Investing in California’s African American Students: College Choice, Diversity & Exclusion

December 2015
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**Suggested Citation:**

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I. Executive Summary

High-achieving African American students in California are not attending UC campuses due to a number of factors that takes into account admissions access, campus climate and diversity, affordability, financial aid, K-12 college counseling support, and academic program offerings. The fact remains that for these exceptionally hard working African American students, who have earned admission to a UC campus, access to the campuses of their choice, the highly and moderately selective campuses, is limited at best. This elite pool of students has therefore sought college options outside of the UC system, and gravitated towards universities that appreciate and value their strong record of academic achievement, leadership capabilities and commitment to public service. The UC system is missing the opportunity to further cultivate talented students who have already proven their ability to succeed and thrive in highly selective postsecondary settings.

Since California is home to the fifth largest African American population in the country (American Community Survey, 2014), it is in the public interest of both the nation and state to invest in this population that has for generations sacrificed and invested in the country’s infrastructure. California has suffered from a hyper-implementation of Proposition 209 over the past 20 years, where attempts to ensure diversity are under strict scrutiny and UC campuses have moved further away from its public mission, under the California Master Plan, to serve students in the top 12.5 percent of their graduating class. Despite the fact that the Supreme Court decision in Grutter (2003) provides campuses with a framework for utilizing race as one factor in a series of admissions variables and factors, Proposition 209 further complicates this possibility and has demonstrated a political will in California that remains hostile to students of color.

This report represents a statewide examination of the college admissions and choice process as experienced by African American students admitted to the UC system for the Fall 2015 admissions cycle. While the majority of the students in both our survey (n=558) and interview (n=74) samples were not admitted to the highly and moderately selective UC campuses of their choice, it is important to note that most of the students were in the top 10th percentile of their high school classes, having earned GPAs of a 4.0 or higher, held leadership positions in high school, earned special school and community recognition, were actively engaged in sports or extracurricular activities, and/or worked throughout high school. This elite group of students truly represents a very high achieving pool of high school graduates who are self-motivated, engaged and committed to the betterment of the African American community and society.

Research Design
The design for this study was a mixed method research design (Creswell & Clark, 2010) that allowed for a large-scale survey of all African American admits to the UC for the Fall 2015 admission cycle (n=3402) and an in-depth qualitative study component focused on students who attended college elsewhere despite admission to a UC campus (n=74). The overarching objective of this research project was to explore the college choice processes among African American students accepted to the University of California for the Fall 2015 cycle but decided to seek enrollment elsewhere. Hearing directly from African American students who recently completed the admissions process provides critical insight on the factors they considered when enrolling elsewhere, and their experiences with UC admissions overall.
Figure 4 outlines the specific components of the Convergent Mixed-Method Research Design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) utilized to complete the data collection phase of this study.

Data collection for students began in August 2015 with the survey administration, and individual student interviews. The stated goal was to interview 60 students from throughout California to gain a representative sample of UC African American applicants from different regions in California. The Principal Investigators specifically identified geographic regions based on an initial analysis of county and school census data with critical masses of African American students, in their first semester in college. The Project EXCEL research team exceeded the initial goal and completed 74 interviews from August-December 2015.

A survey of all African American students admitted to the University of California for Fall 2015 was administered from August-October 2015 using an anonymous survey link using Qualtrics software. The survey was meant as a complement to the individual interviews, to understand the background features of students admitted to UC, factors they considered, the role of their peers and family, and how their ultimate college choice “ranked” in the list of priorities. The survey provides a valuable backdrop on the overall pool of admitted African American students in the Fall 2015.
Survey Results

The survey data represents an aggregate profile of African American California high school graduates admitted to a UC campus for Fall 2015. Students responded to a series of questions related to their academic background, extracurricular activities in high school, family background, college-going practices, the role of family and peers, and the central factors they considered when choosing a college for Fall 2015. Together, these responses provide a comprehensive look at the college-going and choice processes of the admitted UC pool of African American first-time freshman students. A total of 710 students completed the online survey in Fall 2015, 558 of whom were California residents. The survey was primarily utilized to understand the factors that admitted African American students weighed in making their college decisions. The survey provides for an understanding of the admit pool with respect to their demographic profile and college-going practices. This tool was also used to secure a large proportion of the interview sample, with over 304 (over half from California) students from the total sample volunteering to participate in an individual interview.1

From the survey results, it was clear that the pool of UC African American admits were highly qualified to enroll in any of the UC campuses across the system. Over 79% had a GPA in the A range or higher (exceeded the 4.0) and 64% were in the top 10th percentile of their graduating class. The students in the survey pool enrolled in an average of at least five AP classes in high school and 73% had received special honors recognition in their high schools. Another important feature of this sample was the breadth of awards earned by the survey pool. Twenty-seven percent of survey respondents had received a Scholar Athlete award, while 25 percent had received a community service award. In addition, participation in extracurricular activities was also wide ranging and overlapping, with students participating in more than one activity:

- 75% engaged in a form of community service (n=417)
- 58% of students participated on a sports team (n=323)
- 29% participated in a church activity (n=160)
- 28% participated in an ethnic activity (n=157)
- 19% were ASB officers in their high school (n=107)
- 14% participated in AVID (n=75)

In terms of family background, the mothers of the students that elected to participate in the survey were either highly educated with a four-year degree or higher or had some level of exposure and experience in higher education. Students reported lower education levels for fathers, with 38 percent of dads having a bachelor’s degree or greater (n=208). The survey sample was also socioeconomically diverse, with students reporting incomes ranging from below the poverty line (27 percent), to students who had median household incomes over $100,000 (26 percent), and 46 percent between $30,000-$99,000 median household income levels.

“The UC System needs to make Black students feel like they are genuinely wanted…They should feel like the UCs want them to apply.”

--Survey Respondent
The survey results also suggest that parents played an important role in providing a supportive environment for these youth.

- 96% of students noted their parents supported their college decision
- 37% expressed that proximity to family was either “important” or “very important, while and additional 33 percent noted “somewhat important”
- 32% planned for college beginning in middle or elementary school, while 29 percent of the sample started planning in their Junior year of high school.

One of the key findings from the survey results which is also supported by the qualitative findings is the importance of campus and climate to this African American pool of admitted students. High achievers have the option to also be selective in weighing their college options; issues of campus climate, diversity, social factors and an infrastructure for academic support were all important to this group. Students commented in the fill-in portion of the survey that “the percentage of African Americans attending UCs is too small.” In fact, many students researched the percentage of African American students at each of the UC campuses when making their college decision. While others also commented on the limited effort made by UC to attract African American students, “For me, it felt like none of the UCs really made a point to try to get Black kids to enroll when comparing the efforts made by other schools. After looking at the demographics of the UC schools with most being 2% Black or less, it was very unsettling and really deterred me from wanting to enroll.” Campus climate and the lack of a critical mass were factors across the sample:

- 67% of students in the survey sample considered campus climate to be either a very important or important factor in their college choice process.
- 56% of students noted that social factors were either “Very important” or “important” in making their college decision.

Finally, affordability was also one of the most important factors in the college choice processes of the African American admitted survey sample.

- 84% of students agreed that college cost was either “very important” (63%; n=333) or “important” (21%; n=111) to their college selection.

Students also noted that cost was particularly important for families with multiple siblings in college. Most students were concerned about financial aid packages that the UC offered and were concerned about accruing high debt levels for their undergraduate education. As one student notes, “We could take out loans, but there is no guarantee of a job with just a Bachelor’s. So taking out loans [and being] in debt doesn’t sound ideal.” While other critical factors were further identified in the qualitative data, the themes of diversity and affordability were strong rationales for college choice across the mixed-methods study.

“In my opinion, the primary reason Black students don’t go to UCs is due to the perceived lack of diversity.”
--Survey respondent
Qualitative Results

The qualitative results of this study share the voices of a high achieving, savvy African American college-going population who is committed to their academics, families, communities and U.S. society. These students represent a group of high achieving, hard working, optimistic, critical, and civic minded individuals who attended college outside the UC system either because they did not have viable financial aid packages, did not get into the campus (or academic program) of their choice, were concerned about the campus climate and lack of a critical mass of African American students and faculty on UC campuses, or were simply not “sought after” in the ways other postsecondary institutions pursued their enrollment. Regardless of socioeconomic, gender, or regional differences across the statewide sample, many of these concerns were consistently expressed by interview participants.

As a result of systemic barriers and college contexts they perceive as “unwelcoming,” African American students are seeking college options outside the UC system even when admitted to a UC. For our interview sample, eight students enrolled in an Ivy League university, eleven chose to attend a highly selective Predominantly White Institution (PWI), eleven are attending a highly selective Historically Black College and University (HBCU), thirteen are enrolled in moderately selective PWIs, twenty-four are attending a CSU campus (32 percent of the sample), and five are enrolled in a local community college with the hope of transferring to the UC of their choice. This savvy group of students and emerging leaders has done their homework in terms of researching viable college options for themselves, which include the possibility of psychological balance and social interaction while in college.

This report highlights the qualitative results from 74 individual student interviews conducted by research teams from UC San Diego, UC Riverside, UC Berkeley, and UC Davis from September to December 2015. A total of 74 interviews were conducted from six different regions in the state including, Berkeley, Oakland, Los Angeles, the Inland Empire, Orange County, San Diego, Sacramento and the Central Valley. Approximately 24 percent of the sample were male, while 47 percent of students had mother’s with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Only 13 percent of the sample had mothers with a high school education or less, while 19 percent had mother’s with “some college” as their highest level of education earned.

Five central themes emerged from the statewide data as playing a critical role in college access and decision making. These core themes include: Access, Diversity & Climate, Affordability, Outreach, and the High School context. Together, these themes provide critical perspectives on the nature of UC admissions, access, choice and how the University of California can better serve future generations of highly qualified, engaged, deserving African American students and future civic leaders.

“Don’t ask me to tell you what I can offer [a UC]. Give me the opportunity to show you.”

--Bay Area Female Student
Attending a CSU
First Choice was UCLA
The qualitative aspect of the study yielded several key findings related to the issues of Access, Diversity and Climate, Affordability, Outreach and School Context. First, high achieving African American students are not being admitted to their priority campuses, namely the top highly competitive UC campuses. As a result of not being admitted to their top campus choice, many opted to attend college elsewhere. In fact, UC Merced was the sole option for one-third of our interview sample. Due to lack of familiarity with academic offerings and the desire to attend college in an urban setting, many of the students chose to attend college in the CSU system (n=24 or 32 percent of the sample) while 11 percent of the students were attending an Ivy League university (n=8), 32 percent attending a highly or moderately selective PWI (n=24), 15% chose to attend an HBCU (n=11) and approximately 6.7 percent opted to start in community college (n=5). Most students applied to several colleges, which included a mix of public and private and enrolled in campuses that either recruited them, offered competitive financial aid packages, or had climates that appeared to offer a more diverse learning environment than the UCs.

**Diversity & Campus Climate**

Students were very concerned about the campus climates, academic program offerings, and whether supportive infrastructures within the UC campuses existed. Students stated concerns over being at a campus with limited student diversity, and not wanting to be the “only Black person.”

As a high achieving student from the Bay Area noted how she and her peers “were looking at the percentage of Black people, well African Americans, and when we saw it, it was like there is not a lot of [African Americans]…that’s mainly why I did not want to go to Cal.” Students were keenly aware of the racial composition of the UC campuses within the system, and they researched campus climates, extracurricular offerings and the cities and regions where campuses where located.

“I feel like the standards for UC’s have just ridiculously gone up and they’ve ridiculously gone up in such a way that alienates most of the student population, especially being from Oakland, where most people are like lower income. Some people that I know had to work through high school so they didn’t necessarily have the opportunity to spend as much time with the course material and with reading and making sure their grades were top-notch. But that didn’t mean they weren’t good enough, you know.”

*Female, Bay Area Region Attending a CSU*

“I want to go somewhere where I’m gonna be happy, where I know I fit ‘cause then I can perform and I’d be more impassioned about what I do while I’m on campus. So as I started weighing the last two schools [one a UC] I was like, you know, I didn’t feel like this was a fit for me, or this school felt like it was basically made of people like me.”

*Female student, Los Angeles region, Ivy League University*
Affordability
African American students are also very concerned about the cost of college and financial aid packages. Many noted larger financial aid packages offered by private highly selective Ivy League universities, private or Historically Black Colleges and Universities, compared to the limited financial aid and scholarships offered by UC campuses. Students in the sample were debt averse, preferring a cheaper college option, particularly if they were not admitted to their first choice campus. These students were conscious about not wanting to rely on or burden their parents in paying for college.

“At the end of the day I wanted to be at a school that would support me, and I don’t want to say that only financially is the only way to support me, but it just really made sense for my family. …And then two, I’d probably say financial aid just because what it would have cost to attend UCLA for one year is more than it’s gonna probably cost me to attend here for all four years, but it’s just that in the end, it’s quite a bit of money that I saved, so financial aid especially.”

Male, Los Angeles Region
Attending Ivy League University

Outreach
Another key finding is the fact that most of the students in the sample, 68 percent had no contact with UC recruiter or academic outreach program. For African Americans that did have contact with a recruiter, it was primarily through a partnership program such as Upward Bound. And for a handful of students that did have direct interaction with a UC recruiter, the interaction was not entirely positive. That is, these students felt that they were recruited or valued by the UCs. As a male student from the Los Angeles region described, “He was a very direct individual…not necessarily welcoming us to apply to the UC system.” This savvy group of high achievers could clearly delineate when they were sought after and received a welcoming tone by university recruiters—and this appeared most often with the Ivy League schools, highly and moderately selective private universities, and highly and moderately selective HBCUs. These campuses offered paid campus visits, recruiting weekends, and included their families in this process. Students also noted that the CSU campuses also had offered positive recruiting experiences, where they were often connected with local alumni to answer follow up questions.
**High School Context**

It was also clear from the interview data that high school context matters and plays a unique role in mediating college knowledge and information. Students explained that their counselors were largely responsible for admissions and financial aid paperwork. Counselors and the counseling offices were central places to gather flyers and leaflets on the various colleges, but the counselors lacked detailed information about academic programs on UC campuses other than the most well known campuses and programs.

Teachers emerged as the primary formal system of support for helping African American students identify colleges and universities that fit their interests and goals; while counselors played a secondary role. Our data on the role of teachers conveys an opportunity for greater partnership between teachers and UC outreach efforts, given the important role that teachers of high achievers play in the college planning process. Because the CSU prepares the majority of teachers in California, it was clear that students in low-income schools and communities were more likely to receive college information about these campuses, as their teachers were alumni.

African American students, particularly those in AP and honors classes, also commented on the assistance they received from teachers who provided support an encouragement, letters of recommendation, or direct feedback on college essays. In addition, students in more affluent schools commented on the academic planning that began early in their high school years. However, even for these students, direct information on college options was inconsistent. There was a clear contrast between African American high achievers in high poverty schools to their more affluent peers, because low income students were more likely to begin college planning and discussions later in their high school years. Students in affluent schools were more likely to utilize counseling services based on their social capital from informal sources, such as family and friends, while students from high poverty schools suffered from not having other outside resources for college choices.

Taken together, these findings support the need for a concerted effort to increase African American access to the UCs across all levels of selectivity, to address issues of climate and underrepresented student diversity across the UC system, address affordability through private funding sources and scholarships to attract more African American students to all of the UC campuses, provide greater information for the African American community on academic program offerings, generate more targeted outreach to create new applicant pools, and establish targeted efforts to educate teachers and counselors about the program offerings and long-term benefits of a UC education.

**Recommendations**

Investing in African American Students is critical for the University of California, if the system is to seriously address the limited representation of African Americans across the UC system. Based on the voices and survey feedback of highly qualified African American undergraduates who were admitted to the UC system, these recommendations represent a multi-faceted approach to increasing the numbers of African Americans transitioning to UCs as first-time freshman and are based on the voices and survey feedback of highly qualified African American undergraduates who were admitted to the UC system. As noted in this report, our sample represents an elite group of academically competitive, civic-minded, well-rounded future leaders that the UC system has failed to attract to its campuses for a number of reasons ranging from climate to not getting...
into the most selective UC campuses despite the rhetoric of appreciating diversity in the public UC system.

**Admissions Process**

1. **Increase African American students through the admission process.** Instead of relying on solely traditional indicators and numeric measures, it is important for the UC system to broaden the ways in which UC defines academic success by considering non-cognitive factors for admission and adding additional weight to such non-cognitive variables that are indicative of a hard work ethic, leadership, and commitment to community service (Sedlacek, 2011). For example, students who participated in pre-college programs (Upward Bound, AVID, etc.) and other high impact activities such as sports, leadership programs, work or community service in communities that are underserved would have additional consideration.

2. **Optimize and streamline the ELC process.** The UC system is not optimizing the ELC process to increase the number of disadvantaged, first generation, or the highest achieving students within their high school context. For example, in our survey sample, less than 10% (n=50) claimed that they were ELC students; yet, over 64% (n=358) students reported that their class rank was in the Top 10 percentile of their graduating class. Clarifying the ELC process for students and their families and assign students this status, rather than the “opt in” approach currently used would help to increase the pool of African American students with this status. The UC could capture more African American students that fit the ELC designation if it handles determining qualified students; since UC already performs a cross check on ELC status when students apply, we recommend that this be done across the entire pool of UC applicants.

3. **Designate at least 12.5 percent of admissions slots, as laid out out in CA Master Plan, for ELC students across the system, low-income students, first-generation students, and students in the top 12.5% of their class.** Each campus should reserve at least 12.5 percent of admission slots for providing special consideration to students who are either designated as ELC, low-income, from urban high schools and districts with high concentrations of poverty, or in the Top 12.5 percent of their high school.

4. **Establish one application fee that allows students to apply to all of the campuses of their choice.** Students who qualify for financial aid are only eligible to apply to four campuses with the existing waiver process. Many of the low-income students we spoke to only applied to the four campuses covered under this waiver, rather than expanding their options. And they applied to the highly competitive campuses most sought after for admission, UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara. In addition, for those students just missing the cutoff for a waiver from their high school, individual application fees can place a burden on families with more than one child.

5. **Streamline the UC wait list and appeals process**—according to students, “it is too late” when decisions are made and they have already made their college decisions by the time they hear from UC on their wait list or appeal case. Many students commented that they “found out May 1, June, or later that they were admitted to campuses, past the deadline for SIRs at their other college options.
**Outreach**

6. **Increase outreach and targeted recruitment to high schools with high concentrations of low-income urban students.** UC needs a multi-faceted approach to outreach, creating new applicant pools by targeting high schools that have been largely ignored by UC recruiters. This approach would include: increasing outreach efforts to high school counselors, educating them about the UCs and requirements for admission; Bringing students to UC campuses so they can experience the campuses firsthand; and working directly with teachers since they appeared to be the primary source of college information for students.

7. **Marketing Campaign to better promote the UC campuses and its academic programs.** In some regions, the UC campus is not well known or overshadowed by the local CSUs that may already be MSIs (Minority-Serving institutions) or HSIs (Hispanic Serving Institutions). A targeted marketing campaign throughout California educating high schools on UC program offerings would raise the level of visibility of UC across all school and community contexts. Specifically, we recommend reaching out to high schools in regions with a critical mass of African American students and families and enhancing efforts to deliver timely and relevant information on available majors and academic programs. The team also recommends that the UCs need to do a better job of promoting the campuses by engaging in the following outreach activities:

   - Better messaging to communities of color, reach out through community programs
   - Advertising campaigns across California
   - Increase contact and use of African American alumni in recruiting
   - Bring students to campuses
   - Re-evaluate and reorganize UC websites

8. **Target children of UC alumni.** The African American UC Alumni associations are not fully utilized as a potential strength in recruiting efforts. For example, 78 percent of the survey sample had parents who earned their degree in California. The African American parents that earned their degree at a UC campus could be integrated into open houses and outreach efforts in the community.

9. **Provide resources to the Black Resource Centers on UC campuses to increase their visibility and efforts to serve as a resource to low income urban high school students.** The BRCs at many of the UCs are the primary source of connection to low income African American community on campus. Early exposure to these centers would enable families and admitted students to have

**School Context**

10. **Work with teachers and counselors.** Teachers are a significant source of information for most students, including many African American students. Teachers are being under-utilized as college resources and counselors do not have enough information
about the UCs or the academic programs and offerings within the UCs. The interview data confirmed that students are very savvy and knowledgeable about the academic majors and programs they would like to pursue. Educating high school counselors and teachers about the strengths of UC’s programs would help to increase UCs exposure and knowledge about all of the UC campuses in high schools.

11. Expand applicant pools and by conducting outreach to high schools not on UC’s radar for admissions recruiting. Over 68% of students interviewed never had contact with a UC recruiter. Expanding the number of schools to conduct outreach in urban areas and high schools with a concentration of African American students may help UC campuses to increase their visibility among the African American pool of high achievers.

Affordability--Financial Commitment

12. Increase the number of scholarships provided to low-income first generation students. Provide scholarship money to students that come from partnership high schools and schools with high concentration of African American students. UC Berkeley and UCLA have African American initiative to raise private funds for African American students. This model should be adopted throughout all of the UC campuses.

13. Provide scholarships to middle income African American students. Most of the scholarship opportunities that exist are solely for low-income students or “need-based” financial awards. However, many high achieving African American students in our sample were middle income students, with additional siblings in the household that were either college-age or soon to be transitioning to college. Incentives to choose a UC through “merit-based” financial awards for working class and middle income African American and underrepresented students would enable UC to recruit high achievers that are highly sought after by other selective and private institutions would enable UCs to better compete for their enrollment.

Build an Infrastructure for African American Leadership within the UC System

14. Create funding pools from private sources to fund outreach and scholarships for African American students. Establish a fundraising campaign at the system level from private sources to conduct targeted recruitment efforts in the African American community and create new funding pool or an endowment for such efforts.

15. Create an African American Research Collective comprised of leading African American scholars within the UC system and an advisory committee to the UC President. Building an infrastructure of African American leaders within the UC system would provide the UC Office of the President with expertise and an infrastructure for tangible feedback and solutions for the unique challenges faced by African American students in the UC system.
16. Increase recruitment and retention of African American tenure line faculty and Senior level administrators. Students commented on the presence of African Americans on campus and the climate. Faculty play a key role in campus climates, because they are more likely mentor, provide research opportunities, and volunteer to assist student clubs and organizations on campus. They are central to an infrastructure for supporting African American and underrepresented students on UC campuses.

17. Fund Vice Chancellors for Diversity in each of the respective campuses to levels that enable them to better work with academic departments to diversify their faculties. Vice Chancellors of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion may play a critical role in recruiting faculty of color or provide counter offer packages for existing African American and faculty of color at UC campuses. These offices also play a critical role in funding Black Resource Centers, Raza Centros, and other ethnic initiatives on campus designed to welcome students of color and provide community to first generation or diverse students.

18. Work to Repeal Proposition 209 in conjunction with California’s state leaders. Proposition 209 has severely impacted the pool of high achieving African American applicants, admits and those choosing to enroll in a UC campus, particularly at UCLA, UC Berkeley and UC San Diego. While significant damage has already occurred in terms of supporting the development of and sustaining a thriving African American middle class in California, it is time to acknowledge the fact Proposition 209 has impeded the mission of the University of California by constraining practices that were designed to ensure access to all public UC campuses in the state. California residents and their children, that are now over 60% underrepresented students, deserve more than segregated system of higher education.

Conclusion
The University of California system is in a critical position to act upon 20 years of limited African American student access to UC campuses, particularly highly and moderately selective campuses. As both the survey and qualitative data confirm, the University of California can do a significantly better job of attracting highly qualified, engaged, civic minded African American high achievers to its campuses throughout the state of California by focusing on initiatives to promote greater access, address issues of campus climate across the UCs within the system, enhance affordability and financial assistance by creating a funding mechanism for scholarships, better marketing the UCs and what they have to offer African American students and communities, and strengthening existing partnerships while creating new ones with larger bases of the school counselors and teachers in urban and suburban high schools. Our recommendations are intended to facilitate tangible efforts to ensure that the UC system fulfills its public mission to serve California residents and contributes to the development of a cadre of African American academic, industry and civic leaders through thoughtful investment and a sense of urgency.
I. Introduction

The UC system in California continues to face the challenge of ensuring access to all public UC campuses in an increasingly competitive and constrained admissions environment. As a result, high-achieving African American students in California are not attending UC campuses due to a number of factors that take into account admissions access, campus climate and diversity, affordability, financial aid, K-12 college counseling support, and academic program offerings. The latter findings are largely consistent with the national college going population (Eagan, et. al., 2015). Significantly, campus admissions access and climate and diversity, as noted in our survey and interview data, appear to be important factors in African American college choice. As the UC campuses grapple with low percentages of African American students, particularly UCLA, UC Berkeley, and UC San Diego, students’ apprehensions about climate and diversity, as they relate to supporting students’ academic, social, and psychological needs represent a set of unique concerns which must be addressed through various policy initiatives.

This study shows how high achieving African American students are not being admitted to the highly selective UC campuses. Instead these students are admitted to UC Riverside or UC Merced, the less selective campuses in the system. Additionally, African American students who have multiple college options assert that campus climate and diversity appear to be either “very important” or “important.” Given that these high achieving African Americans have other college options, and are heavily recruited by colleges and universities that value the contributions African American students make to their campuses and to U.S. communities beyond their bachelorette degrees, they are attending college elsewhere, including outside of California.

Post Proposition 209, California witnessed a decline in African American student applications, admits and enrollees across the entire system (Contreras, 2005; 2011; Gandara, 2012). Previous research has found that African American students attended private institutions in California and out of state in the first five years following the passage of Proposition 209 (Geiser & Caspary, 2003). Unfortunately, the system has not recovered from the real and perceived limitations imposed by Proposition 209 and the UC system continues to experience a small proportion of African American high achievers applying to and enrolling in UC campuses. While African Americans represent 6.2% of the K-12 population in 2014, African Americans represented a mere 4.3% of students admitted to a UC Campus in Fall of 2015 (UCOP, 2015).

In addition, in the Fall 2015, UC received 10,623 freshman applications from African American students, 7990 were from California. Yet, only 2,647 California Residents and 755 out-of-state students were admitted to a UC campus. Approximately one-third of all California African American applicants were admitted to one of the UC campuses for Fall 2015, and the majority of students in this pool were admitted to the moderately or less selective of the UC campuses.

Figure 1 highlights the share of African American Admits by campus selectivity from 1989 to 2014. As Figure 1 shows, the share of African American students admitted to the two highly selective UCs declined post Affirmative Action and the share increased at the least selective UCs, UC Riverside, Merced, and UC Santa Cruz. Scholars have deemed the impact of shifts in higher education policy as a “Cascading Effect,” where African American and underrepresented student access to the most selective institutions significantly declined post Proposition 209 in California (Contreras, 2005; Gandara, 2012; Gandara, Orfield & Horn, 2006; Grodsky & Kurleander,
The fact remains that the effects of this policy have had a lasting impact and imprint on higher education access for African American and underrepresented students to the UC system, particularly to the moderately and highly selective UC campuses.

Figure 1 further conveys the marginal impact of policy proposals such as Eligibility in a Local context and holistic review on UC admissions. Many scholars continue to argue that there simply is no substitute for race in college admissions (Gandara, 2012; Orfield & Miller 2006; Contreras, 2005, 2011) if the UC is to realize its mission under University of California charter in 1868 to serve “all portions of State” population the state of California (Gandara, 2012). Finally, Figure 1 shows how African Americans are also not gaining admission to the moderately selective UC campuses, in addition to the highly selective campuses. The data presented in this report supports this phenomenon, where African Americans are not getting into their first choice schools; and as a result are either undermatching and attending less competitive colleges or deciding to start out at the community college level.

**Figure 1: African American Share of Admits by Campus Selectivity, 1989-2014**

While Affirmative Action in college admissions remains at the forefront of legal debate, as seen in the Fisher case currently under review by the Supreme Court, prior legal cases, including Grutter, allowed a window for race to be used as one factor along with a myriad of cognitive and non-cognitive factors in college admissions decisions. California has long suffered from a hyper-implementation of Proposition 209 over the past 20 years, where attempts to ensure diversity are
under strict scrutiny and UC campuses have moved further away from its public mission to serve students in the top 12.5 percent of their graduating class (The California Master Plan, 1960).

This report highlights the college choice processes of African American students in California based on a statewide study of first-time freshmen, conducted from August –December 2015, and included: 1) a survey of all admitted African American students for Fall 2015; and 2) Seventy-four interviews of African American students that were admitted to a UC campus but currently attend college elsewhere. The report includes an analysis of this mixed-methods study and provides tangible recommendations for UC system leaders, campus leaders and practitioners to implement as they work to address the limited representation of African American students across the UC system.

III. Background

Access for African American first time undergraduates across the UC system, and particularly the flagship institutions, is at historic lows. Since the passage of SP1 in 1995 and Proposition 209 in 1996, the number of African American students enrolled to UC has been steadily declining, despite several manipulations of admissions variables, policies and practices (Allen, 2005; Bunche Research Report, 2005; Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez, 2003; Gandara, 2012; Contreras, 2011). As many scholars have contended over the past two decades following the ban on affirmative action, there simply is no substitute for race in college admissions decisions.

However, given California’s constrained policy environment, it is important to fully understand where the UC system has been, what initiatives it has tried, and what options exist given the Supreme Court (2003) decision, Proposition 209 and the fact that generations of African Americans continue to experience exclusion from the UC campuses of their choice despite being among the most high-achieving students in the state. Figure 2 highlights the myriad of policies implemented following the two anti-affirmative action initiatives in 1995 and 1996.

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>UC Regents adopts SP1&amp;2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>CA Voters pass Prop 209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>UC implements ELC to Top 4% of High School Grads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>UC adopts Comprehensive Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>UC Regents endorse “Holistic Scoring” in Comprehensive Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>UC expands ELC program to Top 9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the UC system has attempted to look at students through comprehensive review and holistic review, such scoring and review mechanisms have not yielded greater African American admissions or underrepresented student diversity at the highly selective and moderately selective UC campuses.
Another response to the ban on Affirmative Action has been outreach. After the stark decline in African American and underrepresented student admission to highly and moderately selective UCs in 1996, and one of the provisions in SP-1, a task force report identified four strategies to increase the enrollment of educationally disadvantaged students to UC (Gandara, 2012). The recommendations included: 1) Expand on existing student centered programs; 2) invest in new partnership programs, creating partnerships between UC campuses and 50 underperforming schools; 3) Expand informational outreach; 4) create an evaluation team to assist in studying the impact of outreach efforts (Gandara 2012, p. 6). At the same time these goals were established the UC increased its outreach budget from $60 million to $120 million. However, after 2001, this level of investment has steadily declined (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

**Student Academic Preparation & Educational Partnerships (SAPEP)**

State & UC Funds, Select Years, 1997-2014

![Bar chart showing State & UC Funds from 1997-2014](chart.png)


**Why College Selectivity Matters**

A higher education from selective institutions provides avenues for academic, economic and social advancement in the United States. Students attending selective or highly selective universities are not only exposed to elite educational offerings and exposure to cutting edge faculty and leaders, they have shorter time to degrees and higher college completion rates (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Fry, 2004; Contreras et. al., 2011). Students who attend highly selective institutions as undergraduates are also more likely to go on to graduate school for their Master’s, professional or doctoral degrees (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Bowen & Bok, 1998) although this has been found to vary by major fields of study (Eide et. al., 2015). Researchers have also found that African Americans, Latinos and Native American students are less likely to attend these highly selective institutions (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Carnevale & Rose, 2003).

Attending elite colleges also translates into higher lifetime earnings and positive effects (Loury & Garman, 1995) compared to their peers from the same ethnic group; but significant differences exist between Whites and Asians earning higher wages than African Americans or
underrepresented communities with comparable degrees from elite institutions (Cancio, Evans & Maume, 1996; Zhang, 2008).

Students who attend highly selective undergraduate institutions also become part of a network of high achievers that further advance their social and professional networks beyond undergraduate or graduate school (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Finally, selective colleges represent an important “signal” to society, associating the student with the rigor and prestige represented the institutions attended. As a result, postgraduate pathways and opportunities are also more likely (Gandara, 1995; 2012).

Unfortunately, selective and elite institutions of higher education have become increasingly difficult to gain admission, given the high stakes and competitive nature of admissions. Students from high income backgrounds for example have a competitive advantage in the admissions game compared to students from first-generation, low income or underrepresented backgrounds.

For African American students in California, the pathway to higher education is not always linear, and college knowledge varies depending on the socioeconomic status of students and the high school context (Allen, et. al., 2005). Higher education literature on college access, transition and choice processes has found African American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American students to possess limited access to selective institutions given their poor preparation in low-resource K-12 schools and socio-economic contexts (Allen, et. al., 2004; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Jayakumar, et. al., 2103; Gandara, 2005; Contreras, 2011).

In addition to growing body of college choice literature, this study also draws from emerging higher education literature on under matching, which asserts how underrepresented first generation students of color are more likely than their peers to attend less selective institutions even if they are high achievers competitive for admission to highly selective or elite institutions (Gandara, 2005; Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Due to a range of factors including, cost, debt aversion, lack of information on academic programs, desire to remain close to home, limited financial resources, limited social capital or “college knowledge,” underrepresented first generation students are more likely to come from families and communities that believe college is college, and may not fully understand the tangible benefits to attending highly selective institutions. Students may also not be fully aware of the fact that less selective institutions have longer time-to-degree completion average rates, higher drop out rates, larger class sizes, are commuter campuses and offer less financial aid packages than selective or elite institutions.

**IV. Research Design and Methods**

Project EXCEL (Examining College Choice, Enrollment & Linkages) officially began July 1, 2015 and includes a team of five principal investigators from UC San Diego, UC Berkeley, UC Riverside and UC Davis, a post doctoral scholar from UC San Diego and 12 graduate and undergraduate students. The design for this study was a mixed method research design (Creswell & Clark, 2010) that allowed for a large-scale survey of all African American admits to the UC for the Fall 2015 admission cycle (n=3402) and an in-depth qualitative study component among students that attended college elsewhere despite admission to a UC campus (n=74). The overarching objective of this research project was to explore the college choice processes among
African American students accepted to the University of California for the Fall 2015 cycle but decided to seek enrollment elsewhere through both a survey and individual interviews. Hearing directly from African American students that recently completed the admissions process provides critical insight on the factors they considered when enrolling elsewhere, and their experiences with UC admissions overall.

Figure 4 outlines the specific components of the Convergent Mixed-Method Research Design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) utilized to complete the data collection phase of this study.

Figure 4 outlines the mixed-method approach that guided this research project. Data collection for students began in August 2015 with the survey administration, and individual interviews among students. The stated goal was to interview 60 students from throughout California to gain a representative sample of UC African American applicants from different regions in California. The Principal Investigators specifically identified geographic regions based on an initial analysis of county and school census data with a critical mass of African American students, and a base of students transitioning to the UC to target for the interview component. The Project EXCEL research team exceeded the initial goal and completed 74 interviews from August-December 2015.

A survey of all admitted African American students to the University of California for Fall 2015 was administered from August-October 2015 using an anonymous survey link using Qualtrics.
software. The survey was meant as a complement to the individual interviews, to understand the background features of students admitted to UC, factors they considered, the role of their peers and family, and how their ultimate college choice “ranked” in the list of priorities. The survey provides a valuable backdrop on the overall pool of admitted African American students in the Fall 2015.

The online survey was designed by the research team, which consists of PIs with higher education expertise as well as quantitative and qualitative methods. The survey link was sent to team members to review and evaluate for content and flow of the survey questions. The team also utilized national surveys on college choice as a model for the survey questions, such as the CIRP Freshman Survey administered through The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, which is implemented before students begin courses at their college or university (Eagan, et., al., 2014; Pryor, et. al., 2010). This survey in particular, is widely cited and utilized to understand the college choice processes of students attending four-year institutions in the United States. The questions in our survey tool were tailored by the research team to better understand the contextual factors considered by African Americans in making their decisions.

Upon the launch of the survey, weekly notices asking students to participate and subsequent reminders were sent to all admitted African American students by the UC Office of the President to protect the anonymity of the admitted student pool over the course of five weeks, between September 2, 2015 and the first week of October. The survey was sent to all admitted African American students admitted to a UC campus (n=3402) for Fall 2015. A total of 710 students total completed the survey, which included 558 California residents.

For the interview portion of the study, the PIs and research team conducted interviews from across the state of California, with an emphasis on select cities, based on our initial census analysis of the concentration of African American residents in the state. We narrowed the cities to include five regions: Los Angeles, the Oakland/Bay Area region, Sacramento, Inland Empire, and San Diego. The team implemented a snowball sampling procedure initially with districts, schools and community organizations to acquire potential interview participants. However, the greatest pool of potential interviewees came directly from the online survey. The students who noted in the survey they would be willing to participate in an individual interview, served as the primary pool of our interview sample. Based on the region the students home region, the potential participants were then assigned to one of the four regional research teams. To ensure accuracy of the interview content by participants, member checks, in the form of providing students with a transcript of their interview, were conducted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Using the original questions from the interview protocol, the PIs established a broad coding template for the research team and subsequent team meetings in the Fall 2015 consisted of coding at the regional levels. The full team met in mid-December to engage in a cross coding exercise to ensure inter-rater reliability (Armstrong et. al., 1997), where one-third of the total interviews were exchanged and read across the different teams to ensure reliable coding existed across the state sample. The exercise yielded few discrepancies and demonstrated significant cohesive thematic coding across the regional teams. The key themes were then revisited by the research team, and are representative of the coded transcript data from the entire statewide interview sample. These data enabled the team to determine the overarching findings that
emerged from the seventy-four interviews conducted across the state and develop institutional and policy recommendations based primarily on the voices of these students.

V. Survey data results
The survey data represents an aggregate look at African American California high school graduates admitted to a UC campus for Fall 2015 and their responses to a series of questions related to their academic background, extracurricular activities in high school, family background, college-going practices, the role of family and peers, and the central factors they considered when choosing a college for Fall 2015. Together, these responses provide a comprehensive look at the college-going and choice processes of the admitted UC pool of African American first-time freshman students. In addition to a series of likert-scale questions, there are select fill-in questions enabling students to the option to expand on the options provided or offer feedback to the UC system in establishing climates more attractive to African American students in the future. Over 170 students offered qualitative feedback for the UC system, which was coded and included in this section.

In addition, students who completed the survey were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an individual interview. This resulted in a pool of students willing to participate in the qualitative component of the study (n=304). This section highlights the key findings from the survey and represents the aggregate group of California respondents.

Description of the Sample
The majority of students in the overall sample (n=558) were California residents, and 83 percent of students were born in the state. A total of 21.3 percent of California residents responded to the online survey. The majority of students self identified as “Black or African American” (74%; n=421) “Other” (16%, n=90) or “African” (10%; n=59). For students selecting “Other”, the majority of these students were mixed-race and they filled in their background in the fill-in portion of this survey item.

In addition, 47 percent of survey respondents selected “No immigrant status—family dates back to the slave trade,” while 18 percent claimed to be second generation (the children of first-generation immigrants) in the United States. The majority of students in the sample were female, with approximately one third of the students male. In terms of generational status, twelve percent were first-generation to migrate to this country, and 11 percent of the respondents were third generation and beyond. Finally, twelve percent of students did not know their generational status in the U.S and 88 percent of the sample (n=488) spoke only English while 11 percent spoke another Language or Spanish.

The students who participated in the survey were willing to offer feedback, with 188 students providing written comments and 304 (58 percent) students that agreed to engage the research team by participating in an in person interview. The team then used this base of students to identify students who elected to enroll in colleges outside of the UC or California altogether, which was approximately 50 percent of the students willing to interview (n=304). The research team therefore has a healthy sample of students willing to comment on the UC process and their experience as first-year students in the UC system.
Socioeconomic Status of Participants
Parent education level has long been a predictor for college transition, knowledge and school success across racial/ethnic lines (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Mare & Winship, 1988). One of the interesting features of the sample was the fact that 46 percent of the sample had mothers with a bachelor’s degree (n=246) or higher (Table 1) and 76% of mothers with “some college” or higher. Thus, the mothers of the students that elected to participate in the survey were either highly educated with a four-year degree or higher or had some level of exposure and experience in higher education. Students reported lower education levels for fathers, with 38 percent of dads having a bachelor’s degree or greater (n=208). However, 65 percent had “some college” or higher as their father’s highest education level. And 27 percent of Father’s had earned a high school or less education level. Thus, in terms of socioeconomic status, students from all levels of SES were represented in the sample, even if it is slightly skewed towards middle or upper middle class families.

TABLE 1: HIGHEST EDUCATION LEVEL OF MOTHER & FATHER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate/Professional degree</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-year degree</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some High School</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade School or Less</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Bachelor’s degree or higher data for mothers and fathers of the students in the sample is higher than the average for African Americans in California, as only 23 percent percent of African American households have earned a Bachelor’s degree or higher (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). The students that participated in this survey are from households that are more educated with higher percentages of their parents earning a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to the state population.

The majority of parents (78 percent) also attended college in California (n=357; 78 percent) compared to out of state (30 Percent). A small proportion of parents attended college abroad (12 percent; n=55) and 5 percent of the parents of the survey sample attending an HBCU (n=24). Because so many parents attended college in California, knowledge of institutions in the state is likely greater than the broader African American college-going population in California. These data convey the importance of social capital in producing high achieving students and the likely transference of that capital on the student sample.

The student sample was economically diverse, with students represented across the spectrum of income levels. Twenty-Six percent of the student sample had annual income levels greater than
$100,000, while 27 percent of the survey respondents were from families with less than $30,000, below the federal poverty line for a family of four. Forty-six percent of the students had families ranging from just above the poverty line to under $100,000 annually, while 26 percent of students reported having family incomes greater than $101,000 as seen in Table 2.

**TABLE 2: APPARENT INCOME LEVEL OF HOUSEHOLD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $10,000-$20,000</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately 21,000-$30,000</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $31,000-$40,000</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $41,000-$50,000</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $51,000-$60,000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $61,000-$70,000</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $71,000-$80,000</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $81,000-$100,000</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $101,000-$120,000</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $121,000-$140,000</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $141,000-$160,000</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $161,000-$180,000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximately $181,000-$200,000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than $200,000</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>548</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirty-four percent of the students also reported having a sibling in college and these family members were attending a wide range of public, private and two-year colleges and universities both in California and out of state. This factor contributes to their overall college awareness and exposure and likely played a role in the college planning and decision process (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Freeman, 2005; Ceja, 2006).

**College Preparation in High School**

The students in the survey sample were extremely high achieving with 79 percent reporting that they had an “A” Grade point average or higher (79 percent; n=450), and an additional 20 percent had at least a B average (n=116). Yet, some students wanted to see UC “look deeper into applications. GPA and test scores is not everything,” while others recommended a “more holistic evaluation of applications, interviews.” Students were keenly aware of the highly competitive nature of UC admissions. In addition, 91 percent of the sample possessed an intended major (n=501), suggesting their savviness about academic programs and majors at the respective campuses.
TABLE 3: STUDENT SELF REPORTED GPA IN HIGH SCHOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GPA Range</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (3.6–4.0 or greater)</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (3.0–3.5)</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C (2.0–2.9)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D or Lower (1.0–1.9)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 4: TOTAL NUMBER OF AP COURSES TAKEN IN HIGH SCHOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of APs</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Min Value</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Max Value</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>7.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of African American students admitted to a UC campus are taking between 5 and 6 AP courses while in high school. However, taking an AP course does not mean that these students are taking or passing the AP exam, which would give them college credit and possibly shorten their time to degree completion. For example, for the Class of 2013, African American students represented 6.2 percent of the graduating class in California, and 3.7 percent of AP test takers in the state, yet they represented only 2.4 percent of students successfully passing an AP exam with a score of 3 or greater (College Board, 2014).

Some of the key data points that emerged from the data on special recognition is the disconnect between the students’ self reported academic achievement and class rank and their designation as an ELC student. Only 10 percent of students noted they were considered an ELC student, despite the fact that the majority of students reported that they were either in the top 5th percentile (32 percent) or were in the top 10th percentile (32 percent) of their high school. Sixty-four percent reported they were within the top 10 percent of their high school context—far from the 10 percent of students who reported that they had ELC status (n=51) as seen in Table 6. For example, one student describes not fully understanding the ELC designation, and commented:

I wish I would have known that being in the top 9th percentile of my high school meant that I would be getting into a UC, but not specifically any of the ones I applied for. I would like to know what factors were looked upon the most in their decision making.
The process of ELC is also difficult to navigate, as schools first have to opt into the system and not many students are aware about this designation until they actually qualify for the Top 9th percentile. Then parents and students also have to agree to be designated as ELC students. The total ELC pool for California for the Fall 2015 was 5,245 students. For students not admitted into their top UC choices, UC creates a referral pool. Students are then notified again that they have been referred to UC Merced, the only campus currently accepting referrals for consideration. The student then needs to opt in to this referral pool as well to be considered for admission to UC Merced. The process of ELC designation has several steps and it is understandable to see the low number in the survey sample (n=50) of African American students in this pool—there is a lack of understanding and information on ELC between UCOP and high schools across California.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top 5th Percentile</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 10th Percentile</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 20th Percentile</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 30th Percentile</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the Above</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many of the African American students in the survey sample (73%; n=384) reported earning honors recognition while 36% were on the Principal’s List (n=190) or earned an AP medal (22%; n=118). In addition, 27 percent of the students received a scholar athlete award (n=142).

The students in the survey sample were also committed to service, with 25 percent (n=132) reporting that they received a community service award, while 31 percent earned a leadership award (n=163). These data further illustrate how in addition to being academically high achieving, the African American students in the survey sample possessed a commitment to giving back to their schools and communities. Because high achieving students of color are more likely to return to the communities where they were raised and become civic leaders (Gandara, 1995; Bowen & Bok, 1998) an elite public education from a selective institution has been found to provide an additional layer of validity and foundation for postgraduate study and success (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Gandara, 1995; Wyner, et. al., 2007). The students in the survey sample appear to be already on their way to being high achievers in college and a likely pool of civic leaders if high school recognition and activities provide a glimpse of personal priorities and values.

---

1 The ELC process and specific components were discussed with the research team October 26, 2015 in a conference call with Stephen Handel, Vice President of Admissions for the University of California.
TABLE 6: SPECIAL RECOGNITION IN HIGH SCHOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recognition</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valedictorian</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salutatorian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gates Millennium Scholarship Award</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholar Athlete Award</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Service Award</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Activity Award</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designated as ELC (UC Eligibility in a Local Context)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP Medal</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors recognition</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal's List</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Award</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Award</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Scholarship</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the level of recognition students received (Table 6), a consistent pattern emerges from the survey question on level of involvement in extracurricular activities in high school. Students in the survey sample were extremely involved in high school and in their community. For example, 75 percent of the sample had engaged in community service while in high school, while 29 percent participated in church activities. Fifty-eight percent (n=323) participated in sports while 19 percent were ASB officers in their high school (n=107). A good proportion of students were also involved in a church activity (29%; n=160) or an Ethnic Activity in high school (28%; n=157). These findings are consistent with research on high achieving underrepresented students being not only resilient, but actively work to earn a spot in a highly selective institution while remaining engaged in school and their respective communities (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Freeman, 2005; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). The survey respondents appear to be not only engaged in high school but leaders across an array of extracurricular activities, and have positioned themselves for highly competitive institutions of higher education.

TABLE 7: EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IN HIGH SCHOOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASB Officer</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports Team (s)</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Service</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Activity</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Activity (eg., Black Student Union)</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talent Search/Upward Bound/TRIO</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yearbook</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheerleading</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAOP</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban League: Project Ready, YDFG</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Links, Inc.: Young Achievers Initiative</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAACP: ACT-SO</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack &amp; Jill of America</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Organization</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debutante Cotillion/Beautillion</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another notable feature of the sample was the low percentage of students in AVID (14%), Upward Bound (8%), EAOP (8%) high school intervention efforts designed to increase college transition among first generation students. These programs provide students with college information and preparation (Mehan et. al., 1996; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). These data suggest that perhaps few African American students are enrolled in these intervention programs if they existed in their high school. The same is true for Dual enrollment programs, with only 6 percent of the African American students in the survey sample enrolled in community college while in high school. Dual enrollment programs, where students earn high school and college credit simultaneously, also serve as an important signal of college readiness and are also among some of the factors that exemplify rigor in academic profile of prospective college students (An & Taylor, 2015; Bailey et. al., 2002; Contreras, 2010).

Overall, the Special Recognition data show the leadership skills, high level of volunteerism and engagement in high school by this high achieving African American student population. The survey respondents in this sample appear to be thoughtfully engaged in meaningful and impactful school and community extracurricular activities which makes them highly attractive candidates for college admission.

**College Choices & Options of Survey Sample**

The majority of students were attending a four-year public institution in California (75 percent; n=415). In addition, 19 percent of students are attending a private four-year college (n=107) and 4 percent enrolled to a public two-year college (n=21). Finally, 3 percent of students transitioned to an HBCU (n=16) as seen in Table 8.

### TABLE 8: TYPE OF COLLEGE ATTENDING IN FALL 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of College</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Four-Year College</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Four-Year College</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Two-Year College</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Two-Year College</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For-Profit Institution</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the students in the survey, similar to the interview sample, were more likely to be admitted to the moderately or less selective of the UC campuses as seen in Table 9. UC Riverside clearly had the largest number of students admitted compared to the other UC campuses. It is important to note, that these data reflect the aggregate pool of admitted students to the UC system. It offers an important glimpse of admission offers among African Americans in the California student sample.
Students in the survey sample were clearly casting a wide net in terms of college options, which speaks to the savvy nature of this admitted pool of students. The majority of students applied to more than nine colleges for the Fall 2015, with over 52 percent of the sample applying to a number of campuses for admission (Table 10).

### TABLE 10: NUMBER OF COLLEGES STUDENTS APPLIED TO FOR FALL 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six-Eight</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nine-Eleven</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 or more</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one-third of the students noted that they were admitted to their first college choice (Table 11). An additional 23 percent were admitted to their second college choice (n=126). The data show how many students ended up attending colleges that were within the top three college choices (84 percent), even if not admitted to their first choice.

### TABLE 11: COLLEGE CHOICE RANK FOR STUDENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Choice Rank</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Choice</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Choice</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Choice</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Choice</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Choice</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was not in my top five</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**The Role of Family**

Family plays a critical role in personal development and success for African American students (Allen et. al., 2004). Parents have an important role in supporting their children through the P-12 system and in higher education (Freeman, 2005; Contreras, 2012). Ninety-six percent of students reported that their parents supported their college decision (n=511). This noteworthy percentage of parental support conveys the value that the parents of these high achieving African American students placed on college. In addition, 32 percent of the students responded that college planning began in elementary or middle school (Table 12), while an additional 21 percent of students began to plan for college in 9th grade. Thirty-nine percent of African American students planned for college either in the 10th or 11th grade, suggesting the need for greater outreach to start this process earlier.

**TABLE 12: WHEN COLLEGE PLANNING PROCESS BEGAN FOR STUDENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th Grade</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th Grade</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th Grade</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Year</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thirty-seven percent of students also noted how proximity to family was important to their college decision process (n=197), while over 63 percent of the survey sample selected either “somewhat important” (n=174) or “not important” (n=161). These data convey the willingness of African American students to move away from home and their family to attend the college of their choice.

**TABLE 13: IMPORTANCE OF PROXIMITY TO FAMILY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Role of Peers**

Peers appeared to play an important role in talking about college plans with African American survey respondents (Table 14), with students selecting either “most of my peers” or “all of my peers” when asked if they had discussed their college plans with their peers. However, the majority of peers did not appear to influence college plans of participants.
TABLE 14: PEERS DISCUSSED COLLEGE DECISION WITH STUDENT OR INFLUENCED COLLEGE PLANS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peers discussed college decision with student or influenced college plans</th>
<th>Discussed College Decision n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Influenced College Plans n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All of my peers</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my peers</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of my peers</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of my peers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although peers did not appear to have a strong influence over college plans, students acknowledged that most or all of their peers were attending college in the fall of 2015 (86%). These data convey how African American high achievers tend to select peer networks on similar college pathways and is consistent with existing research on high-achieving students (Cooper, 2002; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Freeman, 2005).

TABLE 15: PEERS ARE ATTENDING COLLEGE THIS FALL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peers attending college</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All of my peers</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most of my peers</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of my peers</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of my peers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Factors

Social factors have been noted in college choice literature as playing an important role in college choice and enrollment (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth & Suh, 2004; Wilson & Allen, 1987; Freeman, 2005; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). That is, students have to see themselves socially integrating into their college environment. To this end, students often research the racial/ethnic composition of the college, the existence of various fraternities and sororities, clubs, athletics, campus life, and the surrounding community (city vs. rural or suburban) to get a sense of their comfort level in attending a particular institution (Freeman & Thomas, 2002; Freeman, 2005; Kinzie, et. al., 2004).

“For me, it felt like none of the UCs really made a point to try to get black kids to enroll when comparing the efforts made by other schools. After looking at the demographics of the UC schools, with most being 2% black or less, it was very unsettling and really deterred me from wanting to enroll.”

---Survey respondent
TABLE 16: IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL FACTORS FOR STUDENT IN MAKING COLLEGE DECISION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Campus climate is another consideration for many students of color, when deciding on which college to attend. High achievers in particular have the option to also be selective in weighing their options, and are likely to consider climate among the top list of factors they consider when choosing to attend a postsecondary institution (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2007; Freeman, 2005; Chang, 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

TABLE 17: IMPORTANCE OF CAMPUS CLIMATE IN COLLEGE DECISION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sixty-seven percent of students considered campus climate to be either important or very important to their college decision (Table 17). In fact, only 10% of survey respondents selected “not important” when asked about the importance of campus climate. One student commented, “In my opinion, the primary reason that black students don't go to UCs is due to the perceived lack of diversity.” While others commented on the overall lack of a critical mass of African American students, “The percentage of African Americans attending UC schools is too small. That makes the idea of going to college very intimidating.” These fill in responses convey students’ overall perceptions of the UC system as not welcoming to African American students, and the challenge of selecting a campus that may not have a diverse learning environment. A student offered the following recommendation: “The UC system needs to make black students feel like they are genuinely wanted.... They should feel like the UC's want them to apply.” Several fill in responses addressed the issue of climate and diversity within the UC system, and a real concern over the limited student diversity, specifically the lack of a critical mass of African American students on UC campuses. Another survey respondent summarizes their perception of the UC system and its commitment to campus diversity:

For me, it felt like none of the UC's really made a point to try to get black kids to enroll when comparing the efforts made by other schools. After looking at the demographics of the UC schools, with most being 2% black or less, it was very unsettling and really deterred me from wanting to enroll.
Many survey respondents also provided written comments related to campus diversity and the lack of feeling sought after by the UC system. There appeared to be a general consensus and knowledge that the UC system is not diverse with respect to underrepresented students, particularly African American students. In light of Proposition 209, scholars over the past 16 years have noted the steady decline in African Americans in the UC system by choice and the fact that the majority have been shut out of the most selective flagship campuses (Allen, 2005; Contreras, 2011; Gandara, 2012; Kidder, 2012; Watford & Comeaux, 2006).

**Economic Factors**
Cost and affordability among college goers across the United States ranks among one of the most important factors in deciding which college to attend (Eagan, et. al., 2015). The cost of college was the single most important factor in the college decisions of the African American student sample. In fact, 63 percent noted that college cost was “very important” in their college decision-making process and an additional 21 percent selected “important” (Table 18).

**TABLE 18: IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE COST ON MAKING COLLEGE DECISION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With 84 percent of students agreeing that college cost was an important factor in deciding which college to attend, affordability and financial aid play a critical role in raising the overall number of African American high achievers that elect to enroll in a UC campus. One student commented how finances are challenging if there is more than one child college bound:

"More financial aid. It is difficult to attend a university and be expected to pay several thousand dollars a year when my parents don’t make nearly enough money to finance [college]. We could take out loans, but there is no guarantee of a job with just a Bachelor’s. So taking out loans to just be in debt doesn’t sound ideal.”

-Survey respondent

Many students of color, particularly those of African American/Black descent, live in one parent households with multiple siblings. Sometimes those households can’t afford to pay the UC system $13,000-14,000 per child in [the] system.

Cost was a particularly important issue for students that had siblings in college. Even if the parent was educated or had a middle class income, the challenge of financing college was a clear consideration for students according to the survey response data. Another student noted the need for greater financial resources:
More financial aid. It is difficult to attend a university and be expected to pay several thousand dollars a year when my parents don’t make nearly enough money to finance [college]. We could take out loans, but there is no guarantee of a job with just a Bachelor’s. So taking out loans to just be in debt doesn’t sound ideal.

African American students in the UC admitted pool were very concerned about not only the cost of attending a UC and worried about high debt levels. Students were also cognizant of the financial pressures faced by their parents, and were hesitant to rely on them to finance their education. The aversion to debt is common among first generation and low-income students in particular, who prefer a pay-as-you-go approach to higher education (Cunningham & Santiago, 2008).

VIII. Qualitative Results: Listening to the Voices of High Achieving African Americans in California

The qualitative results of this study give voice to a high achieving, savvy African American college-going population that is committed to their academics, families, communities and U.S. society. These students represent a group of high achieving, hard working, optimistic, critical, and civic minded individuals who attended college outside the UC system either because they did not have viable financial aid packages, did not get into the campus (or academic program) of their choice, were concerned about the campus climate and lack of a critical mass of African American students and faculty on UC campuses, or were simply not “sought after” in the ways other postsecondary institutions pursued their enrollment. Regardless of class or gender differences across the statewide sample, many of these concerns were consistently expressed by interview participants.

As a result of systemic barriers and college contexts they perceive as “unwelcoming,” African American students are seeking college options outside the UC system even when admitted to a UC. For our interview sample, eight students enrolled in an Ivy League university, eleven are attending a highly selective Predominantly White Institution (PWI), eleven are attending a highly selective Historically Black College and University (HBCU), thirteen are enrolled in moderately selective PWIs, twenty-four are attending a CSU campus (32 percent of the sample), and five are enrolled in a local community college. This savvy group of students and emerging leaders has

“I was excited [to apply] because I was like, wow, there’s a chance that I might go to a UC school. I originally wanted to go to UC Irvine because my mother went to Irvine, and got her bachelor’s in Sociology. So I was like, yeah, I want to follow up [with admissions], and I want to be an Anteater. And it’s going be great. And it just didn’t work out.”

Female, Los Angeles region
Attending a CSU
done their homework in terms of researching viable college options for themselves, while considering the possibility for balance and social interaction while in college.

This section highlights the results from 74 individual student interviews conducted by research teams from UC San Diego, UC Riverside, UC Berkeley, and UC Davis from September to December 2015. A total of 74 interviews were conducted from six different regions in the state including, Berkeley, Oakland, Los Angeles, the Inland Empire, Orange County, San Diego, Sacramento and the Central Valley. Approximately 24 percent of the sample were male, while 47 percent of students had Mother’s with a bachelor’s degree or higher. Only 13 percent of the sample had Mothers with a high school education or less, while 19 percent had Mother’s with “some college” as their highest level of education earned.

Five central themes emerged from the statewide data as playing a critical role in college access and decision making. These core themes surrounding college choice for the study participants included: Access, Campus Diversity & Climate, Affordability, Outreach, and the High School context. Together, these themes provide critical perspectives on the nature of UC admissions, access, choice and how the University of California can better serve future generations of highly qualified, engaged, deserving African American students and future civic leaders.

**Access**

The original goal of the study was to explore why African American students were not choosing to attend UC campuses. However, the data exposed a complex set of factors that constrain students’ college choice options as well. Indeed, students reported that they were not accepted by the UC colleges of their choice; thus, these high achieving students sought other viable college options.

This phenomenon represents the challenge the UC system has faced historically, and certainly after the passage of Proposition 209 in California. UC began to witness a clear “cascading effect” in the UC system, where the system has become increasingly segregated according to selectivity, with African American, Latino and Native American students more likely to gain admission to the least selective of the UC campuses (Gandara, 2012; Kidder & Gandara, 2015; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Orfield 1998; Contreras, 2011; Orfield, 1998). While the students in our sample were not admitted to the highly and moderately selective UC campuses of their choice, it is important to note that the majority were in the top 10th percentile of their high school classes, having earned GPAs of a 4.0 or higher, held leadership positions in high school, earned special recognition in high school by their school and the community, were actively engaged in sports or extracurricular activities or worked throughout high school. This elite group of students truly represents a very high achieving pool of high school graduates that were self-motivated, engaged and committed to the betterment of the African American community and society.
I was excited [to apply] because I was like, wow, there’s a chance that I might go to a UC school. I originally wanted to go to UC Irvine because my mother went to Irvine, and got her bachelor’s in Sociology. So I was like, yeah, I want to follow up [with admissions], and I want to be an Anteater. And it’s going be great. And it just didn’t work out.

Female, Los Angeles region Attending a CSU

I was really counting on it [UC Santa Barbara]. It was my first choice because, yeah, I was really excited to go there, and they put me on the waitlist and they said, ‘we will get back to you no later than May 1st. I did not get an email from them until July 11, this year, saying that I’m sorry but due to space in our college, you will not be enrolled in UC Santa Barbara. I’m fine with that rejection. I got rejected from UC San Diego too. And I was a little upset about that… But then out here [Out of State School] it was like once I signed up [applied] they were like, ‘oh yes, we’ll give you money. Yes, come out here!’ And people were like, you must have worked really hard [to receive a full ride out of state].

Female student, Los Angeles Region, Female, Attending a Selective HBCU

I’m like really active…I’m a real active student …I’m a good student, so I feel like if they would have given me a chance, they wouldn’t have…I wouldn’t have been kicked out or anything like that. And I feel like they should just give us…like give them [African American students] a chance to show you who they are instead of reading off paper. …I know that you’re supposed to put yourself out there on paper, but sometimes that’s hard. Like, you know the saying, ‘I can show you better than I can tell you.’ ...and…you know, I can’t explain it, but if I would have had that chance, I would do…I would try my best to really stay in school because, like, I really worked hard to get into school…

Female, Bay Area region, Attending a CSU

I feel like the standards for UC’s have just ridiculously gone up and they’ve ridiculously gone up in such a way that alienates most of the student population, especially being from Oakland, where most people are like lower income. Some people that I know had to work through high school so they didn’t necessarily have the opportunity to spend as much time with the course material and with reading and making sure their grades were top-notch. But that didn’t mean they weren’t good enough, you know.

Female, Bay Area Region, Attending a CSU

Most students applied to at least four UC schools and experienced rejection from multiple UC campuses. For students applying to four, they likely applied to the three most competitive, and then a moderately selective campus. This is particularly problematic for low-income students, because waivers only allow students to apply to four UC campuses and the majority of students who fit this criteria in the sample waged their chances on the most selective UC campuses. Thus, for those who did not get into UCLA, UC Berkeley or UC San Diego, Merced became the only option for most, if they had ELI status. One student explained, “UC Merced accepted me, and then UCI I was rejected. UC Riverside put me on the waitlist, and UC San Diego, I was rejected.” Moreover, students in the sample were impressively thorough about researching colleges and universities that fit their academic and social interests. For most students, getting accepted to a UC was not about committing to just any campus, but choosing particular
campuses with particular programs. Therefore, when the sole option was a less desirable campus, such as UC Merced, students weighed other important factors into their decision making processes. For example, students stated,

Well, I applied to four UC’s. I applied to UC Santa Barbara, UC Merced, UC Irvine, and UC Santa Cruz…. And I really wanted to go to UC Santa Barbara, but I only got into Merced. I didn’t like the area that it was in because it was in the middle of nowhere. It was just not the UC that I wanted to go to.

Male student, Bay Area region
Attending a Private College

There were two reasons why I didn’t decide to attend a UC: the first reason was that the only UC I got into was Merced and then the financial aid at UC Merced that was offered didn’t necessarily cover most, if not all of my financial situation.

Male student, Bay Area region
Attending a Private College

UC Merced was the sole option for almost one third of the sample population. Of the students who were admitted to UC Merced, very few actually applied to the school itself. Instead, these students were offered admission to UC Merced through the ELC policy. Students perceived a sole admission to UC Merced as an unsuccessful attempt to get into a UC, and therefore, as a failure on behalf of the UC system and themselves. As one student noted, “Well the UC that accepted me was UC Merced, but I didn’t like the environment when I went there, it was kind of just country, like not in the city. I didn’t like that aspect.” Most students in the sample that were accepted to Merced actually did not visit the campus prior to rejecting this option. Students were not drawn to the campus due in part, to its physical location and lack of familiarity with the program offerings at this particular campus. Many of the students who were rejected from UC campuses resigned themselves to CSU campuses that were close to home and financially feasible. Two students for example explained,

But when I didn’t get into Irvine or UCLA I was kind of like, hmmm, I guess I’ll just go to Cal State Long Beach. It’s close and I don’t have to worry about going a far distance and leaving anything behind, or anything like that.

Female Student, Los Angeles Region
Attending a CSU

“So I actually have never visited a UC campus just because after I was accepted to the other schools, you know… but I actually was rejected from UC Berkeley, and at the same time I was getting into Ivy Leagues early…”

Male student,
Los Angeles Region
Attending highly selective private university
UCLA was my first choice, but unfortunately I did not get in, so the next best thing…well, the next [best] thing [was] UC Riverside, but they ended up not having…they did not have nursing, and so I didn’t like that, and …oh, basically CSU East Bay was really my last choice. I really did not want to go to the school, and so…but I settled anyway.

Female student from Bay Area region
Attending a CSU campus

The student from the Bay Area region above ultimately “settled” in her view largely because she believed she could save money by living at home while attending the local CSU and figured if she was unable to attend her first undergraduate choice, she would save money work hard to attend graduate school at UCLA. This student in particular had over a 4.0, over five AP classes, was Salutatorian of her high school and very involved in the local community in Oakland.

While some students were made to “settle” on less selective institutions, several of the participants in this study who were denied admission to the UC system’s most selective campuses, UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UCSD², were admitted to and enrolled in highly selective colleges elsewhere. These same participants left the state and took their talents to prestigious institutions such as Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology as well as selective historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), while others elected to attend selective private colleges in California. For example, a male participant with a high school GPA above 4.0 because of honors and AP classes offered at his school, who decided to attend an Ivy League school, commented: “So I actually have never visited a UC campus just because after I was accepted to the other schools, you know… but I actually was rejected from UC Berkeley, and at the same time I was getting into Ivy Leagues early…” In a similar light, a female participant, who was a high school valedictorian, was denied admissions to UCB and UCLA, but elected to attend another prestigious institution out of state, noted: “I looked up schools in California, but not very many because my goal was to not stay in California unless I got into UCLA or Berkeley or Cal Tech… And so at that point I couldn’t really justify staying in California, especially when I was given the opportunity to choose between two Ivy Leagues.” Another participant who was not admitted to UCLA but enrolled in a top historically black university, added: “…so I just applied to the top HBCU’s and the top UC’s with the best psychology programs… but I didn’t get accepted [to UCLA] so I was like, oh, well, forget it, and I was going appeal my decision, but I just let it go.” Similarly, a female participant was an ASB officer, earned a high school GPA above 3.7, participated in sports and community service, and received several honors and awards for her strong academic achievement. She attends a private college in California and described the disappointment of not being admitted to UCLA: “But like my sister, when she went to UCLA, when she would tell people where she was going, and everyone would be like, oh, wow, UCLA, like that’s so amazing, so I guess I just kind of wanted that for myself.”

Within the sample of 74 students, 15 students were denied admissions to UCSD, 20 students were denied admission from UCLA, and 13 students were denied admission from Berkeley. These numbers do not take into account the numbers of students who, although highly qualified,

² For Fall 2014, African American freshman admits for UCB and UCLA were 3.4% and 4.4%, respectively (UCOP, 2014).
did not apply to several of the highly selective UC campuses. It is conceivable that these same deserving students may share their stories with their African American peers and other high-achieving and aspiring UC students who might infer that they might encounter similar unfavorable admissions outcomes. As a result, these stories can take on greater significance than one might think. Aspiring UC African American students in fact might interpret the UC selection process as not fair and equitable, and, in turn, decide not to apply altogether. As one explains,

*I think a lot of my friends didn’t apply to UC’s because they felt that they were not going to get in. Even my friends with 3.8 [Gpas] and all that. It was just I’m not going to get in, and I can’t afford it, so what am I doing. A lot of Black people don’t apply because they already looked at the numbers and say, ‘Well, I’m not going to get into unless I’m playing football or I’m some engineering student. So I think it’s hard for people who are good, but not super, and who are people of color, to get into [UC] schools that are considered prestigious.”*

Female student, Los Angeles region, Attending a CSU

While it is beyond the scope of the study to determine the numbers of highly qualified African American students who simply did not apply to a UC based on reputation, the data analysis shows that students used both formal and informal networks when making college decisions. The networks include the stories of how friends, peers, and family members negotiated the UC system; students also relied on information from informal sources to choose the colleges where they believed they would be most successful.

The failure to admit African American students to UC campuses suggests that there is a need both to rethink the purpose and mission of California public higher education and the current selection process for admissions to ensure basic principles of inclusion, fairness, and equity (Hutson, 2013). But “rethinking,” without an authentic strategy for achieving equity, will not lead to significant change. Comeaux and Watford (2006) reminded us almost ten years ago that “system-wide, present admissions outcomes reflect negatively on the future of racial and ethnic equality in the state” (p. 3), and that high-achieving and deserving African Americans are not being granted admissions to our most selective UC campuses (see Watford & Comeaux, 2006). Yet, we are still witnessing an access dilemma and inherent flaws in the selection process for admissions to the most selective UC campuses for many talented, historically excluded African Americans. These racial inequities in student access and outcomes are cause for grave concern, largely because admission to
California’s public selective universities has significant influence on potential earnings and future educational attainment (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Indeed, the diverse and viable opportunities a prestigious college education provides African Americans is particularly important (Carnevale & Rose, 2003).

**Diversity & Climate**

Campus climate plays a critical role in the academic, social, and emotional development of college students, assisting college students as they transition into adulthood and prepare for interacting in the domestic and globally diverse marketplace (Hurtado, 1990; Hurtado 2005; Smith, et. al., 1997; Chang, 1999; Milem, et. al., 2005; Kidder, 2013). Racial and ethnic diversity is an important benefit to all students on college campuses, yet for African Americans, they are most likely to encounter racial isolation and greater levels of harassment in highly selective campuses, as seen at the flagship UC campuses (Kidder, 2013; Rankin & Reason, 2005).

Many students in our sample had researched and considered campus climate and racial and ethnic diversity when making a decision about attending a UC school or attending another university. As one student female student from the Bay Area explained about the process she and her peers engaged in, “When we were choosing schools we were looking at the percentage of Black people, well African Americans, and when we saw it, it was like there is not a lot of [African Americans]…that’s mainly why I did not want to go to Cal.” For these students, their perceptions of campus climate, stories of microaggressions on UC campuses, and persistently low percentage of African American students at the undergraduate level influenced their university selection decision.

There was just nothing that the UC’s were offering that would make me want [to] spend four years of my life there and that would make me put up with another four years of being…always feeling uncomfortable in an environment, or always being that black person.

Female, Sacramento Region
Attending a highly selective HBCU

Many of the UC campuses that I saw were in or near diverse areas but then did not reflect those areas….And it made me feel as if the university really didn’t care about my culture and my community.”

---Male student, Bay Area Region
Male, Bay Area Region
Attending Public Selective University

I would have preferred…honestly, I would have preferred to stay in California, but proximity was less important for me than being around other black people, that was…and I think for my siblings too, that was definitely the top factor that we all wanted, and we knew we wanted. I would have preferred to being closer, but I was willing to sacrifice that.

Female, Bay Area Region
Attending Highly Selective Private University

I had always heard from my dad about the feeling that students of color had, at least on the Cal campus, that made me a little bit wary when I was applying, and I figured, you know, just look at it and see. And then I figured ultimately with the stories that I had heard and the accounts that I had read of students online that I figured, you know, this might not be the best environment for myself.

Female, Inland Empire Region
Attending a Highly Selective Private University

Students in our sample commented that campus climate or perceptions of campus climate were key factors in influencing their decision to attend or not to attend a University of California campus. Several students mentioned that they had conducted research on issues related to campus climate and diversity during the college application process. As a result, students were aware of stories about recent racial aggressions on UC campuses against students of color. Students could refer to recent accounts of the “Kanye Western Party at UCLA in October 2015, or even had awareness of the “Compton Cookout” that took place five years ago at UC San Diego. They were keenly aware and sensitive to the lack of racial diversity on UC campuses. When asked about the primary factors they considered when making their final college choice, issues of climate and diversity came second only to academic programs. Students described the desire for diversity as a both the numerical racial demographics and social groups and organizations. Many students researched racial demographics online when they could not visit the campuses, while other students were quick to note the lack of Black and Brown faces during campus tours. For example, when asked about campus climate and diversity, students replied:

I didn’t want to go to a place that was just dominated…just seemed so dominated by one race but, I mean, as I went on the campus tours, I saw that…. it’s kind of just a fact that there’s not a lot of black people around, and you can even look online, like even through the stats without going on campus tours, that African Americans have the lowest percentage.

Female student, Bay Area Region
CSU campus
I took it as an indicator of what I would feel like on campus, and I didn’t want to go to a school where I felt alienated or excluded, not an experience I wanted, so…you know, as an example, I know I looked at a survey from UC Berkeley, I think it was from a few years ago, and they were saying that… I think it was around 47 percent of black people felt disrespected on campus, and so I was looking at things like that, and so, you know, 47 percent is alarming, yeah, so I looked at that and at other articles written by students on campuses and how they felt, and took that as an indicator.

Female, Bay Area region
Highly Selective Private University

In another example, a female student from the Sacramento region commented that she had conducted background research on UC campuses during the college application process in order to gain a better understanding of campus climate and the level of racial and ethnic diversity at the UC’s she was potentially interested in attending. She stated, "[Campus climate] was something that was really heavy on me, and heavy on my shoulders at the time of applications just because of also the things that were occurring in the news, and all the things that were going on at the time of college applications with all the police brutality and things of that nature." The recent racial incidents around the country heightened African American students’ concerns about racial climate on college campuses. Additionally, students who felt that they had grown up in a diverse community, or that California as a state is diverse, did not feel that the same diversity was represented on enough University of California campuses. These savvy students equated the mis-match between the demographics of California and lack of racial diversity on UC campuses as an indicator that they were less welcomed and valued on these campuses.

Students intertwined issues regarding campus climate and racial and ethnic diversity. One issue mentioned repeatedly was that students felt that they had grown up in a diverse community, or that California as a state is diverse, but felt that the same diversity is not represented on enough of the University of California campuses. For these students, racial diversity and how they would be treated as Black students were integral aspects of campus climate and their ability to succeed in college. Students expressed concerns over being singled out in classes or feelings of isolation due to an inability to find friends and make connections with other students, particular on a large university campus. In some cases, students were aware and commented about how the racial and ethnic diversity and climate on campus can impact their comfort levels, which ultimately could impact their academic performance. For example, students explained,
Campus racial climate was very important to me as well because when I was a sophomore in high school we were visited by a College Bound, an Upward Bound manager who spoke to us, people of color specifically...and just let us know that it can be intimidating when you’re on a University campus and you don’t see many people of your skin color, it can be one of the top factors that make people drop out...but my family is a little bit more harsh and expecting, so they kind of don’t, well, some members of my family don’t really pay much attention to how the racial climate might affect you, they want everything to be, pretty much you’re on your own. You inspire yourself and we’re here to back you on that, however I do have an aunt, she’s not biologically related to me, but she helped me throughout the college application process, and she’s the one that brought it to my attention, that a lot of your comfort come[s] from how much you’re in tune with the racial climate.

Female student, San Diego region
Attending a CSU

I toured the campuses and they just didn’t...they didn’t feel super safe or welcoming...well, I mean, it wasn’t necessarily like wrong, but like UCSD for example, I felt like I was walking around a city alone, which is not instilling you with confidence, I don’t know, just personally.

Female student, San Diego region
Attending Selective Private University

Having a critical mass of fellow peers also influences learning in the classroom setting, individual motivation to participate, and serves to create a culture of empowered learners (Hurtado, 1996; Hurtado & Alvarado, 2013; Milem, Chang & Antonio, 2005). One student who is at a highly selective institution talked about how having other Black students has affected her academic context and ability to learn:

Yeah, and I was like, ok, ok, wow! Like a lot of my classes have at least two other [Black] people beside me. So I think that definitely makes me feel more comfortable learning or expressing myself…. I’m lucky to have a pretty diverse class, but [my friend] doesn’t. And I know that sometimes it’s hard for her to feel like she has to talk all the time about black issues when it’s about media. And I don’t. Especially since I am going into media, I felt like I needed a place with people would could back me up.

Female student, Los Angeles region
Attending Highly Selective Private Institution

Overall, students in our sample chose to attend colleges and universities where they felt comfortable and accepted. As another female student from the Los Angeles region who opted to attend NYU rather than UCLA explained,

It [Diversity] is something in the back of my mind, whether I am going to feel acclimated. Something that drew me to NYU was I was accepted into
their Martin Luther King Scholars Program. So I have seminars that are
centered around his work, his teachings, and his philosophy…so that’s where
if I ever do feel out of place as an African American, I have that group to go to.
Female student, Los Angeles region
Attending highly selective private institution

While few students appeared less concerned about glaringly racist incidents, the majority of
students were concerned about how the lack of diversity would impact their schooling
experiences. The data showed that most of the students recognized and valued the diversity they
found on their campuses, regardless of the campus being an Ivy League, highly selective, or less-
selective institution.

The issue of climate and diversity made a significant difference among two groups of students:
those who were heavily recruited by public and private universities, and those whose choices
were more limited by familial and financial factors. While the majority of students expressed
wanting to be at institutions of higher learning that valued their culture and heritage, the lack of
diversity became an actual tipping point for these two groups of students. For those students who
were recruited heavily by school across the U.S., diversity became a key factor in their college
choice. These students, many of whom are beyond exceptional academically and social, either
chose HBCUs or Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) where they felt they would be
supported both academically and socially. While racial diversity is a major issue for the majority
of Predominantly White Institutions, students remarked that they were immediately exposed to
organizations such as Black Student Unions, fraternities and sororities, Black Male Forums, the
Harambe Initiative, and other social groups during their campus visits. For those students who
were factoring in financial constraints and admission denials from their first and second UC
choices, diversity factors weighed more heavily in their decision to attend CSUs where there are
larger populations of racial groups.

The students in the interview sample also expressed wanting to be at institutions of higher
learning that valued their culture and heritage and would be a place where they would have a
black community of scholars. These data are consistent with the existing research in higher
education that has found the importance of having access to faculty of color for mentoring
opportunities, critical classroom discourse, and research experiences in a lab or team setting.
(Allen et. al., 2000; Allen, et. al., 2005; Milem, 2001; Jayakumar et. al., 2009; Turner, Gonzalez,
& Wood, 2008). Faculty of color are more likely to mentor students of color and provide valuable
research opportunities that are critical to being competitive for graduate school (Allen et. al.,
2000; Milem, 2001; Jayakumar, et. al., 2009).

The lack of racial diversity on UC campuses costs the UCs valuable African American student
attendance. UC campuses must address the full range of student needs not only to recruit and
retain African American students but to ensure their successful matriculation.
Affordability

The theme of affordability was one that emerged quite strongly from the interview data, both because we asked students about the factors that led them to choose a college other than a UC, and we asked what they most discussed with their parents and peers regarding college attendance. We acknowledge that the issue of college affordability has become a national concern, particularly over the last decade. Indeed, issues of college affordability are prominent in the recent reports issued by the higher education branch of the national policy research and advocacy organization, The Education Trust (e.g., Dannenberg & Voight, 2013), which outlined a variety of issues on the cost of higher education and the burden being placed upon the newest generations of college students and graduates. According to related scholarly literature on the interrelatedness of college choice and financial aid among African American students (Allen, Jayakumar, Griffin, Korn, & Hurtado, 2005; Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015; Harper & Griffin, 2010-2011; Kim, 2004; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005), we have come to understand the notion of affordability as being defined as the real or perceived cost of higher education to the student and his/her family relative to their available financial resources intended to support the student’s college attendance.

The perspectives on affordability also vary in that one can view this as an assessment of how the cost of attending a particular college is borne by students and parents through some combination of personal (family) resources and grants, scholarships, loans, or other financial aid support. Often, higher education officials, particularly from public institutions such as the University of California, assert that the fees and tuition charged typically do not reflect the full cost of providing a high quality postsecondary education. However, even when an institution charges a substantial amount for fees and tuition, if the level of financial support offered meets or nearly meets the total price a student faces, the student may view that institution as being more affordable.

In the case of the participants in this study, the issue of affordability involved at least two noteworthy dimensions. One dimension was the perceived immediate cost to students for their postsecondary education. Related to this was the students’ own analysis and understanding of the manner in which non-UC universities approached the admissions process with clear and generous funding offers that seemed to assist students in making comparisons among UCs and other college options. Another dimension of the affordability issue is how, in an attempt to minimize costs and especially to avoid excessive amounts of student loan debt, it might have led some students (particularly first-generation college students) to opt for less selective institutions or campuses they may not have originally seriously considered. Despite having prepared throughout high school to attend a UC or other selective colleges or universities, some students opted for California State University campuses, community colleges, or other less selective institutions. What is perhaps most compelling about the emergent theme of affordability is that both first-generation and second-plus-generation college students alike resonated with the issue of affordability. We present in the following quotes a sample of the perspectives offered by the study participants on the issues surrounding UC affordability:
I think third [factor influencing college choice] was probably the financial aspect because, I mean … most of the schools I looked at, I made sure beforehand that they would be a fit financially … But initially applying to schools, my dad was very supportive since he was the one paying for the applications. He told me, I’ve [the student] done the work up to this point, so if I just applied to schools, did my job to apply to financial aid and find scholarships, he would meet me halfway. [Cost] was…well, [cost] was pretty important to me just making sure that it was doable … [used] financial aid calculator before I started applications to make sure it was even an option before I started and got set on a school, ‘cause I’ve always said I wanted to make sure that my younger siblings are taken care of, that they’ll be able to go to school because they’ve worked just as hard as I have, if not harder, and they should get the same opportunities, if not more. I think what weeded out the campuses, the UC campuses … was just knowing that I would have had [to] sacrifice more financially than I was probably willing to, just ‘cause I know we’re [the family] in that…we’re barely above that bracket where we would have had school completely paid for, but it was just enough to where I couldn’t…that I would have had to sacrifice my siblings’ tuition, and I know if they’re doing better things than I was doing at this age, then I shouldn’t take that from them.

Female, Los Angeles region, Ivy League Institution

My mother has been out of work for a year now, and I got into my dream school but I knew I couldn’t afford it even if…like I got financial aid, but I didn’t even have enough money to even buy the dorm stuff for the campus, or even commute, drive up there, so I knew that it wasn’t realistic for me to go. Choosing not to…well, when I got accepted into all of them I laid down all my financial aid out, and I was checking them out and, like I said, my mom really doesn’t have any money, and at the time we just lost her unemployment checks, so I was looking at how much I was gonna take out for parent [contribution] plus loans, and then, you know, I was really gonna go to Davis ‘cause I only had to pay out of my pocket $3,000, and that was looking really good, but [college presently attending] came and was like, we’re gonna give you almost one-half of the tuition with their own personal grant, and that wasn’t even including the Pell Grant or the Cal Grant A, that was just them alone, so it was like, yeah. Financial aid was definitely the biggest contribution for why I’m here. 100 percent, it was the first thing I was thinking about.

Female, San Diego region, Highly Selective Private Institution

I mean, my ending grade point average at my high school career was a 4.0, so that is pretty ok, but … for a UC I did expect them [campuses] to have something, not just suggest, so yeah, you take out student loans. And how the price of out of state out here [where she presently attends college] is the same price as in state over there [in California], I was a little like, really, I mean, I looked up the prices for UC Santa Barbara, San Diego and Santa Cruz, and I put in state, yes, I know I would be staying on campus, would I have a meal plan, probably, yes, I understand that too, but it was still just like, how is it that it is $35,000 a year to go to UC Santa Barbara and UC San Diego, and UC Santa Cruz, when I’m from California, and then here in Louisiana it’s $32,000 when I’m out of state. That also made absolutely no sense to me … I thought of my family when I
made my college decision because basically my mom is a single parent who is raising three kids on her own, and I’m the first one in college, and my younger brother will be going to college next year, so I had to make a decision on expenses and scholarship funds, and weigh them out because I did not want her being constantly stressed over finances when I am enjoying myself in college … [T]hat’s not fair and it’s not right … I’m even getting a job and everything to make sure that I am paid for, so she can focus on my two younger brothers.

Female, Los Angeles region
Selective Out-of-state public university

“That [cost] was very important in my decision making just because I didn’t want to be in debt at all, so I looked for schools that gave me mostly scholarships that were merit based scholarships to really narrow down my decision. That was very important. Baylor in Texas, Howard in DC, Loyola, Xavier, Smith, I didn’t even apply to Smith but they were willing to give me a scholarship to go there, so I decided to go … to look for those schools instead … UC Riverside didn’t give me any financial aid, except for the unsubsidized loans, which basically every school gives you, so that’s why I chose not to … [attend UCR] … because I was getting a much better deal at other places.”

Female, Los Angeles region, California private university

“It was--I mean, cost, for me, was extremely important because I had no family member about to put any money in! So, I mean...it was basically what I could afford! And I’ve heard from some of the people that were thinking about UCs, and I know it’s more costly. It’s costlier than Cal States, and I just wasn’t! To be honest, it made it more difficult for me to even consider going there. Had I got accepted to the ones that I was really considering--just because it was like if I’m barely able to afford Cal States...I wasn’t sure how I’d make it work with financial…with UCs! So, I mean, it was really important! And then--not only that--but it was important knowing that I can manage financially ‘cause here, if something happens to me at Cal State [campus he presently attends], it’s not like I have to leave the city to get support. I have my support here.”

Male, Los Angeles region, CSU campus

[Regarding why she chose not to attend UC Merced] Well, it was kind of far away from my family, and it was far away from the coast, and it was pretty expensive, and I wasn’t…I didn’t think I was gonna be able to afford it. …[A]nd I didn’t want to pay out [of] state tuition … I didn’t want to pay an extreme amount of money that I couldn’t afford. I just wanted to make sure that I could afford college, and the most stressful thing about college wouldn’t be the money I have to pay … Yeah, like I said, like I just…I feel like if I wanted to…I need to be able to afford my college ‘cause I’m paying for it pretty much myself … I need to seek out loans and stuff… be able to afford it and not feel like I’m drowning into debt. [Regarding the role financial aid would have played in choosing to a UC] Yes, if I … had scholarships then I would absolutely would choose to go to a UC, but again, it was…I didn’t have the money for it.

Female, Central California region, CSU campus
It is striking to hear that some students expressed concern for their families in bearing the responsibility to meet the cost of college attendance for the study participants’ siblings. While higher education institutions may view each student as making decisions only for themselves, it is important to appreciate the manner in which some of the study participants viewed the issue of affordability as a whole-family concern, not just their own. Even when they were encouraged by their parents to focus on pursuing their top college choices, regardless of cost, several students in this study expressed the need to make choices that would allow for their siblings to likewise enjoy the opportunity of obtaining a college degree in the future.

Interestingly, another confounding factor that may have come into play for the study participants in making their final college choices is the overall awareness of options for financing higher education and having full access to the information necessary to make college choices. Certainly, some students seemed to hold quite extensive knowledge of the student financial aid systems of the colleges to which they applied and offered important analyses that were part of their ultimate college choices, as illustrated below by two young men who are now attending a community college and highly selective private university, respectively. In addition, as discussed by Kim (2004) in explaining the complexities of the role of financial aid in supporting African Americans in their pursuit of their first-choice colleges, it is possible that college financial literacy and awareness of the potential long-term differences in the benefits (e.g., differential earnings, as a measure of returns on college education investments) of attending a UC versus other (especially less selective) colleges and universities might also explain the study participants’ ultimate choices.

I chose to stay [in California], yes, for financial reasons mainly. All of the financial assistance I got were loans, which it was totaled up to around $30,000-something in loans that I would have to pay, and I didn’t want to put that financial burden on my family, so I said, I’ll just bite the bullet and go to a junior college and spend less money there. … UCs are incredibly expensive right now, and I feel like that’s one of the deterrents for a lot of students, especially African Americans, to not go to a UC, and to go to a, let’s say, Cal State, even though their prices are really high, or what I’m doing, a JC. … New York, they did, they gave me quite a bit, they gave me $30,000 in scholarships, but for me to go out there, it would cost me about $60,000, so that was the downside of it, so I would still be paying around UC costs to go out there.

Male, Los Angeles region, California Community College

[Regarding cost as a factor] "I would say, I wouldn’t say very important, but I definitely took it into consideration, and then if it was very close, like if it was within $1,000, it’s not, I don’t want to say it’s not a big deal, but it’s very manageable in the sense that Harvard and all the other Ivy Leagues as well, they tend to have this policy where if it’s a school of similar prestige and the financial aid is different, there’s a difference, then they’ll match the other aid. So, for example, if I wanted to go to Cornell it would have cost me the same as to come here [to Harvard] because they would have matched it. And I know at the UCs, being a public school, it doesn’t work the same way, so let’s say I’d taken Harvard’s financial aid offer and said it’s only [going to] cost me this much to go there, their hands are kind of tied in the sense that they can’t really match the aid offer. Whereas, let’s say I went to Cornell or Johns Hopkins with Harvard’s financial aid offer
and asked them to match it, you know, it’s a different story because it’s a private school, it’s a private institution, and with that they can spend their money a little more, I don’t want to say wisely, but a little more appropriately to try and recruit other students. ...I think another really important factor, too, was just financial aid. For example, to come here it’s, it was the best financial aid offer by far, so I think for my family to save things financially, and I really had the most fun on this visit and just thought it could be a lot more than the other schools. So it wasn’t anything specifically, besides, I guess, maybe the financial aid and clubs and stuff on campus, but also just how I felt, and feeling it was the right school for me. [S]o to choose between UCLA, and don’t get me wrong, UCLA is a great school, but just for me and with financial aid and everything, especially, it just made sense to just look at Cornell and definitely see what they had to offer, and just the other Ivy Leagues. I just wanted to see the school that fit me best, and I feel like, unfortunately, financial aid definitely came into play. At the end of the day I wanted to be at a school that would support me, and I don’t want to say that only financially is the only way to support me, but it just really made sense for my family. …And then 2) I’d probably say financial aid just because what it would have costed to attend UCLA for one year is more than it’s gonna probably cost me to attend here for all four years, but it’s just that in the end, it’s quite a bit of money that I saved, so financial aid especially. ”

Male, Los Angeles region
Highly selective private university [Harvard]

[Regarding cost] "I wouldn’t say very important, I definitely took it into consideration, and then if it was very close, like if it was within $1,000, it’s not, I don’t want to say it’s not a big deal, but it’s very manageable in the sense that Harvard and all the other Ivy Leagues as well, they tend to have this policy where if it’s a school of similar prestige and the financial aid is different, there’s a difference, then they’ll match the other aid. So, for example, if I wanted to go to Cornell it would have cost me the same as to come [to Harvard] because they would have matched it. And I know at the UCs, being a public school, it doesn’t work the same way.”

Male student, Los Angeles Region
Attending Ivy League University

Still, several students expressed concerns about relying upon student loans to finance college, so it was helpful to understand from the study participants that the issue of affordability also raised questions regarding the specific role of student loan debt in choosing colleges. In the case of the students who expressed concern over taking on debts in order to attend a UC campus, we noted that the actual loan amounts in question might not be generally viewed as exorbitant. However, for students (and families) who are not accustomed to using debt to cover expenses, even relatively small amounts of student loan debt may seem daunting and unaffordable. While this concern from students may lead to institutional efforts to address financial literacy opportunities for new college students, such efforts are more often aimed at helping students manage their finances responsibly during and after college. Less often do we hear that students are reluctant to undertake debt to finance their college education out of concern for others in their families, as was the case with the participants in this qualitative
study. Thus, even when financial literacy supports may be warranted, it is also important to
develop such approaches with sensitivity toward the particular preferences of students and their
families when it comes to managing (or even avoiding) debt.

To place the affordability concerns expressed by the study participants into broader statewide
perspective, it is important to consider that California’s college aspirants and their families have
been negatively affected by the recent declines in state funding for higher education and
concomitant increases in tuition and fees charged by the state’s college and university campuses.
In fact, according to the Campaign for College Opportunity (2015), these trends, along with
insufficient access to financial aid, have become significant barriers to college for California’s
African American students. Thus, it is understandable that for new students facing the possibility
of incurring significant debt or seeking other means to cover the cost of college, the decision to
not enroll at a UC becomes driven by the perceived immediate cost or “sticker price” they see
when they are admitted. To further complicate the matter, with UC campuses striving to
diversify their undergraduate populations in the current environment of affirmative action bans,
the study participants’ perspectives on the role that financial aid offers played in the final
college choices are ever more troubling. The talented, well-prepared African American UC-
admitted students in this study were apparently deterred by the relatively limited financial
support they were offered, even though they could articulate an appreciation for the high quality
education that UC represented. They turned down UCs in favor of other colleges and
universities that could provide a college education and not place undue financial burden on the
students or their families to do it. Such realizations give us pause in that while the literature
(Allen, et al., 2005; Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015; Espinosa, et al., 2015; Harper &
Griffin, 2010-2011; St. John, et al., 2005) outlines the need for more targeted recruitment, pre-
college preparation, and financial aid efforts to increase the representation of African Americans
in selective or elite higher education institutions, the participants in this study clearly helped to
illuminate how the UC system falls short of students’ expectations to meet them halfway in terms
of affordability to be able to attend a UC after undergoing years of preparation for this significant
educational opportunity.

Outreach

African American students experienced limited recruitment efforts and contact with UC
campuses before and after the admissions process. As demonstrated in previous research, yield
activities targeting specific student population are key in improve racial and socioeconomic
diversity (Espinosa, Gartner & Orfield, 2015). Despite having a rich applicant pool of high
achieving African American students, very little effort was made to recruit African American
students to the University of California. Of the 74 students interviewed, 50 reported not having
any contact with a UC recruiter throughout their high school years. While the University of
California often talks about the value of diversity, participants did not feel that the UC placed a
high value on their application process or presence in the system, as evident through their limited
recruitment practices. Many students looked outside of the University of California as they were
more attractive and welcoming options.
He [the UC recruiter] was a very direct individual, the questions that we may have had, he just answered them straight up, not necessarily welcoming us to apply to the UC system.

Male Student, Los Angeles Region
Currently Enrolled at Community College

I did not go to a college fair where I met a UC recruiter. I met…I went to many college fairs and they were all like…basically I went to the one where it had Harvard and Yale, and everything, and then I went to the SEC one, and then there was another one also, but I never got one that said specifically this is for the UC’s and you should come.

Female Student, Orange County Area
Currently Enrolled in Selective Public Institution

I don’t know what to say because the only reason why I got really connected with the UC’s was because of Upward Bound, so in a way I guess you could say they reached out.

Female Student, San Diego Region
Currently Enrolled at Selective Private Institution

I spoke with a UCLA admissions office regarding my personal statement and they seemed mean, but it was…they were emails, so I couldn’t tell, it was during application time, close to the deadline. They gave us the opportunity to send our personal statements before the deadline, so I had somebody from there check it, and they just seemed like they really didn’t want to deal with it…

Female Student, Los Angeles Region
Currently Enrolled at a CSU

African American students in the sample reported limited to no contact with University of California recruiters during the application process or after being admitted. Of those students that did report contact, most of the students interacted with recruiters during campus visits or college fairs, which was often a result of students seeking out information rather than being approached by recruiters or being given information individually tailored for them and their major of interest. Students reported that their visits to the UC were made possible by community organizations, high schools, and parents. While several students attended advertised campus events, no students reported being invited to a campus by a UC recruiter or UC employee during their college planning or search processes. Additionally, recruiting
activities on UC campuses grouped African American students together with the general population, rendering their campus visits somewhat meaningless.

A common strategy for selective public and private institutions is to hold specific welcome events to enable students and their families to engage in discussions about campus racial climate, resources in a safe yet culturally welcoming environment.

[T]he UC’s were cool too, they were…everyone was nice, but it wasn’t so special or individualized, but it’s a lot bigger, there are a lot more people. I went on a campus tour there and it was five different groups of 20 people, and so it is a lot harder.

Female student, San Diego region
Attending Private Institution

While having the opportunity to show students how they could fit into the UC campuses, in this case UCI, African American students were placed in general information sessions that did not address some of the questions and concerns that they had. The lack of information provided to students is because the students were given tours by college students, but did not meet with a UC counselor.

Even after students received admission letters, little to no contact existed between UC recruiters and students. Only three students, two of which were admitted into theater and performing arts programs, experienced extensive recruitment after they were admitted to several UC campuses and were often put in touch with student organizations. Even the 18 high achieving students who were admitted to an Ivy League or another highly selective public institution such as MIT or Stanford were not highly sought after by UC recruiters. These students expressed frustration and disappointment at the lack of attention they received from the highly-selective universities in their home state.

Given the lack of attention they received, the students questioned the commitment of the UC to recruiting African American students. Students felt that PWI’s along with HBCU’s did a better job at providing information about their schools and how to pay for college. Two students described being recruited by Wake Forrest and were flown for a campus visit before they applied. “It was called the Visions Program, it’s like an overnight program for black students to come and spend the night. So I went to that and I really felt comfortable here.” Having the opportunity to be invited to campus and spend time there made students feel welcomed and made them feel wanted. A message that they did not receive from UC campuses.

Students perceived that there was a relationship between race and the lack of recruitment efforts the experienced from the UC system. For example, one student recalled how a white female student from her high school was heavily recruited by UC Davis two years earlier. She felt slighted when she was not recruited the same way as her peer, even though both were at the top of their class, valedictorians, and had very similar academic profiles.
But like I also remember at the same time UC Davis was trying to get her (a white classmate), so was another school, and they took it to the point where they took her up to the campus, paid the trip, they had her stay there for a week, get to know it, and I mean, I’m not saying that’s what they need to do, but I think that’d be nice.

Female Student, San Diego region
Attending Selective Private Institution

Even students who participated in college preparatory programs, such as Early Academic Outreach Program, reported having limited communication from the UC recruiters. Most of the information that they received about admissions requirements came from program staff rather than from the admissions office. In certain instances, students attended college visits through their program and sat through a general admissions presentation at different UC campuses.

Students who attended less affluent schools and who were financially unable to visit distant UC schools, rarely heard or interacted with any UC recruiters before the application process and after being admitted to various campuses. These students were struggled with a greater disadvantage because their counselors were less likely to provide specific information about the UC system or college in general. While counselors could have played a more critical role in the college choice process, few counselors were engaged beyond checking course requirements and deadlines (Muhammad, 2008).

Students reported a lack of recruitment efforts from all the UC campuses. Students who were admitted to UC Riverside and UC Merced rarely heard from any recruiters throughout the application process. Of the 18 students admitted to UC Merced, only 4 had contact with the campus. Similarly, out of the 27 students admitted to UC Riverside, 8 interacted with a UC recruiter, although two were through interactions with athletics coaches. The lack of recruitment effort by these schools ensured that students did not attend either campuses; therefore, students were less knowledgeable about what the campuses could offer. Unfortunately, most students, including those whose only choice was UC Merced, did not know where Merced was geographically located.

Students perceived that the UC system takes the application process of California students for granted, so the campuses do not feel the need to recruit the best and brightest California students. A female student from the Bay Area for example explained, “I realized throughout the years, the UC’s, they don’t really recruit anymore because they know that everybody is going to apply anyway, and people want to get in, so they don’t.” This perception of the UC system discouraged some students from applying to several UC campuses or labeling the campuses as their first and second college choices. Students’ perceptions of college access are particularly significant for first-generation students, many of whom are not likely aware of the differences across institutional types, due to a lack of what scholars have phrased as “college knowledge” (Bell et. al., 2009); thus, these students are more likely to use different criteria to make college choices with limited knowledge of the future outcomes.

African American students were left wanting more affirmation that the University of California valued them and wanted them at one of their campuses. As a female from the Bay Area region noted, “More attractive option…so, I mean, I can’t really say that a larger campus is good or bad, but maybe just pointing out more of the benefits to prospective applicants, and also I think
just continuing programs of increasing diversity.” Many respondents saw the irony in UC campuses proclaimed diversity initiatives and the lack of effort to recruit them. These intelligent students perceived the UC as being unauthentic and hypocritical, and questioned the UC commitment to increasing racial diversity across campuses. Indeed, the lack of recruitment of the best and brightest students the state has to offer must be addressed by the UC system in order to increase African American student enrollment.

Although after the passage of SP-1 and Proposition 209, the CA Legislature increased the UC budget for student academic programs from $18.1 million in state and university funds in 1997-98 to $85 million in 2000-01 and an additional 38.5 million from the California Legislature to implement the UC Task Force Plan on Outreach (Gandara, 2012). Viewed as a way to increase access to college for disadvantaged students and promote diversity, UC academic preparation programs targeted partnerships with low-income schools in an effort to increase the number of students who were college ready. However, the state’s fiscal crisis in the early part of the previous decade saw a reduction of funds down to it’s current budget of $24.6 million in 2013-14 (SEPAP 2013-2014 Program Outcomes). Despite these efforts, the demographics of students enrolling in UC campuses has remained stagnant.

**High School Context**

The theme exploring the roles of teachers and counselors in high school contexts yielded three important issues for the recruitment of African American students to UC campuses: 1. Counselors were more concerned with students gaining the necessary qualifications for student eligibility and assisting students with the application processes, 2. Counselors were not knowledgeable about the diverse array of strong programming across the UC campuses, 3. Teachers played a significant role in guiding and supporting students through college choice and application processes. The following quotes highlight the role of high school counselors in the college planning and decision making process:

> We had one college counselor and career counselor, but she was for the whole school, so it was like also not a lot of one-on-one time. But she would send stuff about scholarships and the deadlines for applications and stuff, so they did their best.
>  
> Female Student, Los Angeles region
>  
> Ivy League University

> The counselors were helpful in an administrative role of making sure I got everything submitted, but they really didn’t influence my decision on where to go very much.
>  
> Female Student, Sacramento region
>  
> Highly Selective Private University

> I started the research by just Googling various college ranking lists, so, of course, there was like U.S. News and World Report. But I also visited sites like QS World Rankings and the Forbes Top 50 list. After that, I looked at individual college websites. I also ended up at their websites through pamphlets and catalogs I received in the mail, but yes, I usually did it online from programs like their study abroad, their campus culture….
>  
> Female, Bay Area region, Ivy League University
Well so I had my counselor from my school. But my counselor managed, I want to say like 700, 800 kids because there are only a few counselors for such a larger school... But I think, in the end, they definitely helped me with the paperwork and stuff. But in actually choosing the college it was just me telling them, ‘Oh, by the way, I got in here. I decided to go to [east coast Ivy League]’ It wasn’t really much of them having an influence on my choice.

Male student, Los Angeles region
Ivy League University

We had a college career center and it was a lady who worked there. Her job was mainly to help people apply to college, how to get into college, and give them information on the different colleges and what we needed to apply.

Female Student, Sacramento region, CSU campus

An overwhelming number of the African American students interviewed stated that their counselors were of little service when selecting colleges beyond assisting them with the paperwork and submission processes necessary for their college applications. The lack of comprehensive counseling services at the high school level is supported by the Pathways to Postsecondary Success Report on California students’ college choice process (Solorzano, Datnow, Park, & Watford, 2013). Counselors appeared to focus on students’ high school records and course selection so that students were eligible for highly-selective colleges and universities. One student explained, “I had a set idea of some schools in my head where I was like, these are the schools I really want to go to. And I did research on them, and so I got in the mindset of which schools I was going apply to.” Even when students had regular meetings with their counselors, the students stated that they were responsible for bringing information about colleges and financial aid to their counselors. For the most part, the students researched their school choices independent of their counselors and only relied on the counselors for task oriented performances. The students’ descriptions of college counselling reflect research outcomes on college counselling which compel scholars to call for counselors to be more involved with students’ college election processes (McDonough, 2005; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008).

Researchers’ call for improved counselling includes providing counselors with abundant knowledge about college offerings and selective programs (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Corwin & Tierney, 2007; McDonough, 2005). Through the interviews, it became clear that the counselors either did not have or did not know comprehensive information about the UC system beyond the general information found on the UC websites. The counselors appeared knowledgeable about the UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UCSD campuses, but were less-likely to demonstrate an informed opinion of the other UC campuses. Moreover, the information the counselors provided about the highly-selective UC campuses focused on widely-known departments and disciplines, not equally strong departments and programs at various campuses. Students heard from their counselors about the math and science programs at UCSD, but were unaware that the Political Science department in nationally ranked at the number one position in 2015. For example, when explaining her choice to attend a CSU over UC Merced, one student stated:
Well, because they have a pre-nursing program, and then they have a nursing program. And if I was going to UC Merced I’d have to choose a different major. I don’t know. It feels like they had a better structure to keep going since I’m going to be a nurse.

Female Student, San Diego region, CSU campus

Yet, UC Merced highlights various pathways for a nursing degree to fits the needs and schedules of different student profiles (http://prehealth.ucmerced.edu/professions/nursing-0). Similarly, a student, who wants to be a sports medicine doctor, was dissuaded from choosing multiple UC campuses because she only had knowledge of the UCSD biology department. She had no idea that there are multiple undergraduate pathways towards medical school, several of which could have been fulfilled by different UC schools.

A definitive split was found within the data analysis between the counseling experiences of middle-income and low-income schools. Counselors in schools with large populations of low-income students appeared to be more familiar with the CSU system and directed their students to focus more attention on CSU choices. As prior research supports, low-income students spent significantly less time with their counselors than middle-income students (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Holland, 2015; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). In many cases middle-income students were able to cultivate strong working relationships with their counselors in which the counselors sent students notices about recruitment fairs and application deadlines. Additionally, middle-income student stated that the came from schools with college-going cultures in which all school adults and student participated in discussion on colleges; building school cultures that promote college from multiple perspectives and informed adults is likely to increase the numbers of students applying and being admitted to colleges (Corwin, & Tierney, 2007).

Across the interviews students stated that teachers were more likely to talk with them about college choices than their counselors. Teachers played multiple roles in the college-bound process. In many instances, teachers dedicated class time to writing and peer-editing college essays. They wrote recommendation letters for students, read and edited college essays, and provided moral support.

I would say my AP language arts [helped me] and AP literature teacher both helped us prepare for college. My AP literature teacher had tons of college applications in her room every day, and she would always push us to go fill out our applications...And she also had us practice writing our UC prompts in class. And my AP language arts teacher in my junior year, she also had us practice our UC prompts at the very last week of junior year because she wanted us to get a head start. That way we’d have a basis and we could work off of it and continue to make it even better.

Female student, Los Angeles region, Selective, HBCU
My teachers were really helpful with writing letters of recommendation and talking about the processes of going through college applications and just being encouraging in whatever choice we decided to make.

Female Student, Sacramento Region
Highly Selective Private University

Students stated that teachers, particularly in honors and AP courses, pushed the expectation of attending 4-year colleges in ways that college became a normalized aspect of the school and classroom cultures. Additionally, teachers were more familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the students than school counselors (Corwin, & Tierney, 2007; Kirst & Venezia, 2004); even though they did not have appear to have significant knowledge about UC schools, the teachers encouraged the students to find programs that aligned with the students’ interests. One student explained, “I got really close to a couple of my high school teachers. So being able to bounce ideas off of them was really helpful. Like most adults, they didn’t want to tell me where to go, so they were more a listening board for me to get feedback, but not necessarily have them tell me what to do or where to go.” Teachers also promoted their own alma-maters through school paraphernalia and shared conversations with the students. Given that the CSU campuses produce the lion’s share of California’s teachers, particularly for large urban school systems with over-representations of low-income schools, low-income students once again received more information about the CSU system than the UC campuses.

Teachers and counselors are crucial components in the college-bound processes of high school students in the United States (Farmer-Hinton, & Adams, 2006; Jones, 2013; Solorzano, Datnow, Park, & Watford, 2013). Not only do these school adults have the potential to influence students’ college choices, but they serve as key actors for completing the admissions processes. Teachers and counselors need to be prepared to help students find and explore programs and colleges that fit the financial, academic, and personal needs of their students (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). These findings are more significant for low-income students who rely on school resources to support their college choice and admission processes (Solorzano, Datnow, Park, & Watford, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

IX. Summary of Qualitative Findings

The qualitative aspect of the study yielded several key findings related to the issues of Access, Diversity and Climate, Affordability, Outreach and School Context. First, high achieving African American students are not being admitted to their priority campuses, namely the top highly competitive UC campuses. As a result of not being admitted to their top campus choice, many opted to attend college elsewhere. In fact, UC Merced was the sole option for one-third of our interview sample. Due to lack of familiarity with academic offerings and the desire to attend college in an urban setting, many of the students chose to attend college in the CSU system (n=24 or 32 percent of the sample) while 11 percent of the students were attending an Ivy League university (n=8), 32 percent attending a highly or moderately selective PWI (n=24), 15% chose to attend an HBCU (n=11) and approximately 6.7 percent opted to start in community college (n=5). Most students applied to several colleges, a which included a mix of public and private and
enrolled in campuses that either sought after them, offered competitive financial aid packages, or had climates that appeared to offer a more diverse learning environment than the UCs.

Students were very concerned about the campus climates, academic program offerings, and whether supportive infrastructures within the UC campuses existed when choosing which campuses to apply to and enroll in, stating concerns over being at a campus with limited student diversity, not wanting to be “only Black person.” As a high achieving student from the Bay Area noted how she and her peers “were looking at the percentage of Black people, well African Americans, and when we saw it, it was like there is not a lot of [African Americans]…that’s mainly why I did not want to go to Cal.” Students were keenly aware of the racial composition of the UC campuses within the system, and researched campus climates, extracurricular offerings and the cities and regions where campuses where located.

African American students are also very concerned about the cost of college and financial aid packages. Many noted larger financial aid packages offered by private highly selective Ivy League universities, private or Historically Black Colleges and Universities, compared to the limited financial aid and scholarships offered by UC campuses. Students in the sample were debt averse, preferring a cheaper college option, particularly if they were not admitted to their first choice campus. These students were conscious about not wanting to rely on or burden their parents in paying for college.

Another key finding is the fact that most of the students in the sample, 68 percent had no contact with UC recruiter or academic outreach program. For African Americans that did have contact with a recruiter, it was primarily through a partnership program such as Upward Bound. And for a handful of students that did have direct interaction with a UC recruiter, the interaction was not entirely positive. That is, these students felt that they were not sought after. As a male student from the Los Angeles region described, “He was a very direct individual…not necessarily welcoming us to apply to the UC system.” This savvy group of high achievers could clearly delineate when they were sought after and received a welcoming tone by university recruiters—and this appeared most often with the Ivy League schools, highly and moderately selective private universities, and highly and moderately selective HBCUs. These campuses offered paid campus visits, recruiting weekends, and included their families in this process. Students also noted that the CSU campuses also had offered positive recruiting experiences, where they were often connected with local alumni to answer follow up questions.

It was also clear from the interview data that high school context matters and plays a unique role in mitigating college knowledge and information. Teachers emerged as the primary source of college information for African American students; while counselors played a secondary role. Our data on the role of teachers conveys an opportunity for greater partnership between teachers and UC outreach efforts, given the important role that teachers of high achievers play in the college planning process. Because the CSU prepares the majority of teachers in California, it was clear that students in low-income schools and communities were more likely to receive college information about these campuses, as their teachers were alumni.

African American students, particularly those in AP and honors classes, also commented on the assistance they received from teachers who provided support an encouragement, letters of recommendation, or direct feedback on college essays. In addition, students in more affluent
schools commented on the academic planning that began early in their high school years. However, even for these students, direct information on college options was inconsistent. There was a clear contrast between African American high achievers in low income schools to their more affluent peers, because low income students were more likely to begin college planning and discussions later in their high school years.

Taken together, these findings support the need for a concerted effort to increase African American access to the UCs across all levels of selectivity, to address issues of climate and underrepresented student diversity across the UC system, address affordability through private funding sources and scholarships to attract more African American students to all of the UC campuses, greater information for the African American community on academic program offerings and more targeted outreach to create new applicant pools, and targeted efforts to educate teachers and counselors about the program offerings and long-term benefits of a UC education.

X. A Research Agenda on African Americans in the UC

There are also numerous areas for research that this study has raised for the research team. The first and natural next step is to engage the students who are currently at a UC campus and reported that they willing to interview with the research team (n=120). A healthy sample already exists based on their affirmative survey response. Members of the EXCEL research team would like to examine their first-year experiences at their respective campuses to help inform campus efforts to improve campus climates and infrastructures for better supporting African American student engagement and success.

The Principal Investigators further outlined several areas for future research on African American students, based on this study and our findings from both the qualitative and survey data, including:

1. Examine the applicant profiles of African American applicant and admit pools compared to their peers (underrepresented and non-URMs) to understand shifting profiles of those gaining access to UCs of varying selectivity
2. Document the experiences of African American students on UC campuses and graduate students
3. Examine the admissions process and pool of readers for UC applications (their selection, training, processes/practices for holistic review)
4. Examine the profiles of recent UC African American graduates- Graduating with a UC degree: was is worth it? Research African American graduates a decade out of graduating from a UC campus.
5. Examine UC major concentrations to understand the Departments and majors African American students are more likely to apply to and be admitted
6. Examine the ELC pool at the system level—who is this policy really helping?
7. Examine the transfer student pipeline, choice processes pathways to the UC—and the pre-college experiences of these African American students that begin in community colleges.
8. Examine the relationship between participation in a UC-sponsored pre-college pipeline program (e.g., Upward Bound, MESA) and the UC admissions process and outcomes for participating UC aspirants; given the significant campus and system-wide investment in these programs
9. Examine other underrepresented groups to understand the similarities and differences in campus experiences, accessibility, and campus infrastructures that do or do not exist to support academic success across the UC system.

XI. Recommendations
Investing in African American Students is critical for the University of California, if the system is to seriously address the limited representation of African Americans across the UC system. These recommendations represent a multi-faceted approach to increasing the numbers of African Americans transitioning to UCs as first-time freshman and are based on the voices and survey feedback of highly qualified African American undergraduates who were admitted to the UC system. As noted in this report, our sample represents an elite group of academically competitive, civic-minded, well-rounded future leaders that the UC system has failed to attract to its campuses for a number of reasons ranging from climate to not getting into the most selective UC campuses despite the rhetoric of appreciating diversity in the public UC system.

Admissions Process

1. **Increase African American students through the admission process.** Instead of relying on solely traditional indicators and numeric measures, it is important for the UC system to broaden the ways in which UC defines academic success by considering non-cognitive factors for admission and adding additional weight to such non-cognitive variables that are indicative of a hard work ethic, leadership, and commitment to community service (Sedlacek, 2011). For example, students who participated in pre-college programs (Upward Bound, AVID, etc.) and other high impact activities such as sports, leadership programs, work or community service in communities that are underserved would have additional consideration.

2. **Optimize and streamline the ELC process.** The UC system is not optimizing the ELC process to increase the number of disadvantaged, first generation, or the highest achieving students within their high school context. For example, in our survey sample, less than 10% (n=50) claimed that they were ELC students; yet, over 64% (n=358) students reported that their class rank was in the Top 10 percentile of their graduating class. Clarifying the ELC process for students and their families and assign students this status, rather than the “opt in” approach currently used would help to increase the pool of African American students with this status. The UC could capture more African American students that fit the ELC designation if it handles determining qualified students; since UC already performs a cross check on ELC status when students apply, we recommend that this be done across the entire pool of UC applicants.
3. **Designate at least 12.5 percent of admissions slots, as laid out out in CA Master Plan, for ELC students across the system, low-income students, first-generation students, and students in the top 12.5% of their class.** Each campus should reserve at least 12.5 percent of admission slots for providing special consideration to students who are either designated as ELC, low-income, from urban high schools and districts with high concentrations of poverty, or in the Top 12.5 percent of their high school.

4. **Establish one application fee that allows students to apply to all of the campuses of their choice.** Students who qualify for financial aid are only eligible to apply to four campuses with the existing waiver process. Many of the low-income students we spoke to only applied to the four campuses covered under this waiver, rather than expanding their options. And they applied to the highly competitive campuses most sought after for admission, UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego and UC Santa Barbara. In addition, for those students just missing the cutoff for a waiver from their high school, individual application fees can place a burden on families with more than one child.

5. **Streamline the UC wait list and appeals process**—according to students, “it is too late” when decisions are made and they have already made their college decisions by the time they hear from UC on their wait list or appeal case. Many students commented that they “found out May 1, June, or later that they were admitted to campuses, past the deadline for SIRs at their other college options.

**Outreach**

6. **Increase outreach and targeted recruitment to high schools with high concentrations of low-income urban students.** UC needs a multi-faceted approach to outreach, creating new applicant pools by targeting high schools that have been largely ignored by UC recruiters. This approach would include: increasing outreach efforts to high school counselors, educating them about the UCs and requirements for admission; Bringing students to UC campuses so they can experience the campuses firsthand; and working directly with teachers since they appeared to be the primary source of college information for students.

7. **Marketing Campaign to better promote the UC campuses and its academic programs.** In some regions, the UC campus is not well known or overshadowed by the local CSUs that may already be MSIs (Minority-Serving institutions) or HSIs (Hispanic Serving Institutions). A targeted marketing campaign throughout California educating high schools on UC program offerings would raise the level of visibility of UC across all school and community contexts. Specifically, we recommend reaching out to high schools in regions with a critical mass of African American students and families and enhancing efforts to deliver timely and relevant information on available majors and academic programs. The team also recommends that the UCs need to do a better job of promoting the campuses by engaging in the following outreach activities:
- Better messaging to communities of color, reach out through community programs
- Advertising campaigns across California
- Increase contact and use of African American alumni in recruiting
- Bring students to campuses
- Re-evaluate and reorganize UC websites

8. **Target children of UC alumni.** The African American UC Alumni associations are not fully utilized as a potential strength in recruiting efforts. For example, 78 percent of the survey sample had parents who earned their degree in California. The African American parents that earned their degree at a UC campus could be integrated into open houses and outreach efforts in the community.

9. **Provide resources to the Black Resource Centers on UC campuses to increase their visibility and efforts to serve as a resource to low income urban high school students.** The BRCs at many of the UCs are the primary source of connection to low income African American community on campus. Early exposure to these centers would enable families and admitted students to have

School Context

10. **Work with teachers and counselors.** Teachers are the primary source of information for most students, including many African American students. Teachers are being under-utilized as college resources and counselors do not have enough information about UCs or the academic programs and offerings within the UCs. The interview data confirmed that students are very savvy and knowledgeable about the academic majors and programs they would like to pursue. Educating high school counselors and teachers about the strengths of UC’s programs would help to increase UCs exposure and knowledge about UC in high schools.

11. **Expand applicant pools and by conducting outreach to high schools not on UCs radar for admissions recruiting.** Over 68% of students interviewed never had contact with a UC recruiter. Expanding the number of schools to conduct outreach in urban areas and high schools with a concentration of African American students may help UC campuses to increase their visibility among the African American pool of high achievers.

Affordability—Financial Commitment

12. **Increase the number of scholarships provided to low-income first generation students.** Provide scholarship money to students that come from partnership high schools and schools with high concentration of African American students. UC Berkeley and UCLA have African American initiative to raise private
funds for African American students. This model should be adopted throughout all of the UC campuses.

13. **Provide scholarships to middle income African American students.** Most of the scholarship opportunities that exist are solely for low-income students or “need-based” financial awards. However, many high achieving African American students in our sample were middle income students, with additional siblings in the household that were either college-age or soon to be transitioning to college. Incentives to choose a UC through “merit-based” financial awards for working class and middle income African American and underrepresented students would enable UC to recruit high achievers that are highly sought after by other selective and private institutions would enable UCs to better compete for their enrollment.

**Build an Infrastructure for African American Leadership within the UC System**

14. **Create funding pools from private sources to fund outreach and scholarships for African American students.** Establish a fundraising campaign at the system level from private sources to conduct targeted recruitment efforts in the African American community and create new funding pool or an endowment for such efforts.

15. **Create an African American Research Collective comprised of leading African American scholars within the UC system and advisory committee to the UC President.** Building an infrastructure of African American leaders within the UC system would provide the UC Office of the President with expertise and an infrastructure for tangible feedback and solutions for the unique challenges faced by African American students in the UC system.

16. **Increase recruitment and retention of African American tenure line faculty and Senior level administrators.** Students commented on the presence of African Americans on campus and the climate. Faculty play a key role in campus climates, because they are more likely mentor, provide research opportunities, and volunteer to assist student clubs and organizations on campus. They are central to an infrastructure for supporting African American and underrepresented students on UC campuses.

17. **Fund Vice Chancellors for Diversity in each of the respective campuses to levels that enable them to better work with academic departments to diversify their faculties.** Vice Chancellors of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion may play a critical role in recruiting faculty of color or provide counter offer packages for existing African American and faculty of color at UC campuses. These offices also play a critical role in funding Black Resource Centers, Raza Centros, and other ethnic initiatives on campus designed to welcome students of color and provide community to first generation or diverse students.
18. Work to Repeal Proposition 209 in conjunction with California’s state leaders. Proposition 209 has severely impacted the pool of high achieving African American applicants, admits and those choosing to enroll in a UC campus, particularly at UCLA, UC Berkeley and UC San Diego. While significant damage has already occurred in terms of supporting the development of and sustaining a thriving African American middle class in California, it is time to acknowledge the fact Proposition 209 has impeded the mission of the University of California by constraining practices that were designed to ensure access to all public UC campuses in the state. California residents and their children, that are now over 60% underrepresented students, deserve more than segregated system of higher education.

XII. Conclusion

The University of California system is in a critical position to act upon 20 years of limited African American student access to UC campuses, particularly highly and moderately selective campuses. As both the survey and qualitative data confirm, the University of California can do a significantly better job of attracting an elite pool of highly qualified, engaged, civic minded African American high achievers to its campuses throughout the state of California by focusing on initiatives to promote greater access, address issues of campus climate across the UCs within the system, enhance affordability and financial assistance by creating a funding mechanism for scholarships, better marketing by the UCs and what they have to offer African American students and communities, and strengthening existing partnerships while creating new ones with larger bases of the school counselors and teachers in urban and suburban high schools. Our recommendations are intended to facilitate tangible efforts to ensure that the UC system fulfills its public mission to serve California residents and contributes to the development of a cadre of African American academic, industry and civic leaders through thoughtful investment and a sense of urgency.
References


The Black Student Union of the University of California, San Diego. (n.d.). Do UC us?: Campaign to increase numbers of African-American students at the University of California, San Diego. San Diego, CA.


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1 While 304 students noted they were willing to be interviewed, over half of these students were enrolled in the UC system. Since this study was concerned primarily with those who chose not to attend a UC campus, the total pool of potential interviewees for this study and met our criteria was considerably smaller.

2 In addition to student data collection and analysis, the research team has been engaged in parent data collection, which began in November through December. It was very difficult to organize focus groups among parents of African American students so the research team altered the IRB plan in early November to be able to conduct individual interviews. As a result, six interviews and one focus group have been conducted to date to understand the role African American parents play in the college choice and planning process. The research team plans to continue this data collection phase in January. Because of the late data collection process and unique challenges in scheduling parents, this analysis is not included in this report but will be conducted and submitted to UC Office of the President upon completion.