

The impact of this advocacy on this participant’s life was groundbreaking and something they discussed throughout their interview. They spoke to the importance of this advocacy in also preparing them to navigate UC in a way that would ensure their success.

Karen reiterated the importance of this individualized care that staff and peers extended to the program participants by sharing that as they progressed through the program, they could attain informal information that guided them in selecting courses and knowing who to connect with when they wanted specific things done. They stated that,

I would say registering for class is one of the bigger takeaways from the UC Ambassador Program. Because, we sometimes only think for a certain number of classes to go to, we want to get these out the way, you try to look for the best teacher, the best route to get things done to make your college career more efficient. Being able to understand who certain teachers were, what the hours were looking like, how the work was going to be presented, all these types of things were handled in the UC Ambassador Program. Whether or not it was direct, whether or not it was passive, it was just stuff that really helped later on.

This reiterated the belief that the CSP Ambassador program saw these students as individuals first and then students who were engaged in this program based on their lived experiences. It became clear while coding the data that students valued the individualized support they received from staff and peers in the program, as the simple things that one can take for granted, like registering for classes, may not be so simple for someone who
does not have the capital to navigate the nuances that are tied to registering for classes. So, being given the tools and having people support them through this program was important to the participants of this study.

In closing out this theme, I want to note that there is value in how we help students navigate these spaces, and there is value in ensuring that their families and communities are also engaged with us because we know that there are barriers that exist. Those barriers can be a hindrance to students being successful during college. These perceived or actual hindrances tie into campuses' understanding that while students have shared lived experiences, they should also be seen as and treated as individuals. The similarities they share bind them together in this social capital incubator. However, their differences are also central to how they experience college.

**Identifying and Removing Barriers**

All five participants shared that overall, the program was a catalyst to amazing things in their lives, as the program's structure allowed them to engage with peers who had navigated this space before. The ability of the program to help identify and remove barriers was the final theme. For example, Michael stated the following during their response:

I mean, honestly, I mean, for me, I would just say eye-opening. Because it gave me the insight of what college is really about and that whole process of what's next after high school. Being gen one, my parents had no idea what FAFSA was or what financial aid is, or anything regarding paying for application fees, doing all that. So it was very eye opening because it taught me a lot throughout the whole process. And it taught me way before I even got into the step of actually
starting. So, it started the summer before my senior year, which I feel like was pretty important because now I knew what was going on throughout my whole senior year. At least I had an agenda/itinerary, or more important dates I needed, and stuff like that.

This response is a strong indicator that this program not only opened this participant’s eyes to a future that involved college but that there were resources available to them that assisted them in navigating this process.

Conversely, there is value in also realizing that there is still a gap that exists when sharing information, and things that we believe are self-explanatory in our roles as administrators may not be for those who lack the capital to navigate a college campus. For example, while these participants spoke about this program in a way that showed the importance of having access to information about how best to access resources, there was also talk of a gap that potentially existed in how information was shared. This was reiterated to me when Kim, one of the participants who had raved about the program throughout the interview, shared that,

I felt like the thing is, with the program, I got the whole gist of it was focused on urban high schools and stuff like that, right? But I think the main thing that I didn't feel that was important that should have been important was filtering out the students that you have in front of you as well, regarding their status. Because the only reason why I actually chose UC was because they actually provided a little bit of financial aid. But I feel like they should have prepared me more regarding you can't apply for certain scholarships because you're not eligible for
that. Or think about out of state tuition. Are you willing to pay that much, even if you're living in-state and your status kind of reflects that and stuff like that?

Understanding that these gaps produce barriers is important, as multiple students fall into the USP demographic whom this communication gap can impact. An example of this would be one of the James, who identified themselves as a DACA student. This student freely discussed their DACA status throughout the interview while also sharing that once they arrived on campus, it became clear that based on their status, they could not access certain financial resources. They also shared that this status meant they had to start thinking like an adult quickly and make adult decisions regarding their college choice as they were doing this entire process independently and had a better understanding of the process than their family. This notion of doing things independently was common throughout the interviews, as all the participants discussed this.

Like James and the other participants, Karen also explained to me that getting and seeking assistance was still complicated because they also had no assistance from family. This participant self-identifies as a first-generation college student and, similar to the participant who has DACA status, needed more understanding of what loans and other tangibles entailed. It was important to have a group of peers to assist them with removing the barriers that accompany being a first-generation college student. They shared that,

It's quite complicated. You got to have some assistance with that if you've never had anyone in your family go to college because they require so much information about you, your family. That was a huge help as well, being able to talk to the financial aid department at UC, having them come in, giving us advice, giving us advice about loans, the difference between subsidized, unsubsidized,
which a lot of us wouldn't have known, then interest rates, stuff like, and also knowing the difference between grants, loans, scholarships because grants are money you don't have to pay back, same for scholarships.

This lack of understanding of the college process and having access to information about the process also came out in other interviews where students identified some additional barriers while engaging with the program and UC. These barriers centered on staff leaving and there needing to be a clear transition process shared with students around this. Carlotta shared that they had a lot going on in their life, in addition to classes and how the changes made in staff added to that disruption and served as a barrier to them being as successful as they wanted to be that semester. The participant shared that,

That summer? Oh, wow. Yeah. I have things to say about that. During that summer, because I had just moved out of my mom's house... I left the day after prom. I'm like, "I can't stay here anymore." It was just the environment was too hostile, and I was just over it at that point because I was about to graduate anyway, and I was moving on to college. I left my mom's place, and then I moved in with my sister. She had just had her second son the day before my birthday in May. All that was going on, so I was staying with her that summer because I knew it was going to be temporary anyway because I was moving on campus. Then living there, helping her with my two nephews, just trying to take some weight off her shoulder... I don't know. It was just a lot dealing with that, and then I was working still because I still had things I needed to get ready for college.

They also shared that this was magnified by them having classes as well,
Then I was also taking courses during the summer as well that was preparing me for college. It was a summer bridge program through UC. I believe I got recruited because I was an ambassador. I think that's why I got reached out to because of that ambassador connection. I participated in that because I was super nervous about starting college. I didn't think I had the intelligence at the time because of the high school I came from, the curriculum wasn't structured. I feel like I was weak in some areas in terms of math and science, and I was trying to get into an engineering degree. I would say that was going on.

As I close out this theme, I want to share that the engagement the students in this study had with staff and peers is directly linked to how Yosso describes social capital as a model. However, with this approach to engagement can also come the trauma and barriers associated with the loss of staff and peers and the pressures faced when these relationships must be rebuilt from the ground up. The experience of loss, in the minds of these students, created barriers that they did not think they would have to navigate. We must be mindful of this when engaging with underserved populations, as significant changes can be detrimental to their success on our campuses.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this process, I was reminded that as much as students are similar, they are also uniquely different. I was also reminded of the value of authentically engaging students while also centering their voices and how they see the world when we converse with them. We must understand that students from USPs have a larger learning curve to overcome, which is magnified when we start having conversations about college access and completion. Having peers engaging in these conversations with them like we did with
the CPS Ambassadors program, is an integral part of our engagement with students, as
the lived experiences that students share tie them to the campus and each other in a way
that faculty and staff are unable to.
SECTION SIX: DISCUSSION

This section discusses how my study will contribute to the CPS Ambassadors program at the University of Cincinnati, and how I plan to engage with the scholarship around how admissions and enrollment management practitioners in higher education can positively impact the experiences of USPs. The following research questions were addressed and answered after concluding this study:

1. How does participation in the CPS College Ambassador Program build college knowledge for the program Ambassadors?
   a. What role does social capital play in the recruiting and retaining students in the program?

2. How do CPS ambassadors talk about their experiences with the program?

I have discussed the implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and scholarship through a few of this study's findings. The first research question seeks to uncover how social capital impacts retention in the program and at UC. The second research question guided my understanding of these students' lived experiences through the lens of social capital. I will first start with implications and recommendations for practice and policy.

Leveraging the Voices and Experiences of Students

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the CPS Ambassadors had an amazing experience on that campus, from how they were recruited to how they were retained. It also became clear to me that embracing social capital's impact on how students engage with each other can positively impact how we retain them and how we leverage their experiences to keep students. Which aligns well with (Yosso, 2005)
because there was an emphasis on the students utilizing one another as a resource to navigate the system. This proved to be consistent throughout each participant. Additionally, while the program could have been better, it is a catalyst for access for students from the Cincinnati Public School system. The CPS ambassadors shared that based on their experiences in the program, they would all be willing to engage with high school students and share how valuable the program has been to their success at UC.

This theme validates the notion of social capital influencing an individual’s education (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005). In addition, Coleman’s definition aligns well also, describing social capital as a public good and notes individuals can utilize this good for their advantage such as educational or career attainment. Coleman's definition of social capital is not perfect, but it helps demonstrate further why it is a valuable tool for understanding the CPS Program. First, ambassadors must apply to serve in the program; as such, similar to what Coleman (1988) suggests, the ambassadors appear to be making individual decisions to participate. Second, the ambassadors know the benefits of serving as an ambassador. As such, it could be assumed they are participating in this program for their advantage. Building on Yosso, 2005

**Access to Pre-College Program**

Throughout the study, it became clear that it is becoming increasingly important to expose students from USPs to a college experience through the lived experiences and stories of students and staff that mirror their own. The interviewed participants made it clear in their assessment of the program that there be an expanded conversation around college readiness before students get to UC while ensuring that there are opportunities for
students to grow, flourish, dream, and learn when they do get to campus. In their assessment, the best way to do this is through pre-college engagement.

This theme continues to build on the scholarship around college access. An emphasis on defining and operationalizing college access is present within the scholarship and the CPS Ambassador program (Perna, 2002; Thomas & Perna, 2004; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Conley (2010) describes college access as a systematic understanding of the postsecondary educational system. It is a process combined with learning environments that provide students with the college knowledge and social capital skills necessary to navigate the college enrollment process and college environment (Bethea, 2016; Conley, 2010; Freeman, 2012; Perna, 2000, 2006; Venezia et al., 2003; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Successful navigation of the college enrollment process and environment leads to educational and career attainment. In conclusion, access to a pre-college program prepared to ambassadors with knowledge they did not acquire from their high school and/or family environment.

However, this program is novel. It is rare that an undergraduate admissions office funds a program for students to attend college in general. Normally, when admissions offices fund programs they expect to see an increase in recruitment at their specific college. The CPS Ambassador Program is designed so that students attend any college regardless of if UC is their choice.

In alignment with creating and having access to a pre-college program. Throughout the study, I picked up on the importance of giving students access to the resources and tools they need to access college, as doing so will give them agency over their lives while providing them with the necessary resources required to leverage the
complicated higher education system we all have to function in. This study has made it clear that there is value in leveraging the support and experiences we provide students through the programming and intentional engagement UC offers.

**Implications for Scholarship**

**Admissions Role in College Access and Student Success**

While coding the data, I identified comments from participants that led me to believe that there could be a downside to Yosso’s social capital model as it pertains to establishing and maintaining these relationships with students. The impact that staff leaving can have on the overall harmony of this environment can damage the community built around the social capital model. Some participants believed that changing staff at the institution could have been a determining factor in retaining some of the students who did not successfully progress through the program. They shared that these students' lack of connection with the campus after being immersed in it through the CPS Ambassador program was served when these staff left, which led to some people leaving. I believe there is value in examining through research how transitions on college and university campuses impact students' experiences.

The disparities in college access for USPs are an area for improvement for our nation. There are competing demands that institutions must resolve. While there are many competing demands, admissions professionals directly impact all of them. Admissions professionals are responsible for creating strategies for increasing enrollment, diversifying the incoming classes, and admitting academically prepared students who can
handle the course rigor. As my study shows, this would result in an enhanced academic experience. As Maxwell and Garcia (2019) note, enhanced educational experiences foster environments that "reduce students' racial bias, improve satisfaction and intellectual self-confidence, and enhance leadership skills, which translates to a well-informed and diverse global workforce and productivity.

Suppose admissions and enrollment management leaders influence and assist institutions with meeting the outlined demands that promote academic and student excellence. Why are the institutions not reflective of the communities they serve and the American population? For example, Black and Latinx students are not more represented in the student population at selective universities today than representation 35 years ago. At 45 of the 50 flagship state universities, the percentage of Black undergraduates is lower than that of high school graduates in that state who are black (Maxwell, 2019). Maxwell and Garcia (2019) further this discussion by providing the high school graduation rates in Mississippi that indicate 50% of the students who graduated in 2015 and 2016 were Black. Still, only 12.9% of the University of Mississippi undergraduates were Black. The college access gap persists. The lack of college access results in a lack of college knowledge and social capital, which translates to either (a) students not enrolling in college or (b) enrolling and dropping out.

Additionally, admissions professionals have historically attempted to close the college access gap and meet demands by focusing on ways to improve the admissions process specifically, opposed to thinking of a more holistic approach that assists students before the college admissions process and beyond (Ancheta & Edley, 2004; Bethea, 2016; Chang, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002; Gurin, 2004; Maxwell & Garcia, 2019; Orfield,
2001; Roksa et al., 2007). Suppose admissions professionals, administrators, and policymakers want to increase college-going rates effectively and, in return, serve increasingly diverse student populations. In that case, we must better understand how to foster success among Black students before and during the college-going process and post-admission (Museus & Quaye, 2009).

As the conversation and research continue around college access and student success, admissions professionals must develop students' efforts before college and potentially beyond admission into the institution. One of the pathways admission professionals, such as the one I am examining in this study, considers peer-to-peer pre-college transition programming. While the concept of college transition and support programs is familiar to higher education, admissions have yet to fully integrate and/or operationalize transition programs and experiences into the admissions field.

**A Commitment to Removing Barriers**

It also became clear to me that while students have lived experiences that join them to a place and space, their uniqueness also means they have experiences that will not be similar on our campuses. The sooner we can remove barriers unique to our campuses around the college access process, the easier this transition will be for students. Additionally, we must remove internal barriers while simultaneously providing information to students about external barriers, especially around the financial components of attending college, for example, providing them with detailed information about loans, grants, and other resources. Through research, there could be value in examining what financial barriers exist for students on our campuses and what impact, removing these would have on their experiences on our campuses.
The scholarship notes USPs have substantial barriers. In contrast to students from high-income families, they are less likely to participate in traditional college-going activities like searching, requesting institutional information, and attending information sessions (Buchman et al., 2010; Le et al., 2016; Ross et al., 2012). The idea of college and the college-going process becomes another difficult barrier USPs must choose to navigate and address new challenges such as mental health and wellness, increasing college costs, enrollment complexities, and increased campus support. Educators and higher education administrators must intervene to support students and their families throughout the college-going and transition process.

Due to the substantial barriers contributing to college access and student success, transition and support programs are incredibly pragmatic in alleviating the barriers students and families often experience during the college-going and college enrollment process (McCurrie, 2009; Noone et al., 2007). This is especially true for student's families with low educational attainment. A student's family's educational background plays a significant role in a student's access to and ability to navigate college (Horvat et al., 2003). For example, parental encouragement can influence college planning as early as a student's seventh-grade year (Cabrera et al., 2006). As such, this study aligns with the notion that college transition and support programs provide supplemental support for students and their families. The scholarship suggests they are a critical pragmatic component to provide additional support as students come from different backgrounds and ecosystems with unique challenges (Hallett et al., 2019).

**Contribution to Practice**
Research suggests that higher education leaders must examine organizational behavior and its relation to student outcomes (Berger, 2000). Additionally, the research indicates the importance of admissions professionals as gatekeepers for postsecondary education (Bethea, 2016). As an admissions, student affairs, and enrollment management professional who has served in different roles at a large urban public institution, a Historically Black College University, a mid-sized regional institution, and an Ivy League school, I empathize with higher education professionals as we navigate the challenges of higher education.

The change to our practice that we must navigate is placing more value on the voices of students and how we engage, support, and mentor them before them even joining our campuses. We have to truly understand the importance of ensuring students and their voices are at the core of our practice and the decisions we make as institutions, as there are always unintended consequences to the things we do and decisions we make.

In closing, I am compelled to ensure I utilize this study to assist UC and other institutions with their efforts to create access and student success opportunities and possibly aid admissions offices with strategies to transform their engagement with urban public high schools and local communities. I will discuss the different ways below and hope to contribute to the practice.

**Contribution to Scholarship**

**General Contribution to Scholarship**

This study aims to build on the research that impacts admissions professionals. I argue that admissions and enrollment leaders are the gatekeepers of higher education. As such, they have a voice and a stake in this fight beyond admitting students. There is a real
opportunity here for admissions professionals to have a higher stake in student success. I hope this study challenges the narrative that admission professionals play in higher education as it pertains to student success while building upon research admissions professionals have conducted in the field (Bethea, 2006, Kezar, A., & Kitchen, J. A., 2020, Kniess, D., Buschlen, E., & Chang, T. F. 2020).

Potential Avenues for Dissemination

The American Behavioral Scientist Journal

The American Behavioral Scientist journal is "peer-reviewed and published fourteen times a year, is a valuable source of information for scholars, researchers, professionals, and students, providing in-depth perspectives on intriguing contemporary topics throughout the social and behavioral sciences." (SAGE, 2020). Because this study hopes to add to the scholarship on social capital and the body of knowledge around college transition and support programs, it would be beneficial to contribute to these topics through this academic journal.

Urban Education

The Urban Education journal website describes this journal as "Get hard-hitting, focused analyses of critical concerns facing inner-city schools in Urban Education (UEX). This ground-breaking publication provides thought-provoking commentary on key issues from gender-balanced and racially diverse perspectives. Articles cover topics such as mental health needs of urban students, student motivation and teacher practice, school-to-work programs, and community economic development, restructuring in large urban schools and health and social services." (SAGE, 2020). This study focuses on
urban high school students and an urban research one institution. As such, I plan to submit an article to this journal to build on urban public high school students' research.

**The Journal of College Admissions**

The Journal of College Admission is "NACAC's quarterly flagship publication, The Journal of College Admission, which offers readers resources from thought-leaders tracking the pulse of college admission counseling; the foremost authorities on trends, data, and research; and members dedicated to ethical college admission." (NACAC, 2020). This study is specific to admission-related work and leadership within the admissions and enrollment management field. As such, it would be instrumental in contributing to the scholarship through this journal.

**Journal of Higher Education and Outreach and Engagement (JHEOE)**

The Journal of Higher Education and Outreach and Engagement mission is "to serve as the premier peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal to advance theory and practice related to all forms of outreach and engagement between higher education institutions and communities." (JHEOE, 2020). This study examines a program that increases engagement between a public school district and the community. As such, submitting an article for review for this journal would contribute to the K-20 partnerships and community engagement scholarship.

**Conclusion**

In higher education, we discuss the importance of removing barriers. However, more resources often need to be assigned to programs and processes that would assist us with bridging this gap and/or eliminating these barriers. The CPS Ambassadors program can serve as a model across higher education to help practitioners identify tangible ways
to move the needle forward. This should be done in a way that centers the voices of all students, especially those from USPs, who need the support that comes with removing barriers more than others.

My findings have highlighted the importance of empowering students to utilize their voices and actively participate in their academic journeys. When we do this, the likelihood of us retaining them improves. This is especially important for students from USPs, who may have reservations about stepping into these spaces on college campuses that were not historically created for them. Students reading this case study will be able to find value in the fact that engaging with their peers is a valuable asset when navigating the unfamiliar terrain of higher education.

Admissions counselors and other folx who are active in recruiting and retaining students should ensure that they are creating opportunities for students to build on and explore their social capital on their campuses. As I shared above, when students are empowered to use their voices and explore their agency, this impacts how they see themselves and the campuses that support them. Conversely, these findings can also be beneficial to other campus stakeholders who are responsible for supporting students and retaining them. In higher education, there is a common belief that retention is everyone's job, and there is value in understanding that creating opportunities for students to engage in experiences that highlight social capital is crucial to their retention, especially at a campus that serves a large number of USPs in an urban environment.

Using Yosso’s (2005) social capital model as a framework allowed me to explore the experiences of these students by highlighting the value they placed on the relationships they created and nurtured while engaged with this program. The model also
brought to the forefront of the study how valuable it is to create opportunities for students to be active in their academic experiences, especially when they come from USPs. Yosso’s social capital model assisted me in centering these participants' voices in their experiences while ensuring a clear understanding of how empowering it is for them to have agency over finances, social engagement, and academic planning. They have never been exposed to these things in a structured way. When a university exposes them to the nuances of the processes that are essential to navigating the higher education space, they must teach them with the notion that, at some point, they will want to engage in this process by themselves and on their terms.

While this case study was anchored in the experiences of these participants who were students on a large urban campus, I believe that this framework and approach to understanding how social capital impacts the experiences of students can be applied to all institutional sizes and types. Yosso’s (2005) social capital model has at its core, the importance of centering the experiences of students who come from USPs, and students who fall into this category can be found on college and university campuses across the globe.

Before I close, there was one thing that surprised me in these findings, and this was the importance of consistency in the staff that we have engaging with the students in these programs. The students shared that they see the lack of consistency of staff as a barrier to their experience, as it causes angst and requires them to start rebuilding relationships/social capital with someone else. This does not mean that they were averse to change or not resilient; it just means that losing someone who has been on their
journey with them impacts them emotionally, and that can take a toll on how they engage in this space.

In closing, Yosso’s (2005) social capital embodies the experiences that students should have on all campuses. At minimum, there should be value placed on how engaging with people who share their lived experiences can positively impact students' overall experiences. We have to be intentional about this, especially in instances where students come from backgrounds where the members of their families have never attended college. These individuals often lack the capital to have a comprehensive conversation around this decision, and we must create opportunities through peer engagement and other aspects of a social engagement model to assist them with navigating this.
SECTION SEVEN: SCHOLAR PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

I graduated from high school with a 1.5 GPA, barely making it to my high school graduation. In the summer before my freshman year of college, I participated in a pre-college program to improve my math skills. The program director expressed doubts about my academic aspirations, citing my low ACT scores, and suggested I attend a community college. Despite these initial challenges, I decided to enroll at Marshall University that fall and completed my first year of college with a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Ever since my high school graduation, I've been on a personal mission to challenge the stereotypes associated with students who may have learning disabilities. I've been determined to further my education at all costs. Upon completing my master's degree, I thought my academic journey had ended. However, my perspective shifted when I was invited to an informational session for the Mizzou ELPA program. Even then, I had reservations about pursuing a doctorate, but I received overwhelming support from those who encouraged me to take a leap of faith and embark on this new journey.

I initiated my doctoral studies at the age of 26 while concurrently taking on the role of Director of Recruitment and New Student Programs at Lincoln University. I became the youngest director on staff and was promoted within three months. Early enrollment in the ELPA program significantly benefited my growth as a young professional. Unlike the typical learning-by-experience approach, our coursework provided immediate practical applications, fostering my growth as an educational leader and student. Now, at the age of 34, I've experienced numerous career changes, including a transition to educational technology. Despite these shifts, my core mission has remained constant: how can we add value to the lives of those we serve?
The research has shaped conversations I plan to have with the University of Cincinnati. I aim to enhance the CPS student ambassador program and bolster its recruitment efforts, particularly targeting urban public high school students. Additionally, I intend to collaborate with the Director of Admissions at the University of Cincinnati to present at conferences, sharing insights on how K-12 leaders can forge partnerships with institutions to improve college access and student success. Furthermore, I'm keen on returning to academia as an adjunct professor to educate students in higher education programs.

This study has underscored the importance of placing student voices at the center of our efforts. While we may believe we know what's best for students, it's imperative to leverage their strengths and experiences to address the gaps in higher education effectively. I'm more inspired than ever to collaborate with higher education practitioners to bridge the divide in the college admissions process and encourage innovative thinking about our impact.

**Conclusion**

As a scholar, anything is possible if you conduct thorough research and adhere to APA guidelines. I see a tremendous opportunity to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on student success despite changing career paths. I'm more motivated than ever to add value to this body of work and advance research on student success.
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Hello CPS Ambassadors!

Thank you for your interest in receiving more information about this study. I am DèRecco Lynch (day-rico lynch) and I served as the Director of Admissions at the University of Cincinnati and one of the creators of the CPS Ambassador Program. I am a doctoral candidate in the educational leadership policy analysis program at the University of Missouri, Columbia., and my research interests are college access, urban public high school students, P-20 partnerships and student success.

I am interested in your experience in the CPS Ambassador Program and more specifically how you feel your time as an ambassador impacted your process in navigating the college going process and your time in college; I would also like to know how you feel this program in general have the potential to serve as a program model for other colleges to assist students with navigating the college experience. The findings of this study will be used as part of the degree completion requirement for my doctorate degree. As key players in this program, you can imagine, your input is extremely valuable.

Your participation in this study will be completely voluntary, and you can withdrawal from the study at any time. There is minimal to no risk to participating in this study, although interview questions may be deemed sensitive in nature and may cause participants to reflect on previous experiences that may be uncomfortable or difficult to discuss. Participants must (a) currently serving as ambassador (b) entering their first semester of college, and/or (c) enrolled at UC and/or about to graduate from UC.). This
research project satisfies the graduation requirement for a doctorate degree of education from the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program at the University of Missouri, Columbia. The purpose of this case study is to examine how The University of Cincinnati’s College Ambassador Program leveraged students’ cultural strengths to foster college knowledge and social capital. The findings from this study will be used to inform scholarly conversations about admission program models, particularly those that are designed around college access, urban public high school students, P-20 partnerships and student success. Data collected will be stored in a secure file on my password protected personal laptop. Participants will have the ability to create pseudonyms (a fictitious name to be identified as). All data related to this study will be deleted seven years after the completion of this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please respond to this email affirming your willingness to participate. I will send further information post-confirmation regarding the next steps. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Thank you.

For more information, please contact me at:

DéRecco Lynch
dereccolynch@mail.missouri.edu
APPENDIX B

University of Missouri, Columbia

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Principal Investigator: DéRecco Lynch
Project Title: “Fostering College Knowledge: A Case Study Examining Lived Experiences of Urban High School Seniors in an Undergraduate Admissions College Access Program”
Project Number:

This research project satisfies the graduation requirement for a doctorate degree of education from the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program at the University of Missouri, Columbia. The purpose of this case study is to examine how The University of Cincinnati’s College Ambassador Program fostered college knowledge and social capital among its current and previous ambassadors. The findings from this study will be used to inform scholarly conversations about admission program models, particularly those that are designed around college access, urban public high school students, P-20 partnerships and student success.

What is the initial survey?
The initial survey will be used to collect demographic information on participants, and introduce open-ended questions from the interview.

How long is the interview?
Individual interviews should take at least 60 minutes. Participants can end the interview at any time or decline to answer any question.

What are the risks of participating?
There is little to no risk to participate in this study. However, some of the interview questions may be deemed sensitive in nature. In addition, some interview questions may evoke personal emotions from past experiences that may be uncomfortable or difficult to discuss.

What are my rights as a participant?
Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

What is the cost to participate?
There is no cost to participate in this study.
Confidentially
The interview (whether by means of in-person, video conference, or audio conference call) will take place in a closed room to ensure confidentiality. The participant has the opportunity to create a pseudonym or participant ID# to ensure confidentiality. All interview material that details the participants responses by means of: audio, interview notes, or interview transcriptions will remain confidential and stored in a secured file until the completion of the study. In addition, all interview material will be destroyed at the end of this study.

Who should I contact if I have any questions, concerns, complaints regarding this study? If for any reason the participant has questions or concerns regarding this study. The participant can contact:

Dissertation Chairs of this Study:

Dr. Michael Steven Williams
University of Missouri, Columbia
Associate Professor, Higher Education
williamsmichael@missouri.edu

Dr. Jeni Hart
University of Missouri, Columbia
Dean, Graduate School
Professor, Higher Education
hartjl@missouri.edu

Institutional Review Boards

MU Human Subjects Research Protection Program/IRB
Office of Research
University of Missouri
573-882-3181
irb@missouri.edu

University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board
Office of Research
513-558-5259
irb@ucmail.uc.edu
After I receive approval from the University of Missouri — I will submit this to the University of Cincinnati IRB. The program staff will be providing us with the contact information for recruitment. We will also utilize uc emails for recruiting current UC students as well.

Participant’s Consent
I have read this consent form and understand the study’s purpose, my roles as a participant, the study’s risk, and who to contact if I have questions or concerns. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can remove myself at any time within the study.

A copy of this consent form will be provided to all participants prior to this study and linked in the initial survey.
APPENDIX C

CPS Ambassador College Program Initial Survey via Qualtrics

(link emailed ortexted to students)

1. Name:
2. Pseudonym (a fictitious name that I will use if I quote you in my study):
3. Gender:
4. Age:
5. Race:
6. Ethnicity:
7. Email:
8. Phone:
9. High school attended?
10. High school graduation year?
11. At the time of applying to become a CPS Ambassador, were you the first in your immediate family to graduate high school? Yes or No
12. What semester did you enroll in college?
13. Undergraduate Major:
14. High School GPA (optional)
15. College Cumulative GPA (optional)

Link to the consent form that says the interview will be recorded and transcribed.
A statement that indicates the participant has read and agreed to the consent form.
A box for the participant to sign and agree to all the above and the consent form.

☐ Request for participation letter

☐ Informed Consent Formal Letter

☐ Finalized interview protocol
APPENDIX D

University of Cincinnati CPS Ambassador College Program Ambassador Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code or Pseudonym: ______________________
Interview Date: ____________________
Interview Start Time: ____________________ AM/PM
Interview End Time: ____________________ AM/PM
Interview Method (zoom, phone, in-person): ____________________
Approval to video or audio record interview: ____________________

A. Introduction

- Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I am excited to catch up and learn more about your thoughts and experience while in the CPS College Ambassador Program.
- I have some housekeeping items I need to go over with you before we begin.
- I will be audio recording our interview so that I can have accurate information and avoid taking numerous notes by hand.
- As a reminder, anything that you tell me is confidential and will not be traced to you.
- Here is a copy of the consent form you agreed to via the initial survey — do you have any questions?
- Let’s verify the demographic information you submitted via the initial survey is correct.
- I have about 12 questions for you and this interview will be approximately 60 minutes.
- Do you have any questions for me?
- Great, let’s start.

B. Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Research Question and Theoretical Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Check-In: How are you doing and how have you been?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. In your own words, how would you describe the CPS Ambassador program?

2. If you could describe CPS ambassadors to someone who has never heard of the program what would you say? Familia Capital

3. How was CPS College Ambassadors respectful of your circumstance? What messages did you receive about CPS College Ambassador Program about your culture and your neighborhood/upbringing? Familia Capital

4. When you were applying for the CPS College Ambassador Program, how certain were you about applying to college? What messages you receive from your family and community about college? Aspirational Capital and Familia Capital

5. In the CPS College Ambassador Program, how, if at all, did you learn about the process of getting ready for college? For example, how did you learn about the different institution types, the different college applications, obtaining fee waivers, SAT/ACT test preparation, filling out the financial aid application, or anything else about getting in and paying for college? Navigational Capital

6. How did the CPS College Ambassador Program help you decide on the University of Cincinnati as your college destination? Navigational Capital
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. What aspect of the CPS College Ambassador Program helped prepare for college? Do you recall a specific activity or a person?</td>
<td>Navigational Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What would you say are some of your strengths or values that help you in this college process? Did CPS ambassadors prog</td>
<td>Familia Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Post high school graduation, describe obstacles you faced that might have prevented you from going to college? How did the CPS College Ambassador Program help you overcome those obstacles?</td>
<td>Resistant Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tell me about an individual in the CPS College Ambassador Program, who prepared you for navigating campus?</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Did that individual change during your first semester of college or did it change, if so, who is it now?</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What offices on campus did you establish relationships with due to serving as a CPS Ambassador?</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. How would you describe your campus community?</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. How did your personal relationships help you transition into the campus community?</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VITA

I am driven by a deep passion for education and innovation, instilled in me by my grandmother "Granny." She taught me the value of continuous learning and thinking outside the box. As a first-generation college student from a low-income background in West Virginia, I personally experienced the transformative power of programs like Upward Bound, STEM Pre-College, and Peerforward at West Virginia State University, which opened doors to higher education and set me on a path of growth.

My professional journey has equipped me with a diverse skill set, spanning technology, operations, higher education, college access, and event planning. I take immense joy in shaping the leaders of tomorrow, and my profound understanding of organizational behavior, encompassing people, structure, strategy, technology, and environment, drives my determination to create a meaningful impact.

During my time at Salesforce as an engineer, I had the privilege of leading our company wide engagement strategy with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Collaborating with The White House, Congress, and global corporations, we worked tirelessly to enhance access and opportunities for underrepresented communities.
in our rapidly evolving economy. These experiences inspired the founding of The
Excellence Factory.

The Excellence Factory is a one stop shop for inspiration, collaboration and
execution. We are powered by Slack and empower entrepreneurs to realize their dreams
by providing direct access to on-demand innovation specialists, resources, and tools.