



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations

---

Fall March 2016

## **“We’re Different because We’re Scholars”: A Case Study of a College Access Program in South Los Angeles**

Lizette Zarate

*Loyola Marymount University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Zarate, Lizette, ““We’re Different because We’re Scholars”: A Case Study of a College Access Program in South Los Angeles” (2016). *LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations*. 209.

<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/209>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations

---

Fall October 2013

## **“We’re Different because We’re Scholars”: A Case Study of a College Access Program in South Los Angeles**

Lizette Zarate

Loyola Marymount University, zettezil@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Zarate, Lizette, ““We’re Different because We’re Scholars”: A Case Study of a College Access Program in South Los Angeles” (2013). *LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations*. 209.

<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/209>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

“We’re Different because We’re Scholars”:

A Case Study of a College Access Program in South Los Angeles

by

Lizette Zarate

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctorate in Education

2013

“We’re Different because We’re Scholars”:

A Case Study of a College Access Program in South Los Angeles

Copyright © 2013

by

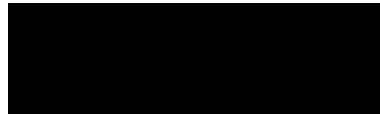
Lizette Zarate

**Loyola Marymount University  
School of Education  
Los Angeles, CA 90045**

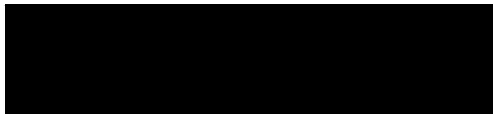
This dissertation written by Lizette Zarate, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

8/8/13  
Date

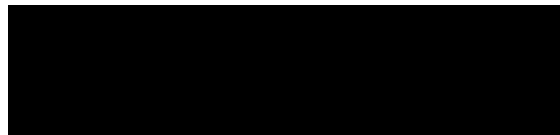
Dissertation Committee



Jill Bickett, Ed.D., Committee Chair



Karen Huchting, Ph.D., Committee Member



Yvette Lapayese, Ph.D., Committee Member

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been completed without the support and guidance from some wonderful individuals. For their unwavering support, I give thanks to:

Para mi mamá, Bertha Zarate. Sin su apoyo, tiempo, paciencia, amor, y confianza este trabajo no se podría haber hecho posible. A mi papá, Federico Zarate, por ser el mejor ejemplo de responsabilidad y dar lo mejor de uno. Es un privilegio ser su hija.

To my sister, Ivonne, for always having faith in me. I hope that this work inspires you as much as you inspire me daily. Believe in yourself – you can accomplish anything.

To my partner, Jesus, for your encouragement throughout this process.

To my daughter, Charli - you are my inspiration and motivation. Completing this work was hard; there were many times in the process when I didn't think I would or could finish. But I did! Never give up, for you can accomplish whatever you set your mind to. May you always work hard, may you always remember how loved you are, and may you always let your light shine.

To my aunt Vicky, for being my first example of academic success, for always pushing me open my eyes to the vastness of the world, and for your friendship, which I cherish.

There are no words to describe my gratitude to Dr. Jill Bickett. Thank you for being the beacon that lit this journey for me. Without your unwavering support, coaching and belief in me, this work couldn't have been completed. You are my college access program – you supplemented what I was missing and pushed me to believe that I am worthy. I believe it. I am forever in your debt.

To my committee, Dr. Yvette Lapayese and Dr. Karie Huchting for your feedback and advice along the way. I learned very much from you two, during the dissertation process, and as your student in the doctoral program.

To Ms. Kim Thomas-Barrios for opening the doors of the NAI program to me and allowing me to live my passion in service of the youth of this program. A million thanks for your support, encouragement and belief in this work.

DEDICATION

To Charlotte Makenna

&

The scholars of the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative

*You were born with wings, why prefer to crawl through life? - Rumi*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	ix
CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY.....	1
Introduction.....	1
College Access Programs.....	4
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Significance of the Study.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Method.....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Epistemology.....	10
Limitations.....	10
Organization.....	12
Definition of Terms.....	12
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	14
Introduction.....	14
College Access Programs.....	14
Definition.....	14
Resilient Students.....	15
Theoretical Framework.....	16
Funds of Knowledge Theory.....	16
The Plight of Urban Communities.....	17
Impacted Neighborhoods.....	18
Unstable / Non-Supportive Family Conditions.....	19
Lack of Opportunities for Involvement.....	19
The Emergence and Evolution of College Access Programs.....	20
College Access Programs: In-School and Out-of-School Models.....	21
College Access Programs: Types and Features.....	22
Common Features of College Access Programs.....	23
Examples of College Access Programs: CAPS across the State.....	24
Social and Cultural Capital Theories in College Access Programs.....	25
Interventions of College Access Programs: Targeted Factors that Impact Success.....	26
Factor 1: Introducing Cultural and Social Capital.....	26
Factor 2: Providing Tools to Navigate the Urban Environment: Counseling, Engagement during Out-Of-School Hours.....	27
Factor 3: Engaging Families in Student Academic Success.....	28
Factor 4: Setting High Academic Expectations.....	30
Factor 5: Developing Self-Concept.....	31
Conclusion.....	32



CHAPTER 3: METHODS .....	35
Research Questions .....	35
Rationale for Qualitative Research .....	35
Case Study Method .....	37
Setting .....	38
Population Sample .....	40
The Program and Its Components .....	41
Table 3: NAI Program Components .....	42
Study Participants .....	42
Student Participants .....	43
Alex .....	44
Robert .....	44
Marissa .....	44
Alumnae Participants .....	45
Michelle .....	46
Marcos .....	46
Byron .....	47
Additional Participants .....	47
Lola .....	47
Sofia .....	47
Elizabeth .....	47
Ms. Garcia .....	47
Ms. Flores .....	48
Ms. Blanco .....	48
Data Collection Sites .....	48
Data Collection Methods .....	49
Observation .....	49
Interviews .....	51
Journaling .....	51
Senior Survey .....	52
Data Management .....	53
Data Preparation .....	53
Data Manipulation .....	53
Coding .....	54
Internal Validity .....	55
Timeline for Data Collection .....	55
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS .....	56
Introduction .....	56
Document Review .....	57
NAI Graduate Survey, 1997-2012 .....	58
NAI – Agreements Between University and School District .....	59
Student Code of Ethics .....	61
Parent Oath .....	61

Neighborhood Academic Initiative Contract .....	62
Research Question 1 .....	63
Survey Data.....	64
Most Effective Features of NAI as Identified by Participants.....	66
NAI Provides Students with the Structure, Access and Guidance Necessary to Get to College.....	66
Structured Academic Program.....	66
Structured Out-of-School Time .....	68
Structured Support System .....	69
Structured College Counseling.....	70
NAI Immerses its Students in a College-Going Culture.....	71
NAI Offers its Students Access to Academic (Internal) and Cultural (External) Resources .....	75
Internal Resources.....	75
External Resources.....	78
NAI Sets High Academic Expectations.....	80
NAI Engages the Family of Origin and Creates a Family within the Program .....	85
Family of Origin .....	85
Program Family .....	89
NAI Enhances the Self-Concept of its Students: College Access Programs See Students as Scholars.....	91
Research Question 2 .....	93
The Epistemologies of Urban Students: Informing the Work of College Access Programs .....	95
Theme 1: Students Demand Opportunities, Not Handouts.....	95
Theme 2: Urban Students Need Support Along the Pathway to College, but Also Once They Are in College .....	96
Theme 3: To Overcome the Environmental Factors Often Present in Urban Communities, Urban High School Students Should Be Enclosed By a Tightly Woven Net that Ensures Protection and Advocacy .....	98
Theme 4: Urban Students Require the Space to Articulate, Appreciate, and Understand the Value of Their Epistemologies .....	99
Conclusion .....	102
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	104
Introduction.....	104
Analysis of the Findings .....	105
Finding #1: Corroborating the 5 Factors .....	105
Finding #2: Structure and Accountability: The 6 <sup>th</sup> Factor .....	107
Finding #3: Identifying the Practices of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative: A Culture of High Expectations, Transforming Families and Community, and College Guidance .....	109
A Culture of High Expectations.....	110
Transforming Family and Community .....	112
College Guidance.....	114

Finding #4: Informing the Work of College Access Programs – Masked Epistemologies .....	116
Masked Epistemologies .....	116
Masked Epistemologies – Race and Class in NAI.....	123
Masked Epistemologies – Social Obstacles.....	124
Masked Epistemologies – Familial Obstacles .....	126
Masked Epistemologies – Academic Obstacles .....	127
Finding #5: Fostering Independence.....	128
Conclusion .....	130
Recommendations for NAI.....	130
Site-Based Recommendations .....	131
1) Making the Invisible Visible .....	131
2) Intentional Dialogue .....	132
3) Engaging the Alumni Network.....	132
4) Building Bridges.....	134
5) Keeping the Family Close .....	134
Policy Recommendations.....	135
1) Investing in the Students.....	135
2) Investing in the Model .....	136
Future Research .....	137
Conclusion .....	138
References.....	139
APPENDIX A: Site Letter .....	150
APPENDIX B: Detailed Interview Profile .....	151
APPENDIX C: Observation Protocol .....	154
APPENDIX D: Interview Questions .....	155
APPENDIX E: Journaling Prompts .....	156
APPENDIX F: Survey Information Table .....	156
APPENDIX G: Data Collection Profile .....	157
APPENDIX H: NAI Graduate Survey .....	158
APPENDIX I: Class Survey Results .....	159
APPENDIX J: Most Effective Structures .....	160
APPENDIX K: Description of Cultural / Academic Resources .....	161

## ABSTRACT

“We’re Different because We’re Scholars”:

A Case Study of a College Access Program in South Los Angeles

by

Lizette Zarate

This work is a case study focused on the practices of a comprehensive college access program that serves students in south Los Angeles that has maintained a high school graduation rate of 100% and a college matriculation rate of 98% since 1997. This study sought to utilize the voice and experience of students of color to discern the factors that are most effective in helping urban students of color and in turn, inform the future work of the college access community. The study was driven by the following research questions: a) which practices of a south Los Angeles college access program most impact a student's ability to matriculate to college? and b) How can the epistemology of urban students inform the work of college access programs? Through observations, interviews, journal exercises and document review, this study ranked the practices in order of importance according to the participants, and identified that structure and accountability are essential to the success of this college access program. In addition, the study revealed that the students of this program succeed academically because the program, provides students with structure, access and guidance; because it immerses its students in a college-going culture; because it offers access to academic and cultural resources; because it sets high academic expectations; because it engages the family of origin and creates a family within the program; and because it enhances the self-concept of its students: college access programs see students as scholars.

Using funds of knowledge as a framework, this study also introduced the original term, “masked epistemologies” which refers to the shared experiences of college access students once they enter college. The concept of masked epistemologies refers to the experience of students who enter college via a college access program, who go on to feel like her ways of knowing, shaped by the unique experience of being a high achieving student participant of a college access program from an urban setting, are disregarded in the new, unknown terrain of college, and must be masked or concealed, only to be revealed in environments considered safe. The students’ epistemologies go from being highly praised and admired, to being ignored to the point of invisibility. This study found that students of this college access program struggle with adapting to the social realm of college because they have not been exposed to class differences throughout their tenure in the program.

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

#### Introduction

The public system of education of the United States is failing students. Urban students<sup>1</sup>, in particular, have limited opportunities, as part of a social structure that some say intends to keep these students at the margins (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Those who are born into privilege are almost guaranteed success, if they want it; for urban students, on the other hand, success is more difficult to come by (Aronson, 2001). Urban students are faced with challenges such as poverty, homelessness, broken families, violence, and underfunded schools. In the midst of this turbulence, however, a few academic support programs serve as beacons of light for the youth in these communities. These programs aim to make a positive impact on the lives of poor and underserved students. This case study seeks to identify the practices of a highly successful<sup>2</sup> college access program in south Los Angeles that most impact a student's ability to matriculate to college. Furthermore, this study also seeks to identify how the epistemologies of these learners can inform the work of the college access community: an educational community that dedicates itself to providing opportunities to students at the margins.

Whereas other studies have carried out life history studies of college access participants (Jun, 2001), or identified shared features of college access programs (Gullat & Jan, 2003), this case study will focus on the specific and most effective features of one of these programs from

---

<sup>1</sup> In this study, Urban Students will be operationally defined as “low-income, students of color who are likely the first in their families to go to college” (Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, and Hurd, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> In this study, *highly successful* refers to programs like NAI, a program that has maintained a high school graduation rate of 100% and a college matriculation rate of over 98% since 1997.

the perspective of the participants themselves. Sirin, Diemer, Jackson, Gonsalves and Howell (2004) posit that though affluent and poor students have comparable aspirations for their futures, what differs among the two groups, are society's expectations of them, as well as the opportunities that are afforded to each. In other words, society expects little of urban students, which directly correlates to the differing outcomes between the two groups (Hotchkiss & Borrow, 1996; Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998). Literature on college access programs indicates that these programs set high expectations of urban students, thus resulting in higher rates of college matriculation, versus their counterparts who are not involved in these programs (Jun, 2001; Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002; Perna, 2005).

Matriculating to college after high school is not necessarily the harbinger of success, but for students from urban communities, where opportunities are limited, going to college may be a way to level the playing field, as "education plays a fundamental role in ensuring social mobility" (Aronson, 2001, p. 3). The job landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed and individuals need more than a high school diploma to access many jobs. Studies show that individuals who hold bachelor's degrees are more likely to have higher paying positions, more benefits, and better quality of life than counterparts without a degree (Couturier & Cunningham, 2006; Goodwin, 2006). Particularly in the inner city, college access programs aim to prepare students to compete academically and help them gain access to colleges and universities. This case study will focus on one such program. The University of Southern California Neighborhood Academic Initiative (USC NAI) has been serving students since 1990 and has played a pivotal role in the college matriculation of almost 700 urban students.

My interest in urban student achievement stems from my own experience as an individual who was born, raised and educated in the inner city of Los Angeles. I was one of the fortunate ones. While I went on to achieve academic success, I watched too many of my peers struggle within a system that seemed to place hurdles to prevent them from succeeding. My experience was not the one that is typically showcased on the news. I grew up in what was probably one of the worst areas of Los Angeles, an area riddled with poverty and crime, and yet, I never felt deprived. It was as if I grew up in a bubble within the chaos in my community. Because of a strong family unit, support from my teachers and my own participation in a college access program, I never felt disadvantaged. I left high school with confidence, a thirst for knowledge, and the belief that I could compete with any student from the most privileged background. I went on to earn my bachelor's and master's degrees from prestigious universities. It was not until I left college and began my career in education that I learned of the disparate educational experiences of students from my community versus those of students from wealthier backgrounds. It was then that I reflected on in my own experience, and wondered why if I had been from the same community and from the same socio-economic background, things had been different for me. It became clear that opportunities are few and far between for students like me, and that I had been lucky. It then became my passion to change this and help every student like me access a quality education.

While I may be one of public education's success stories, I am critical of the system. If the system were truly equitable, my story would not be unique. The fact that I had to seek out opportunity and learn to navigate and ultimately, outwit a system designed to see me fail highlights the problems of inequity that persist. My personal passion is for helping students like



myself access educational opportunities. For the last two years, I have served as the curriculum and instruction specialist for the college access program that is at the center of this study. In this position, I oversee all of the program's academic components, including Monday through Friday instruction and the flagship Saturday Academy program. As a leader for social justice, it is imperative to shed light on programs that help the individuals suffering from these injustices in an effort to bring about change for our students.

### **College Access Programs**

For the purpose of this study, I will apply the definition for college access programs offered by Gullat and Jan (2003), which identifies college access programs as “those programs operated by universities and colleges, federal or state agencies or non-profit organizations that target primarily individual students rather than classrooms or whole schools...[that] provide supplemental academic assistance and/or enrichment activities to primarily middle and high school students” (p. 3). College access programs typically serve urban students, who attend schools in impacted communities, and were born into a marginalized caste.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Public education is perhaps one of the greatest gifts that our nation offers to its citizens, but the fruits of this gift are not equal for each recipient. The 1954 ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*, called for academic integration and brought with it the notion that perhaps change would come; that students would finally have access to an equitable system, one that would provide everyone with the same opportunities. But today, we find that many of our schools, particularly those within large districts, continue to be segregated and continue to fail the students they serve (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Murnane, 2007; McNeal, 2009). Staggering

dropout rates among African-American and Latino students in urban school districts indicate that these schools are in peril (Rodriguez & Conchas, 1999; Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004). College access programs aim to offer urban students opportunities comparable to those afforded to their privileged counterparts. These programs understand the deficits within the system of education, and present themselves as a way to strengthen the system by countering those deficits via access and opportunity (Tierney & Jun, 2001; Corwin, Colyar & Tierney, 2005).

There is a dearth of research on the academic structures that contribute to the success of urban students (Simons, 2003). Though in recent years, some researchers have looked at college access programs (Hayward, Brandes, Kirst & Mazzeo, 1997; Perna, 2002; Jun, 2001; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Gullat & Jan, 2003; Tierney, 2003; Tierney, Corwin & Colyar, 2005), these studies have failed to address the “specific program components of college access programs that are effectively assisting students to enter college” (Gullat & Jan, 2003, p.2). In other words, if a transformation of urban education is to occur, educators need the keys of successful programming. Corwin, Colyar and Tierney (2005) also indicate that “there is very little evaluative data on what works in college preparation programs” (p. 2). Perhaps the lack of research on the topic of structures within urban communities that promote the success of urban students is commentary on the fact that few support structures for these students are actually in place; or, it may be indicative that as a society, we refuse to acknowledge that urban students are just as valuable as privileged students, and that with access and the right components, they too can succeed.

This case study will explore the factors within college access that support urban students in their education from the perspective of the participants themselves. In looking closely at an

example of a program that successfully serves these students, this case study can highlight the specific tools that urban students need to be given to help them succeed; this will open the way to the transformation of our current system (Ceballo, 2004).

### **Significance of the Study**

Stories of our failing system of education, particularly in reference to the schools in urban communities, are plentiful in the news. Authors like Jonathan Kozol (2005) have devoted their careers to exposing the injustices that exist within the system in an effort to incite change. In a discussion about why the system continues to fail, Kozol writes, “they [students] are drilled in the same rigidified curricula in schools that face the same impermanence of staffing, under exhortations to the same allegedly high expectations that are contradicted by the same degrading physical realities” (p.185). Texts like these are informative, but they do not offer educators possible strategies to remediate these problems.

It is imperative to study programs that are actively and successfully serving those at the margins, if we are to transform our system from one that supports the success of a limited few to one that nurtures all -- including urban students. Looking at the programs that successfully serve these students can inform pedagogy and practice. In critiquing the national interventions that have been established to combat student failure (e.g., No Child Left Behind), Noguera (2008) asserts, “...it is possible to raise academic achievement and improve public education without compromising the quality of education that children receive” (p. 179). If we listen to the voices of students who can tell us the components of college access programs that are most effective at encouraging them to pursue higher education, we can ensure that rather than designing new pedagogical interventions, we can take steps to enhance what is already in place and provide our

students with a thorough educational experience that leads to student success. Our nation has yet to adopt a sense of urgency in transforming our system; a web of complacency has been woven, and it appears that very few individuals are invested in creating change. Reconstructing the entire system might seem like a daunting task. Thus, rather than tackling the reconstruction of an entire system, it would be most beneficial to find what is already in place to promote college access that works within the system, and replicate it. Replication could be challenging if the program or features replicated do not resonate with a specific community, as this program model might not be the best fit for another community with different demographics, but learning from the experiences of a successful program can be a step toward improving the educational experiences of students of color. College access programs have proven that they can make a positive impact on the communities they serve and according to research on individual program data they are able to successfully graduate and guide their students in matriculating to college (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Bergin, Cooks & Bergin, 2007). The college access program profiled in this case study is an example of a program with a high number of graduated students and college matriculation. Since its first graduating class in 1997, over 600 students of the NAI program have graduated and gone on to college. Because of the impact that programs of this type have been shown to make, the most successful features of these might serve as models of some of the interventions that can be replicated in urban communities, in an effort to better serve and transform the educational experience of urban students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to use qualitative methods to investigate the factors within a college access program with extraordinary graduation and college matriculation data to

identify the factors that most contribute to the college enrollment of its participants.

Additionally, this study utilized the epistemologies of the participants to inform the work of the college access community. This study also responded to a suggestion for future research from Jun (2001) who calls attention to the need for research about “what specific factors of college preparation programs lead to success for historically underrepresented students in academe” (p. 126). In response to this, this study will seek to find those factors directly from the participants of the NAI program.

Previous studies on college access programs have looked specifically at the structural components of the programs (Perna, 2002; Gullat & Jan 2003), or sorted through the various models of college access programs that exist (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Though these have provided an understanding of the scope of work and significance of college access programs, few of these studies have taken into account student voice to help identify the specific program features that they felt contributed to their ultimate success in matriculating to college. Hearing directly from participants can help us learn which features make for an effective program and thus encourage implementation of similar programs and features for more students. Furthermore, this study will be unique in that it will impart lessons from a highly successful program, to inform the continued work of these.

### **Method**

This case study focused on three high school seniors who have been participants in a college access program since middle school, and three adult graduates of the same college access program who participated in the program from middle school, on, and who have earned a minimum of a bachelor’s degree. Because my aim was to gain a thorough understanding of the

experiences of these students, I wanted to work with a sample size that would allow me to spend time with each of participants for in-depth interviews. Through a series of journaling exercises, observations and interviews, I came to understand what these students believe were the most beneficial components of the program, and the features (if any) that impacted their ability to matriculate to college and graduate. Student voice is imperative to this study, as it filled the voids left in other studies on college access programs (Tierney & Jun, 2001; Jun 2001; Gullat & Jan, 2003). In order to find the keys that contribute to the success of this particular program, we must focus on the individuals who actually take part to enlighten us as to the true experience of student participation.

### **Research Questions**

The research on urban college access programs is limited. Much of the literature available focuses on getting students to college, but few look at programs in depth to identify the specific components that make these programs successful; the studies that do look at these programs focus more on the general programmatic features and commonalities that exist among the programs, not specifically at the perspectives of the students themselves. It is time to shift the paradigm by looking at what works in an effort to design programming and pedagogy that will motivate, support, and grab hold of our “at-risk” students. In this study, “at-risk” will be defined as “those [students] who are members of socially disadvantaged groups” (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990).

Thus, the research questions that will drive this study are:

1. Which practices of a south Los Angeles college access program most impact a student's ability to matriculate to college?
2. How can the epistemology of urban students inform the work of college access programs?

## **Epistemology**

Epistemology refers to how individuals know what they know (Hatch, 2002). A person's epistemology is formed and impacted by his/her surroundings, by what he/she experiences in daily life. The epistemology of a student of color, who attends a poor, urban school, is likely different from that of a white, affluent student who attends private school. In other words, the way these students view the world will be different as informed by the way in which each has grown up, what they have seen, and what they understand to be the truth. Delgado-Bernal (2002) writes that, "Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings" (p. 106). In response to this, and by way of the college access program that this study will highlight, I have explored the experiences of the participants, and can impart a new perspective to educators, founded in the experiences and epistemologies of students of color, to inform pedagogy and in turn, better serve students of color, regardless of their educational settings.

## **Limitations**

In the first chapter of this study, I shared that my interest in the subject of this study is highly personal. I grew up in an urban community, and studied in inner-city schools. More specifically, I was a student in the Neighborhood Academic Initiative, (NAI) the college access program that is the focus of this study. I completed the program in 1998, as part of NAI's second graduating class. After high school, I attended the University of Southern California, with a full scholarship granted to me through NAI. Since graduating college, my interest has been in

identifying how to best serve students like me, students with promise, but whose opportunities are limited as a result of social barriers, designed to keep urban students from reaching their potentials. Today, I am also an employee of the NAI program. Since the fall of 2010, I have served as the curriculum and instruction specialist for the organization. Because of my experience as a student the program, and my keen interest and concern for the students from these communities, I am favorably disposed toward the work of college access programs. I believe that more schools should implement similar supports to help students overcome the barriers presented in their communities, and help them get to college.

This study is also limited because though the objective is for the participants to help us understand what helped them get to where they are, their experiences cannot be generalized and one cannot assume that the participants' experiences will be the same for every other student, or that the results would be the same for other college access programs. In addition, because of the small sample, we cannot generalize the success of the program, as it only represents one program, and the experiences of a small group of its participants. Experiences, successes, and failures may not compare to other programs.

Finally, we must also consider that to join the program, the students must apply. This fact indicates that the students must have the motivation to apply. This sets apart the type of students who ultimately take part in the program. By joining the program, the students who opt in agree to give up much of their free time to additional academic endeavors, and not every student is interested in taking the challenge. Because of the shared characteristics of the students of the NAI program, we cannot assume that the effective features identified by this program can or will apply to every urban student of color.



## **Organization**

This dissertation is a work written in five chapters. The first chapter provides a view of the current state of education for urban students. This chapter will illustrate some of the challenges posed to these students, and how college access programs serve as a way in which urban communities can support these students on the path to college. The first chapter offers a brief overview of college access programs, and describes the communities typically served by these. Additionally, Chapter 1 provides an overview of what this study seeks to achieve, and what steps will be taken to carry out the study. This chapter offers a working definition for college access programs, a term that will be used throughout this study. Chapter 2 offers a review of literature focusing on college access programs and urban students. Chapter 2 will also look at the factors that contribute to the success and failure of these students, and highlights the emergence of college access programs as a way to level the playing field for urban students and help them matriculate to college. Additionally, Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical framework that guides the study. This is followed by an outline of the five factors of college access programs that are cited throughout this study. Chapter 3 presents the methods that will be applied in this study. Here, I also present a detailed description of the specific program being studied, the participants, the reasoning behind selecting these participants, how the data collected will be analyzed, and the timeline projected for data collection.

## **Definition of Terms**

**At-risk:** “those [students] who are members of socially disadvantaged groups” (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990).

**College Access Program:** “those programs operated by universities and colleges, federal or state agencies or non-profit organizations that target primarily individual students rather than classrooms or whole schools...[that] provide supplemental academic assistance and/or enrichment activities to primarily middle and high school students” (Gullat & Jan, 2003, p. 3).

**Epistemology:** how individuals know what they know (Hatch, 2002).

**First-generation student:** “students whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a college degree” (Engle, 2007)

**Highly successful:** in this study, *highly successful* refers to programs like NAI, a program that has maintained a high school graduation rate of 100% and a college matriculation rate of over 98% since 1997.

**The System:** the American system of education; a capitalist institution designed to maintain social stratification.

**Urban Student:** low-income, students of color who are likely the first in their families to go to college (Tierney, Bailey, Constantine, Finkelstein, & Hurd, 2009).

**University of Southern California Neighborhood academic Initiative (USC NAI):** A college access program sponsored by the University of Southern California that serves the students from the neighborhood surrounding the university. The program serves students via a variety of interventions, including instruction on the university campus, an additional day of academic instruction on Saturdays, field trips, etc. The students participate for 7 years (from sixth – twelfth grade) and if the students are accepted to the host university during their senior year of high school, they are offered a 4.5 year scholarship to attend.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

*“It is harder to convince a young person that they “can learn” when they are cordoned off by a society that isn’t sure they really can. That is, I am afraid, one of the most destructive and long lasting messages a nation could possibly give its children.” (Kozol, 2005, p. 37)*

This chapter presents an overview of the literature that undergirds the work of college access programs. First, I review the definition of college access programs presented by Gullat and Jan (2003). Then, I discuss the theoretical framework that is used to guide this case study. After the theoretical framework, I present the panorama of urban communities, highlighting the perils that are typically documented when discussing these. This is followed by a summation of the emergence of college access programs and their evolution. Finally, this chapter highlights the literature that supports the work of college access programs and posits them as combatants of the perils of the urban community.

#### College Access Programs

##### Definition

Gullat and Jan (2003) define college access programs as “those programs operated by universities and colleges, federal or state agencies or non-profit organizations that target primarily individual students rather than classrooms or whole schools...[that] provide supplemental academic assistance and/or enrichment activities to primarily middle and high school students” (p. 3). These programs give students the pieces that are missing as part of the

curriculum offered at their home schools, and aim to provide students with all of the pieces that they need to succeed academically, and eventually gain access to college.

Gandara (2002) presented literature and statistics that indicate that minority students have historically lagged behind their white counterparts academically. Student enrollment to college has increased in the past 40 years; however, minority students continue to be underrepresented in that setting (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002; Engle, 2007).

### **Resilient Students**

The body of literature on the topic of students who successfully navigate the difficulties common present in urban communities and pursue higher education classify these individuals as “resilient.” Typically, these students are considered those who develop into “...well-adapted individuals” (Luthar, 1991, p. 600). McMillan and Reed (1994) further defined resilient individuals as those who, “despite severe hardships and the presence of at-risk factors, develop characteristics and coping skills that enable them to succeed in life” (p. 137). This is an important classification to understand, as the majority of the literature surrounding this topic uses this term as a reference to at-risk students. In fact, it is only through the use of this specific term that I was able to access literature on the topic. Terms such as, inner-city youth, at-risk students, etc., did not garner substantial information. Thus, the specific term, “resilient” serves as the categorical term for the students who emerge from impacted communities and flourish. Many of the students who take part in college access programs can be classified under the definition of “resilient” students; they are students who are challenging the odds and persisting in spite of the factors that would perhaps serve as limiting factors for others.

## **Theoretical Framework**

College access programs would not exist were it not for the systematic inequalities upon which our educational system is founded (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The college access model challenges the current system, which is essentially designed to reproduce failure among people of color (Crosby, 1999).

Looking at the work of college access programs through the lens of Funds of Knowledge theory will allow for a richer understanding of the objectives of these programs, why they exist, and the contribution that these make within an inherently racist society.

**Funds of knowledge theory.** Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) developed the funds of knowledge theory, which affirms that each individual carries with him/her a world of richness based on, “the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). This theory illustrates the idea that students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled, but rather, that they come into their educational settings with their own ways of knowing and seeing the world, and that if educators tap into those resources with which the students are already equipped, the educational outcomes would be much greater for those students.

College access programs take into account the backgrounds of the students they serve and honor them. Most college access models meet students where they are, and supplement the pieces that they need to help them along the college pathway (Tierney & Jun, 2001). Rather than take on a deficit perspective and assume that the students come to the program empty, these programs validate the students, offer them the tools that they need to achieve academic success, and further, engage families in activities designed to help support their children (Tierney & Jun,

2001). The family engagement component goes hand in hand with the funds of knowledge theory.

Zamudio, Russell, Rios and Bridgeman (2011) link the funds of knowledge theory with critical race theory. They indicate that particularly for educators, it is important to meet students where they are, and with what they bring with them to the classroom. A Latina female from a low socio-economic background, for instance, will enter the classroom with an identity that has been formed by her experiences not only as a racial minority, but also as a poor individual, and a woman. The authors write:

People of color pass down stories of conquest and exploitation to the younger generation. These stories of struggle, of resistance and resilience, whether they be of parental involvement in the Civil Rights Movement or immigration stories of grandparents crossing over for a better life, often identify oppressive structures, teach younger generations to name those structures, and provide students with the sense of self to oppose the micro-aggressions and the dominant ideology that attempts to reduce them into an essential identity. (p. 39)

Students, in turn, enter the classroom with a sense of self that has been formed by these experiences. This study will seek to learn from these experiences to lend to educators a perspective about how to best serve this community of learners.

### **The Plight of Urban Communities**

In a 2005 study, Eamon defined the risks that urban students commonly face, and must successfully avert if they are to make it to college, as, “being born to teenaged mothers, being reared by parents with limited English skills, and living in single-mother and large family households. Outside the home, attending low quality, segregated schools and residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods...” (p. 163). Because statistically, the students who serve as the focus of this research effectively avert these risks, it is essential that these conditions be

identified. Perhaps as a result of the heightened emphasis on the cycle of failure that permeates the inner city, an abundance of studies have been carried out to identify the factors that prevent students from achieving, but few have taken into account the thoughts and perspectives of the individual participants.

Literature about urban students suggests that there are factors that typically prevent these students from achieving their full potentials. These risks include impacted neighborhoods, unstable family conditions; and the lack of opportunities for involvement in their own communities.

**Impacted neighborhoods.** The neighborhood in which students grow up is an essential piece to analyze when looking at the factors that impact the academic success of students. Because the urban streets are commonly dangerous places for young people to live, it is important that they find outlets that keep them safe from these neighborhoods. A study conducted by Ginsburg, Alexander, Hunt, Sullivan, Zhao, and Cnaan, (2002) that sought to capture the perspectives of urban youth regarding their futures and how they are impacted by their communities, found that urban students who come out of crime ridden communities generally ask for support in the form of outreach programs, versus a heightened effort on changing the occurrences within the community. The study noted that "...researchers and policies must look beyond the reduction of risk. It must consider how to enhance the protective effects of education, jobs, and job training, connection to caring adults and community based programs that offer youth creative outlets" (p. 1142). Perhaps these findings indicate that because these students have grown up in turbulent communities, they view the violence and

negative neighborhood factors as commonplace, and/or may feel powerless against the perils that define their realities.

**Unstable / non-supportive family conditions.** Literature identifies a stressful or non-supportive family environment as one of the common issues that may keep urban students of color from succeeding (Davis & Paster, 2000). Urban students of color have typically been characterized as coming from broken families, which offer the students minimal support, insignificant investment in their education, and few positive educational role models within the home. Many parents in these communities are obligated to work all day, including during the after-school hours, which are the hours during which most adolescent crimes take place (Daud & Carruthers, 2008). Less-resilient students are typically the ones who become involved in high-risk activities, perhaps those students who cannot find supports to keep them away from the negative influences within their communities, and thus, whose attentions are focused away from school and toward risky behaviors. Further, Engle (2007) noted “first-generation college students tend to report receiving less encouragement and support from their parents to prepare for college than students whose parents have college degrees” (p. 30).

**Lack of opportunities for involvement.** As a result of the limited opportunities for involvement in positive activities that is typical of these communities, urban students struggle to find outlets to keep up their motivation, and enhance their desire to attend school. A study led by Ginsburg et al. (2002), mentioned that students in these neighborhoods seek, “opportunities to use their time positively...with recreation programs, community centers and after-school activities” (p. 1138) Additional research, unfortunately notes that though this is what students seek and need to achieve success, the students from impacted communities have minimal access



to activities that keep them engaged in positive ventures (Crosby, 1999). Crosby additionally noted that the programs that are often eliminated are the ones that “tend to be the very enrichment programs that children in urban areas need to make use of for their basic education” (p. 300).

### **The Emergence and Evolution of College Access Programs**

College access programs exist to counter the reality that poor, minority students are neglected, left behind and prey to the conditions prevalent in their underserved communities (Tierney, 2002).

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 gave way to the Upward Bound program, a federally funded outreach effort, which provides under-served high school students college preparation and opportunities for access. In 1965, Talent Search, another program to assist students from disadvantaged backgrounds who show academic promise, was born; and in 1968, Student Support Services, a program designed to help students complete college, came along. These came to be known as the TRIO programs; federally funded programs aimed at helping disadvantaged students achieve college matriculation. In addition to the aforementioned programs, the Educational Opportunity Centers, and the Training Program for Federal Trio Programs, the Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program and the Upward Bound Math / Science program also joined the cadre of offerings that compose TRIO (United States Department of Education, 2010). All of these programs have the shared objective of offering students with limited resources the opportunity for a college education (Tierney, 2002). To be eligible for these programs, students must meet certain financial criteria, typically falling below certain income requirements.

Private groups also saw the need for interventions targeted to poor students. Tierney (2002) cites the I Have a Dream (IHAD) Program as an early outreach program, which was founded in 1981. Tierney states that the IHAD program emerged as a result of a visit that the program's founder paid to the Harlem neighborhood in which he grew up. King promised 61 students that he would cover the costs of their college educations when the time came. This single act became the foundation for a program that went on to serve more than 13,000 students (Tierney, 2002).

The National College Access network ([www.collegeaccess.org](http://www.collegeaccess.org)) currently lists 2571 college access programs that exist in the United States. These programs vary in services, but have the unified goal of providing college access.

### **College Access Programs: In-School and Out-of-School Models**

Though college access programs take on many forms, the objectives are the same: to get students from typically underrepresented communities to college and perhaps alter the system that has for years kept these students and these communities at the margins. The backbone of these programs is the notion that every student can succeed, if given adequate opportunities. Nora (2002) argued that one specific model for college access programs does not exist, because there is not one model that can serve the need of different students from different communities.

According to Tierney & Hagedorn (2002), college access programs fall into two categories, in-school programs, and out-of-school programs. College access programs are further classified into academic or non-academic programs. Offerings in the academic category include classroom instruction, SAT preparation, tutoring, college information, math and science support, as well as reading and writing support. Non-academic offerings include, career guidance,

motivation seminars, opportunities for social skills development, study skills development, academic advisement, and cultural awareness (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). The program being studied in the current research falls under the “in school program” category, and includes offerings such as test preparation, extra-curricular opportunities, a family engagement component and an enhanced curriculum. Though not all of the program components of this particular college access program happen during school hours, each of the components aims to enhance the academic experience of the participants. In addition, this program classifies as an in-school program because the students participate in this program as part of their school day; the first two classes of the high school student’s day take place on the university campus, and are integral to the program’s model and vision.

### **College Access Programs: Types and Features**

As a result of the emphasis on the perils of urban communities confirmed in the literature (McLeod, 1995; Kozol, 2005) there is a heightened interest on the factors that limit the success of the students in the at-risk communities. College access programs target these limiting factors and attempt to support urban students despite the obstacles they face. These programs offer students opportunities that are not typically offered at their home schools. This section of the literature review identifies certain components that are shared core components of successful college programs. Overall, college access programs identify the voids in urban communities, and design and implement interventions that will address the needs of urban students. These, then, foster and encourage the development of resilience in the students who may not be resilient from the start.

**Common features of college access programs.** A study on the key practices of college access programs, commissioned by the Pathways to College Network (2003) identified 10 principles of practice for college access programs. The study suggests that these are the factors that lead to the success of college access programs. The factors are listed below:

1. High standards for program students and staff
2. Personalized attention for students
3. Adult role models
4. Peer support
5. K-12 / program integration
6. Strategically timed interventions
7. Long-term investment in students
8. School/society bridge for students
9. Scholarship assistance
10. Evaluation designs that contribute results to interventions (Gullat & Jan, 2003, p.11)

Though this case study used the five factors identified in the literature as the most effective in helping urban students achieve college matriculation, many of Gullat and Jan's (2003) categories also appeared in the participants' responses. However, it is important to note that the individuals who were the focus of this study were not presented with the features offered by Gullat and Jan (2003) so as to not influence their answers in the interviews and journaling exercises that were carried out.

### **Examples of College Access Programs: CAPS across the State**

College access programs aim to help students achieve academic success. This section will address examples of College Access programs in the Southern California area. I chose to focus on the Southern California area because this is the area of service of the NAI program. The Southern California College Access Network calls itself "an alliance of 37 nonprofit organizations working to promote a college going and completion in Southern California"

(socialcan.org). The members of this group illustrate the various offerings of these similarly oriented programs.

The “I Have a Dream” Foundation has a program that serves students in the Los Angeles community. Founded in 1981, this program begins working with students in elementary school and follows them through middle and high school. The program provides its participants, “academic support, social-emotional development, college preparation and campus visits, career preparation, and one-on-one mentoring” (www.ihadala.org). This program guarantees each of its participants a 4-year scholarship upon completion of the program and acceptance to college. The program’s website (www.ihadla.org) indicates that 83% of their students graduate high school on time and 66% of those go on to college.

Another college access program that serves students in Los Angeles is the “Motivating Our Students through Experience” program (MOSTE). MOSTE began in 1986 at a junior high school in south Los Angeles. This program pairs middle school girls with professional female mentors with the idea that will guide them and provide them support over the course of the middle and high school careers (www.moste.org). MOSTE offers its participants workshops and the opportunity to apply for academic scholarships for college.

The South Central Scholars is one more program whose mission is to guide students from South Los Angeles toward college matriculation. This program began in 2001, and since then, 288 of the participants have graduated (www.southcentralscholars.org). Via its outreach program, South Central Scholars serves students from 39 different schools across Los Angeles. This program’s offerings include in depth presentations about various colleges and universities,

mentorship opportunities, access to jobs and internships and scholarships once students are accepted to college ([www.southcentralscholars.org](http://www.southcentralscholars.org)).

Each of these three sample programs demonstrates that though their organizational models are completely different, the objectives are to make an impact on underserved populations by offering access to higher education ([socialcan.org](http://socialcan.org)).

### **Social and Cultural Capital Theories in College Access Programs**

The concept of social capital was defined by Bourdieu (1986) as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). Social capital refers to the networks and resources, which are necessary to achieve success. Students from privileged backgrounds, for instance, may understand the necessary steps to get to college, because this is something that is emphasized and expected in these communities. Because urban students are less likely to have access to this type of capital, it is essential to help them acquire it in an effort to help them matriculate to college. To counter the example of the affluent student with a access to networks, an urban student, by contrast, may have limited access to information about college, or preparing for it, might attend a school with limited access to the counselor, and thus might struggle when facing graduation from high school (Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, & Colyar, 2004; McClafferty, McDonough, & Nunez, 2002; McDonough, 1997, 2004).

Cultural capital builds on Bourdieu’s idea that capital comes in various forms. Cultural capital refers to the capital that privileged individuals have as a result of their experiences, which expose them to cultural activities. Bourdieu wrote:

By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what

it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture, which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture. (Bourdieu, 1977a, p. 494)

According to Bourdieu, the system is set up so that those who have access to cultural capital have a higher likelihood to go on to achieve success, because they understand how to navigate the system. Those without it are relegated to the lowest rungs of society.

### **Interventions of College Access Programs: Targeted Factors that Impact Success**

Information on the factors that contribute to the failure of urban students is abundant, as previously discussed. It is widely known that students from urban communities have many barriers placed before them in attempting to achieve success. This section will highlight some of the features of college access programs that literature (Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Eamon, 2005; Engle, 2007; Gandara, 2002; Hearn & Holdsworth, 2005; Horn & Chen, 1998; Kenny, Gallagher, Alvarez-Salvat, & Silsby, 2002; Martinez, DeGarmo, Eddy, 2004; Perna, 2002; Rodriguez & Conchas, 1999; Swail & Perna, 2002; Tierney & Jun, 2001; Tough, 2008) suggests help students overcome these barriers, and positively impact the motivation and ultimate academic achievement of urban students.

**Factor 1: Introducing cultural and social capital.** Bourdieu (1977a) presented the concept of cultural capital—the idea that

cultural knowledge, skills and abilities are possessed and often inherited by certain groups in society. Distinctive cultural knowledge is transmitted through the families of each social class. As a consequence, children of upper-class families inherit substantially different skills, abilities, manners, styles of cultural interaction, and facility with language. (Tierney & Jun, 2001)

This concept of cultural capital is one of the reasons why getting to college is such a difficult issue for urban students. These students generally lack the “how to” necessary to make it to college. College access programs offer participants the experiences that are likely absent within their homes. They familiarize students with the concepts that come as part of the upbringing of their more privileged peers. For example, students from more affluent backgrounds are more likely to have knowledge about the necessary requirements for college going, whereas many poor students may not be “college-familiar,” (Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002, p. 171). These programs make college-going tangible for their participants. Engle (2007) posits that the students targeted by these programs typically lack the “college knowledge” about the necessary steps to get to college. The programs combat the lack of capital and present to students the idea that attending college is attainable, and that a college education is not only for those who come from privilege (Tierney & Jun, 2001).

**Factor 2: Providing tools to navigate the urban environment: Counseling, engagement during out-of-school hours.** Studies conducted in the area of intervention strategies (including college access programs) indicated the need for strategies to allow students to process the realities of their neighborhoods and effectively navigate through the negative factors that surround them, without falling victim to those factors (Bemak, et. al, 2005). Bemak, et. al (2005), suggested that group counseling is an effective means by which to assist students in coping and decompressing. This specific study looked at the idea of “empowerment groups” as a support to the achievement of at-risk students. The ultimate finding with this type of intervention was that it allowed the participants to make positive strides in the school setting. Bemak, et. al, (2005), write that through the discussion of the detrimental factors within their



communities, the students were able to "...for the first time...examine the relevance and importance of school and the relationship of education to their future" (p. 14). Interventions such as these in college access programs are important in helping these students debrief and analyze the factors that can possibly inhibit their academic achievement, and thus help them identify positive alternatives to navigating their at risk setting.

Another piece within college access programs that supports and offers students who participate the opportunity to stay away from the negative factors found within urban communities is programming during out-of-school hours. Literature on the benefits of out-of-school programming cite that because care is provided during the crucial after-school hours, students remain engaged in activities that are typically within their interest; these programs are of great benefit to the participants (Hearn & Holdsworth, 2005; Tough, 2008). Daud and Carruthers (2008) caution that communities that do not cater to the need for engagement during the out-of-school hours find heightened crime, and higher incidences of youth engaging in risky behaviors. Because typical college access models take into account the out-of-school hours and keep students engaged in after school activities, these can ensure that students remain occupied in positive ventures, and away from the risks that may be present in their communities.

**Factor 3: Engaging families in student academic success.** A study conducted by Martinez, et al. (2004), sought to identify ways in which schools promote academic success among at-risk Latino students. In their study, they found that family plays an important role in the development of students' academic success. They identified that the Non-Latino parents who took part in the study displayed a greater "monitoring and supervision of their children" than the Latino parents (p. 141). Though the lack of involvement might not necessarily be representative

of disinterest in the education of these students, but instead might be indicative of the parents' marginalization within the system of education; it is still important to note that in Martinez et al.'s 2004 study, Latino parents demonstrated less supportive behaviors. This piece of information is key because college access programs are an important fit in targeting this issue. Martinez, et al. (2004), indicate that college access programs provide families a way in which to involve themselves in the education of their children. These programs offer family components which range from counseling, parenting classes, and field trip opportunities to enhance cultural capital, that are designed to fortify the family structure and ensure that students are being supported in the home as they travel along their educational journeys (Hearn & Holdsworth, 2005).

Eamon (2005) offered a clearer link between family life and the academic success of resilient students. Eamon (2005) wrote that academic involvement on the part of the parents (academic materials in the home, discussion linked to the school day and overall "cognitively stimulating home environments" [p. 171]), resulted in improved grades in the classroom and higher test scores, specifically in the areas of literacy and mathematics. The author went on to suggest that interventions to provide support to Latino parents, specifically, those with limited experience in supporting their students, are a successful strategy to help engage these parents in the academic accomplishments of their students.

Another study by Horn and Chen (1998) found that parent involvement in a student's education contributed to graduation rates. The study concluded that parent involvement in a child's education, even in the most minimal sense, yields benefits for the child. They indicated that a "student's odds of enrolling in school were increased about two-fold even among those whose parents reported having only 'some school-related discussions' (versus none) and among

those whose parents reported relatively modest educational expectations for their child” (p. 25). College access programs aim to help families learn how to become engaged in the student’s educational experience, with the understanding that doing so will only strengthen the chances of a student making it to college.

The literature makes it clear why this aspect of college access programs is so critical. In an exploration into the sources of support for inner-city students, Kenny et al. (2002), found that the students within their study who were the most successful, academically, were those who, “reported high levels of family support, low levels of family conflict, and strong support for educational attainment” (p. 175). This study, like Eamon’s (2005) was conducted through interviews and observations, and though not generalizable, the information found was important in supporting the identified factors for student success. The study was carried out using high achieving urban students and all of the study participants were involved in a mentoring program designed to get the urban students to matriculate to college. Though the specific program profiled in the study was not a college access program, it contained features that are commonly found in these.

**Factor 4: Setting high academic expectations.** The only explanation that exists for the achievement gap between white and urban students is the reality that urban schools generally offer students less in the way of academic preparation (Noguera & Akom, 2000). Singham (2005) asserted that low expectations coupled with ineffective teaching strategies are to blame for the achievement gap. College access programs work with the understanding that they are serving capable students who have been exposed to less as a result of where they have been educated. It is a safe assumption that one of the reasons why college access programs can boast

high graduation rates and comparable college matriculation rates is that these programs are academically rigorous. They set high standards for the students, and challenge them, but also guide them toward reaching those high standards. Singham (2005) posited that to make a difference in the achievement gap, urban educators must strive to create “expert learners” (p. 107). These learners are defined as, “people who are able to approach new situations flexibly, are able to learn throughout their lifetimes, and are skilled at acquiring new knowledge quickly and efficiently” (p. 108). Based on the research on college access programs that points to high standards, these programs attempt to produce “expert learners” that will get to college, and excel once there (Tierney, 2002).

Research on College Access Programs indicated that these programs offer their students the academic components which are typically absent from urban education (Gandara, 2002). Perna (2002) also indicated that a key feature of these programs is that they require that their participants take the most rigorous coursework. These programs typically have an administrative team that assists with the college-counseling piece, ensuring that students take the necessary classes and that they are on the college track (Tierney, 2002).

**Factor 5: Developing self-concept.** In a discussion about the factors that contribute to the success of students in the inner-city, self-concept is key. Research suggested that students with a favorable concept of self are those that fare better academically (Rodriguez & Conchas, 1999). Rodriguez and Conchas discussed a program targeted to keep middle school students engaged and on track to college, and they cited improved confidence and concept of self as objectives along the pathway. Various studies, such as the one conducted by Necessary and Parish (1994), sought to determine the efficacy of intervention programs designed specifically to

enhance the students' self-perceptions. They piloted a program for inner-city students that focused on enhancing self-esteem through an audio-visual series that focused on one specific principle of self-esteem each day. The students who participated in this program showed improved self-esteem at the program's conclusion, and a follow-up study showed that the students maintained this improved self-esteem over the course of the year. College access programs can similarly impact the self-concept of their participants. By exposing the students to positive imagery and presenting college as something that is within their reach, they can positively impact the sense of self of the participants. Herbert's (1996) case study on young resilient, high-achieving Latino males further identifies the link between positive self-concept and academic achievement. In describing Lucio, one of the high-achieving young men from the inner-city who was profiled in his study, Herbert writes that his resilience was, "strongly connected to his strong belief in self" (p. 9). Lucio went on to achieve academic success in spite of the perceived obstacles that stood in his way as potential challenges to his success.

According to Swail and Perna (2002), college access programs, or "pre-college outreach programs," as they are referred to in the study, offer students various opportunities to build and develop self-esteem; and many of these programs also cite building self-concept as a program objective. This goal is achieved through components, which are typically found within college access programs—opportunities to work with mentors, as well as role-modeling healthy behaviors. A particularly important piece in what college access programs do for the self-concept of its participants is that, the idea of attending college is not an intangible concept. Students are encouraged to think in terms of what they are capable of achieving, versus the traditional deficit mentality that they experience in society.

## **Conclusion**

Literature identified that supplemental programs in impacted neighborhoods, a strong family support system (or one that mimics the family support system through positive relationships with adults), heightened access to academic programs, and the development of a solid self-concept, as the necessary foundations that allow students to successfully make it through school, and ultimately, through life.

This literature review began with a definition of college access programs and introduced the framework for this study, funds of knowledge theory. A discussion about the challenges that are typically present in urban communities followed. Subsequent to this a brief history of college access programs, and described common features of these were explored. Finally, an outline of five factors that are common in college access programs was introduced.

Though many urban neighborhoods do not offer interventions to encourage the development of these features, college access programs for urban youth do take these features into account, and design their programs around these. This is the reason for this dissertation. I will explore the extent to which these factors prove effective in positively impacting the education of urban students.

Before any substantial change within our system of education occurs, researchers must devote more time to identifying the pieces that will help our students achieve. The traditional deficit view of these communities must be transformed into an asset-based one. Once that frame of mind is transformed, we can begin to identify ways to better serve the students who attend schools in under-served communities. Research in the area of specific programs that play an

important role in the academic success of urban students is necessary in order to effect change, and supplement the voids that currently exist.

There are thousands of inner-city success stories. Unfortunately, very few of those are recognized; instead the stories violence and failure abound. This can explain why the literature on the topic of high-achievement in the inner city is sparse. We know that college access programs offer their participants an opportunity to achieve academic success, but as a community of educators we need to know from the perspectives of the participants the specific features that are the most beneficial, so that we can use this information to create supports that impact larger communities of under-served students, not just the select few who gain access into these programs.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

In this chapter, I discuss the logistical aspects of the case study. First, I present the research questions that drive the study, and then I will follow with a rationale for qualitative research, followed by the specifics of case study research. I will then discuss how the participants of the study were selected. Following, I will talk about the data collection methods that were employed in this case study, which will lead into a discussion of how data was managed and presented in the study, as well as the timeline for this research. Finally, this section will offer an overview of the program population sample.

#### **Research Questions**

1. Which practices of a south Los Angeles college access program most impact a student's ability to matriculate to college?
2. How can the epistemology of urban students inform the work of college access programs?

Answering these questions will allow educators to understand how to better serve students from urban and underrepresented communities, whether involved in college access programs or not because they will shed light on the academic experiences of urban learners of color.

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is an ideal methodology for investigating the factors of an effective college access program. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), qualitative research is distinguished by five characteristics. Qualitative research is naturalistic, where the researcher enters a setting and can provide an insider's view and as a result provides descriptive data: data comes alive. And Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest that "the qualitative research approach



demands that the world be examined with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied” (p. 5). This is important in a study about a college access program because each piece of information that is presented by the participants will help create a picture of the most beneficial aspects of the program. The idea that “nothing is trivial” is intrinsically linked to the funds of knowledge framework (Moll et al., 1992); this study will provide a forum for the voice and perspective of the traditionally silenced, and present it as something valuable that will inform and educate our system of education. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) also assert that qualitative research is concerned with process—qualitative researchers look closely at the process that leads to a final outcome, that it is inductive—qualitative researchers look at studies from within, and pay close attention to meaning—qualitative researchers are focused on how individuals understand their own lives or “participant perspectives” (p. 7). This qualitative study will account for each of these characteristics, seeking to provide a vivid account of the experiences of the participants, paying attention to the process of data collection, and seeking to present a holistic understanding of urban students who participate in college access programs. Further, Geertz (1973) posits that qualitative research allows for thick descriptions, which privileges the voice of the participant—something important for a study that is concerned with the perspectives of its participants. The voice of the participants is indeed privileged in this study for it should be respected as something that can inform the work of the college access community.

Because qualitative research is a comprehensive methodology, it was an adequate match to answer the research questions posed in this research study. This type of research allowed the study to take on a great depth and learn from the experiences of the participants. While other

studies exist that look at these types of programs, they do not look directly at what the participants perceive to be the specific components that contributed to the academic success of the participants, as told directly by the participants themselves. In addition, Merriam (1988) suggests case studies are appropriate when the researcher seeks to grasp the specifics and nuances of a program in order to eventually make improvements, as is the case with this study.

### **Case Study Method**

Case studies provide a well-rounded view of the studied phenomena. Yin (2009) posits that “case studies are preferred in examining contemporary events” particularly because of their “unique strength [in their] ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interview, and observations” (p. 11). In studying the features of a college access program, the case study method is particularly effective, as it will allow for a comprehensive view of the facets that make this program unique, and will offer a picture of how these facets contribute to the education of its participants. This study will take into account that “full variety of evidence” presented by Yin (2009). Thus, to understand the program in its entirety, this study will utilize interviews, observations, document review, and a journaling exercise that will be carried out by the participants. The analysis of the data will present a picture of the program, its purpose and ways of carrying out its mission.

Yin (2009) defines the case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context...” (p. 18). The contemporary phenomenon being studied in this case study is the shared experience of students who would be ignored by their schools if not for these programs.

## Setting

The USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative is only one of thousands of similar programs across the nation. Many of these programs can be found at colleges and universities, predominantly those located in or near an urban setting, as outreach efforts on the part of the host institution. The USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI), however, is a program worth studying because when researching other programs of its type, I found that NAI is a comprehensive program that is concerned with every aspect of its participants' academic experience. Some college access programs only operate during the afterschool hours, while others only offer weekend components. The students who take part in NAI are involved in program activities every day, Monday through Saturday. Additionally, parents / guardians are also required to participate in Saturday activities. Thus, the NAI program is not merely an extension of the school day; but rather, completely integrates itself into the academic program of its participants. The comprehensive model of the USC NAI makes this program a valuable site for research to gain an understanding of the components of such programs that participants consider the most effective in helping achieve academic success and college matriculation. The most recent (2012) graduation statistics of the program indicate that since its first graduating class in 1997, 690 students have completed the program with a 100% graduation rate and a 98% rate of college matriculation. According to program data, since 1997, 81% of the graduates have enrolled at 4-year colleges / universities, 14% have enrolled at community college, and 1% have gone on to vocational school (Neighborhood Academic Initiative, 2012). The mission statement of USC NAI, developed collaboratively between the university and NAI administrators states the following:

As a university conceived, nonprofit, pre-college enrichment program serving at-risk, underrepresented minority students in the South Los Angeles neighborhoods surrounding the USC campus, our mission is as follows:

1. To increase the enrollment and graduation rate of low socio-economic neighborhood, and underrepresented students to the University of Southern California.
2. To serve as a model for a 6-year pre-college enrichment program
3. To practice research-based outreach strategies in order to retain the goals of:
  - A rigorous academic curriculum
  - High quality teaching
  - Intensive academic and college-going support
  - Parent/Community connections regarding college-going academics
  - Establishing “College-Going” as the norm

NAI’s headquarters are located in a small office located at a shopping complex owned by USC, across the street from the university’s main campus, located just south of Downtown Los Angeles. Monday through Friday mornings, students walk to or are dropped off at the university campus to take their math and English classes from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. Once classes are dismissed, the students are picked up by school buses, to be shuttled back to the home school. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, students can participate in afterschool tutoring. This takes place from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. and is held at a computer lab located at the university-owned shopping center where the main office is located. For 21 Saturdays per semester the students attend Saturday Academy, which takes place entirely on the university campus, from 8:00 a.m. to 2:10 p.m. Parents attend Family Development Institute (FDI) meetings, put on by NAI, for 16 Saturdays per academic year. These meetings also take place on the university campus and are held from 8:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

The math and English classes, which are taught on the university campus on Monday through Friday, follow the academic standards set forth by the Los Angeles Unified School District. The teachers, after all, are teachers at the home school of the students—they teach what

they would teach at the home school, the only thing that changes is the setting. The Saturday Academy curriculum was written by a curriculum writer hired by the program's executive director and employs a scaffolded model that helps students begin preparing for the SAT from the sixth grade. The Saturday Academy math curriculum is linked to what the students cover in class on Monday through Friday, and the additional time-on-task during the added instructional day, gives students the opportunity to review and strengthen concepts. The FDI meetings are intended to help parents learn the best strategies to support their college-bound children. The workshop series is planned by NAIs project coordinator in collaboration with the executive director and the parent leadership board. Topics such as financial literacy, stress management, financial aid, leaving the home for college, among others, have been discussed in FDI meetings.

### **Population Sample**

The program currently serves 641 students in grades 7 through 12. The students served are 83% Latino and 15% African American (1% Asian; 1% Native American). The students represent two schools—one middle school and one high school—all within a 5-mile radius of the university. The students are selected to participate in the program via an application process. To be accepted to participate in the middle school program, the participating schools refer potential participants to the program, and each interested participant is required to complete an application packet, which includes the most recent report card, teacher recommendation and an essay. The students with the highest grade point average are not necessarily the students who are selected to take part in the program. Rather, students are chosen based on interest and demonstrated effort. Because space in the high school program is more limited than the middle school, students must reapply for the high school program when they are in the eighth grade. The

application process is similar to the middle school application process only that for the high school program, Saturday Academy performance is also taken into account.

The NAI program is led by an executive director, an assistant director, a project specialist and a Curriculum and Instruction Specialist. A team of schoolteachers who are employed by the Los Angeles Unified School District, but who also receive monthly stipends from the Neighborhood Academic Initiative teach the students of NAI their math and English classes on the university campus, Monday through Friday. These teachers, who are employed by the Los Angeles Unified School District, travel to the university campus and back to their home schools on a daily basis. Twenty-five mentors and afterschool tutors are also employed by NAI to help guide the students on their path to college. These tutors help lead the Saturday Academy program, serve as teacher's assistants Monday through Friday, and also facilitate the after school tutoring program.

This study will look at the inner workings of the program as well as the perspectives of the participants to present a clear picture of how the program operates and all of the various pieces that compose the program as a whole to see how these correlate to the ultimate outcomes of the program, and what the participants perceive to be the most beneficial pieces.

### **The Program and Its Components**

The college access program that is at the center of this study offers its participants a wide array of opportunities to engage in activities that will enrich their academic experiences. The following table (Table 3) describes the various components offered by the program.

Table 3

*NAI Program Components*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Days Offered</b>	<b>Times Offered</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Regular math and English classes	University campus	Mon-Fri	8:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.	All NAI high school students
After-school tutoring	University-owned shopping center	Tues, Wed, Thurs	3:30 p.m.-5:30 p.m.	Open to all high school NAI students. Mandatory for all students on academic probation.
Saturday Academy	University campus	21 Saturdays per year	8:00 a.m.-1:15 p.m.	Mandatory for all NAI students (7 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade)
Academic Success Team	University campus	21 Saturdays per year	1:15 p.m.-2:15 p.m.	Mandatory for all NAI students who are on academic probation
NAI Theater Workshop	University-owned shopping center and university campus	Calendar varies	Times vary per semester	Open to all NAI high school students
Summer Intersession	University campus	Summer	Times vary by class	Mandatory for all NAI high school students. Enrichment classes open to all students; academic classes open to students who received a grade of "C" or below in an academic class

**Study Participants**

A total of six individuals participated in this study. Three of these individuals were current high school seniors who had been participants in the NAI program since middle school. The other three participants were adults who have earned their bachelor’s degrees who participated in the NAI program, also from the seventh grade on, and who graduated high school as participants in the program. Six participants were selected because I sought to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of the participants. I wanted to spend enough time interviewing these individuals and analyzing their responses, and six was a manageable number. As I became more deeply immersed in the study and I realized that interviewing a few more participants would yield a better-rounded study. To this end, I conducted short interviews with four more

individuals. These individuals were referred to me by program staff for their experiences as students in the program.

### **Student Participants**

Selecting the student participants required assistance from program staff. I asked the twelfth grade teachers to identify seniors who they thought would be interested in participating in the program. The only requirement of these students was that they be willing to take part in the interview process, which consisted of three separate interviews, and that they engage in the journaling exercises comprised of six prompts. Once identified, I approached each of the students individually and explained the requirements of their participation and because most of them were minors, had them sign an assent form, and have the parents sign a consent form. These forms outlined the purpose of the study along with the requirements and expectations of participation. The student participants also received a \$20 gift certificate to a department store as a way of thanking them for the time they offered to the study.

All three of the senior participants have been involved with the NAI program since middle school, and though the students have diverse interests and are definitely different from one another, it is interesting to note that their experiences within the program are very similar. Their experiences are marked by the same components which each indicated to have guided their individual journeys to college. Another important note is that as opposed to the adult participants of the study, each of the senior participants is headed to a different college. Each of the adult participants chose to attend the host university of the NAI program upon graduation, the University of Southern California.



**Alex, 18.** Alex is an 18-year-old male, born and raised in Los Angeles. He attends West High School. His mother was a homemaker until Alex turned 12 and then she went to school to become a certified nurse's assistant. Alex's father worked full time to support the family. Alex remembers joining the NAI program in the seventh grade, not because his teacher nominated him, but rather because he requested his own nomination. In describing himself as a student when he entered the NAI program, Alex says that he was an "average student." In fact, Alex remembers the D he received on his sixth grade report card. Alex is a model student, who served as his class's valedictorian. Further, he recently received notice that he was a recipient of the Gates Millennium Scholarship for 2012, which grants only 1,000 scholarships nationwide to exceptional minority students.

**Robert, 18.** Robert and his twin brother are both seniors in the USC Neighborhood Academic initiative. Robert's father is a construction worker and her mother is a childcare worker. Robert and his twin brother attend South High school. In the fall, Robert will attend an Ivy League university. Robert has been a NAI scholar since the seventh grade, when his mother enrolled him and his brother. Like Alex, Robert will serve as this year's valedictorian for his school's graduating class. Robert is very involved in his school and within NAI. In addition to being a scholar in the NAI program, Robert serves as student body president, is part of the debate team, and participates in the USC NAI Theater Workshop.

**Marissa, 18.** Marissa attends West High School. Like Robert and Alex, Marissa has been a part of the NAI program since middle school. Marissa grew up in South Los Angeles. Marissa did not want to attend West school for middle school. She wanted to go to a "better" school, and she applied to another school, but did not get in. She says that the only reason she was amenable

to attending West High as because she had been accepted into the NAI program, and she had heard good things about what the program offered. Marissa says that though she always valued school, she went through a brief rebellious period in early high school and her grades began to drop. Soon she befriended some upperclassmen from the NAI program that guided her and helped her improve her academic performance. Marissa is involved in her school's band, debate team and the NAI theater workshop. In the fall of 2012, Marissa will attend a private university in the Midwest.

### **Alumnae Participants**

The adult participants were sought out using the NAI Alumni Network, as well as social media. With the approval of the executive director, a message went out on the program's social media page asking for potential participants. The office's systems coordinator posted the message, and I was listed as the contact person. Once I began to receive messages from potential participants, I offered them a summary of the proposed study. I explained to them the requirements of their participation, which was limited to three 1-on-1 interviews. Adult participants were selected based on their interest in the project, and based on how long they participated in the program. I specifically sought out participants who had been with the program from middle through high school. Individuals who responded who did not meet the criteria for the study, received an email response expressing thanks for their interest, but clarifying that only individuals who participated from middle school on would be used for this study. I chose to focus solely on students who participated from middle school on because their complete experience with the program would lend a longitudinal perspective on the program and its various components.

Studying the current participants of the program shed light on the specific and current pieces of the program that the students thought were impactful to their academic success. Because these participants were active in the program, they were able to provide an insider's perspective of the specific practices that they felt were beneficial to the students. This emic perspective is one of the features that makes the case study methodology so unique. The researcher is allowed a full view of what happens within the program in an effort to fully understand the phenomenon that is happening within. What follows is a description of each of the adult participants of the study. Appendix A presents the site letter granting me permission to conduct research at NAI.

**Michelle, 27.** Michelle is a 27-year-old social worker who currently works for the city's department of mental health. She received her bachelor's degree in psychology and her master's degree from a prestigious university's school of social work. She attended West High School, and graduated in 2003. She joined NAI in the seventh grade and successfully completed the NAI program. After high school, Michelle went on to USC with the full 4-year scholarship that was awarded to her by the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative. Michelle has remained involved in the USC NAI program, and aside from her full-time job, she currently oversees the social work interns who work with the NAI students and their families on Saturdays.

**Marcos, 26.** Marcos is a software developer for a Los Angeles-based company. He graduated from NAI in 2004 and from USC in 2008. Like Michelle, he was a NAI scholar from middle school and upon high school graduation he too attended USC with the USC scholarship that NAI awarded him. He learned about NAI through other family members who had had participated. His mother enrolled him on the counsel of her sister. Marcos reflectively shared that

his experience in NAI was unparalleled and he feels that his participation in this program helped him get where he is today. Marcos studied computer engineering at USC. Currently, Marcos works full-time and is indecisive about whether he is going to pursue graduate school.

**Byron, 22.** Byron has dreams of becoming a politician and returning to his community to make a difference. He received his bachelor's degree in public policy and planning in 2011, also from USC, where he attended with the scholarship awarded to him after successfully completing the NAI program. He recently ran for district delegate. He was part of the first cohort of students from Myers middle school to take part in NAI. As a high school student, Byron was very active in his school and community and continues to work toward improving the conditions of the local community residents.

### **Additional Participants**

**Lola, 22.** Lola is in her senior year of college at USC. She is a graduate of the NAI program and was accepted to USC her senior year of high school. She took a leave of absence from college for one year.

**Sofia, 20.** This study was carried out during Sofia's junior year of college. She was accepted to USC her senior year of college and received the financial aid package offered to her by the NAI program.

**Elizabeth, 24.** Elizabeth graduated from USC in 2010, and completed the NAI program in 2006. She is a graduate of NAI and went to USC with the scholarship provided by the NAI program. She is considering applying for gradate school.

**Ms. Garcia.** Ms. Garcia is a parent of the NAI program. She has two daughters who are graduates of the NAI program and are currently engineering students at USC. Ms. Garcia was

active on the NAI parent leadership board since her daughters were high school students, and has remained active since their graduation. She has volunteered for the program in many capacities, and recently began a part-time position within the organization as an office assistant.

**Ms. Flores.** Ms. Flores has been the NAI program's project specialist for 12 years. She is a dedicated member of the staff and is respected and cared for by the students and parents, alike. She has an extensive knowledge of the organization and is the person most often sought for advice regarding program logistics.

**Ms. Blanco.** Ms. Blanco has been the executive director of the NAI program since 2002. She has been an educator for over 30 years, having been a science teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District. She is well respected in the community and is regarded as an important figure in urban education. In her tenure, she has helped the NAI program maintain a 100% high school graduation rate and a 100% college matriculation rate.

### **Data Collection Sites**

The participants of the study were interviewed individually. These interviews took place at locations that were most convenient to the participants. For the high school students, interviews took place at the NAI main office. The interviews with the adult participants also took place at the program headquarters, located at the university owned shopping complex.

Observations of the program, its different components, and the participants as they engage in program activities, only occurred within the program's natural settings; that is, only on the university premises. (This includes the shopping center located across the street from the university, where the program offices are located, and where the after school tutoring program is housed.)

Because the core NAI activities take part at the university campus, data were only collected there and not at the participants' home schools. The table presented in Appendix B (detailed interview profile) describes the interviews conducted for the study.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The data that were collected for this study provided the knowledge about the factors that contribute to the success of the college access program being studied. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), "data are the particulars that form the basis of analysis" (p. 117). In order to have a qualitative study that is comprehensive it is essential to look at the data with integrity and respect. To maintain the integrity of the program and the individuals being studied, data were triangulated and gathered through observations, interviews, a journaling activity, and a survey.

#### **Observation**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007), indicate that there are several forms and types of observation. For this study, the participants who are currently in the program were observed as they engage in activities related to the program. These observations took place at the university campus, where students meet for their math and English courses every weekday morning, and on Saturdays for Saturday Academy, another flagship component of the program, which also takes place on the university campus.

In observing the program and the students in their setting, I conducted participant-observations. Yin (2009) indicates that this type of observation engages the researcher in more than simply paying attention to what is taking place. Rather, in participant-observations, the researcher "may actually participate in the events being studied" (p. 111). Because I am an employee of the program, I am an active participant in the program's daily operations. For

example, I coordinate the Saturday Academy program, I oversee the academic pieces of the program and I visit the students' classrooms daily. Yin (2009) cautions that some of the cons of participant-observation have to do with biases. I sought to combat this type of bias by taking clear field-notes that described what I was observing without including my own feelings or emotional reactions to what was observed. He indicates that the researcher may fall into a phenomenon that typically occurs in this type of observation, and that is that the researcher becomes a supporter of the project being studied. To avoid this, I utilized the observation protocol chart presented in Appendix C to help me keep accurate and clear observation notes. Finally, another issue that Yin (2009) cautions the researcher about is that it may prove difficult to separate oneself from the role of researcher and worker within the environment. Though these are potential detriments to the study, the potential for a rich study exists, nonetheless, in that the researcher as participant-observer can help render a true emic perspective of the group that will be studied. I carried out observations over the span of three weeks. During this time, I was able to observe the various components of the program, including Saturday activities and parent meetings. I observed for a total of 25 hours, which was sufficient time to observe every aspect of the program. I observed the students in the various settings of the program, during the morning and afternoon hours during which program activities take place. I paid special attention to the various enrichment opportunities and out of school activities that are offered by the program and the opportunities that the parents have for involvement in the different components of the program. All of the observations of the program took place on the university campus or on university-owned property, all locations where the program takes place.

The adult participants of the program were not observed because they have already been

through the program, and what they shared with me came from memory. For these participants, the interview process will yield richer data. At this point in the adult participants' experience, a relevant forum for observation is not present.

### **Interviews**

The six participants of the study took part in three semi-structured interviews each to discuss their involvement / experience in the program. Semi-structured interviews call for a line of questioning to be prepared in advance, and following those questions, but also leading the interviews in conversational form, so that follow-up questions arise from the responses provided by interviewee. Further, interviews give participants a forum to discuss a topic in depth, and for the researcher, it lends the opportunity to discuss the topic from various angles, and receive opinions from various perspectives. Yin (2009) posits, "Interviews are an essential form of case study evidence" (p.108).

Interview questions revolved around the participant's academic experience, their neighborhoods, and the pieces of the program they found helpful along their academic journeys. In qualitative studies, questions emerge as data are being gathered. Interview questions are listed in Appendix D.

### **Journaling**

The students who are currently participants in the college access program engaged in a journaling activity designed to help them process what their participation in the program has meant to them, as well as what they feel the program has done to shape their views and perspectives on college access. The journaling exercise served as an artifact and serve as another tool to help find themes and identify patterns across the participants' experiences to find what



most commonly appears as the features that impacted their success.

Over the course of three weeks, the student participant engaged in journaling exercises that helped them process their experiences in the program, as well as revealed details of their participation that may have been omitted during the interview process. A detailed explanation of the journaling exercises can be found in Appendix E.

### **Senior Survey**

The senior class of 2012 was surveyed as part of this study. The data collected from this survey were part of the triangulation and analysis to identify which of the supports that NAI offers to its students most contributed to their own success along the college pathway. Forty-six out of the 54 seniors took part in the survey. The eight seniors who did not participate were either absent from school on the day the survey was administered, or taking part in senior activities, as the survey was administered late in the school year. The survey was pre-printed for the students. Prior to the administration of the survey, the students were all given consent forms to be signed by their parents/guardians granting them permission to participate, and explaining the survey. All of the seniors submitted the signed form, though eight were not present on the day the survey was administered.

The survey was designed with the lens of the five factors I identified as the most important features of college access in mind. Each of the questions posed in the survey corresponds to one or two of the factors. The survey was designed in this way so that during the data analysis I could identify whether the student participants corroborated the five factors that literature deems to be the most prevalent and significant in the work of college access programs.

Appendix F presents a table that lists each survey question and the factor(s) to which it corresponds.

After the survey was distributed to the students, the seniors were read instructions that asked them to reflect on their experience throughout their participation in the program and then identify whether they *strongly disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, *somewhat agree*, and *strongly agree*, with the statements presented in the survey.

## **Data Management**

### **Data Preparation**

To prepare data for analysis, every interview and focus group was audio recorded, with the participants' permission. Once all of the data were collected, these audio recordings were transcribed. I handled the transcription of all of the interviews and then coded the material for analysis. The journaling exercises that were completed by the seniors were also coded and analyzed. Coding allows for the researcher to identify emergent patterns (Hatch, 2002). The patterns that emerged will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5. Surveys were coded as well, and analyzed through the lens of the five factors identified in the literatures as being the most beneficial for participants of college access programs. Observation notes were also coded for analysis.

### **Data Manipulation**

Once the data were gathered, interviews were transcribed and analyzed through an inductive process. Hatch (2002) defines inductive analysis as “a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made” (p.161). Potter (1996) further describes inductive analysis as a process that looks “...for patterns across

individual observations, then arguing for those patterns as having the status of general explanatory statements” (p.151). My research sought to study the program from the inside out. The features of the program were observed and triangulated with participant interviews and a journaling exercise, as well as a document review. The process of inductive analysis helped me to identify patterns that emerged from the various interviews and reach specific conclusions. Field notes were also part of the transcription and analysis process.

Threats to internal validity were combatted via a) triangulation of data; b) a member check, where each participant read transcriptions to ensure that their words or messages were not altered in the transcription process; by c) identifying and confronting the researcher bias; and d) peer debrief.

### **Coding**

Once data were collected and interviews were transcribed, I analyzed the data and looked for patterns or commonalities in the responses of the participants. Below are the factors that I used for coding the data. These are also the factors that are identified in the literature review as contributing to the academic success of urban students:

- Cultural / Social Capital
- Counseling and engagement during out-of-school hours
- Engaging families
- High academic expectations
- Self-concept

These factors were compiled from seminal literature on the work of college access programs, including Tierney and Jun (2001), Tierney and Hagedorn (2002), and Gullat and Jan (2003). It is also important to note that because I carried out qualitative inductive analysis, other themes emerged as the data were explored. These were also coded.

## **Internal Validity**

Internal validity refers to the idea that a study is valid is important in studies that look at causal relationships (Yin, 2009); that is, in cases where “an investigator is trying to explain how and why event  $x$  led to event  $y$ ” (p. 42). Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009) state that internal validity looks at the “threats or rival explanations that influence the outcomes of a study” (p. 242). In this particular study, we aim to identify the features of the program that contributed to the participants’ academic success, from the perspective of the participants, and no causal method was employed. Still, a potential threat to internal validity has to do with the impossibility of knowing whether the pieces identified by the participants as the factors they feel made the largest impact on their education, indeed contributed to their academic success, or whether it was simply perceived that way by them.

## **Timeline for data collection**

The writing process for this dissertation began in the fall of 2010, when I began working with my dissertation chair. After much research and planning, I completed my dissertation proposal, which I successfully defended in December of 2011. I applied for approval from the Internal Review Board (IRB) in January 2012. The data collection for this study spanned from January 2012, after IRB approval was granted, to May of 2012, the end of the students’ spring semester. Transcription took place between May and July of 2012. The analysis of the data took place over July, August and September of 2012. Chapters 4 and 5 were drafted in the fall of 2012, and were finalized for defense in spring of 2013. I defended this dissertation on April 17, 2013. Appendix G presents the data collection profile for this study.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The aim of this study was to identify the factors within a comprehensive and highly successful college access program that most significantly contribute to the college matriculation of its participants. This study sought to utilize the voice and experience of students of color to discern these factors and inform the future work of the college access community. The following research questions drove this study:

1. Which practices of a south Los Angeles college access program most impact a student's ability to matriculate to college?
2. How can the epistemology of urban students inform the work of college access programs?

This study focused on the structures within a university sponsored college access program to determine which elements best served the program's goal of having students matriculate to college. This study's design included observations and journaling exercises, a review of documents and interviews with a number of program stakeholders. Various individuals took part in this study, but in-depth interviews were carried out with total of six people—past and present students of the NAI program who were sought out to provide a first-hand account of the specific practices of the program. Three of the six individuals were high school seniors during the year that this study took place, and the other three participants are adult graduates of the programs. The individuals selected for this study were chosen because as current and former members of this group, they can provide an emic perspective of what the program offers and how its internal operations may provide structures for success. Understanding their experiences

in the program is essential as these help to identify the program components that are strongest and most beneficial as well as those that need to be strengthened in an effort to make a positive impact in the lives of current and future students as well as in the continued work of these programs.

This chapter will first present the data reviewed from the program documents that were reviewed. Among them are the program's mission statement, the agreement between the school district and the local schools, parent/student contracts, graduation and college matriculation data, the parent pledge that is recited at parent meetings, and the "Scholars' Code of Ethics," which are the tenets of character and behavior that outline how an NAI scholar should behave. Documents were selected for review because they reveal the core of the program – its values and beliefs.

After discussing the documents reviewed for this study, I will begin answering the research questions at the center of this study. To answer the research questions, I will use the data collected from the document review, interviews, observations and journaling exercises.

The data collected from this research are presented through the lens of funds of knowledge theory (Moll et al., 1992), as discussed in the literature review, the theory that most strongly resonates with the work of these programs, and the epistemological frame of reference for this research.

### **Document Review**

A review of the program documents is foundational to this study. The documents surrounding NAI shed light on the program's objectives, and set the blueprint for how the

program aims to serve its students. Thus, before I begin sharing data from observations and interviews it is important to report on the documents that I reviewed as part of this research.

Over the course of the program's history, the program has developed a number of materials and collected various documents that upon analysis help to tell the story of the program and its evolution – these materials are essential in telling the story of NAI. Some of the documents that were reviewed for this study are described in detail below, and will be further discussed in the findings section of this chapter.

### **NAI Graduate Survey, 1997-2012**

The Neighborhood Academic Initiative Graduate Survey for 1997-2012 cites that since its first graduating class in 1997, over 600 students have graduated high school and 99% of them have gone to college. These are significant data, particularly as compared to a report from the US Department of Education which cites that for the 2010-2011 school year, Los Angeles County had a graduation rate of 67% (California Department of Education, 2012), for socioeconomically disadvantaged students. These data are for the same county and same demographics served by the NAI program. NAI's demographics are comprised of predominantly African American and Latino students from a low-socioeconomic background.

The table that appears in Appendix H shows high school graduation and college enrollment rates for students of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative. The NAI graduate survey illustrates the data that the program has collected since 1997, when its first class of scholars graduated high school. The table shows that the program has maintained a high school graduation rate of 100% and a college matriculation rate of 98% since then. It is interesting to

note that 2003, reflects the first graduating class under the direction of the current executive director. Since that year, 100% of the graduates have attained post-secondary matriculation.

Prior to 2008, the program did not collect data on the students after they graduated high school. The program is now tracking where each of the graduates goes during and after college. The data presented in the table, from 2008 to the present reflects where the students went when they graduated high school and where they were in the fall of 2012. The program will update this data every year to ensure that they stay on top of where each of the students goes once they have matriculated to college. They are keeping more accurate records of whether the students persist once in college, if they transfer to a 4-year college/university, etc.

### **NAI–Agreements between University and School District**

The NAI program began with the understanding that the students who live in the community surrounding NAI were underrepresented in higher education and needed assistance in getting to college. In an effort to help students from the surrounding community and to have representation of these students at the university the NAI program emerged. Though the program now seeks to prepare students to go to the university of their choice, the program began with the intent to prepare students for admittance to USC, which would in turn benefit the university by helping to diversify its student population specifically to USC, a clear benefit to the university. The promise for the students is that if, at the end of their senior year, they are accepted to USC, they will receive a full financial aid package to attend. A 1992 article from the LA Times states,

At the end of the program, if the students meet USC's admission standards they will receive a four-year scholarship to the university--an offer worth about \$34,000 a year to the class of 1996-97, at current inflation rates. If they choose not to attend USC as undergraduates, they can use the scholarship money to pay for two years of graduate school at the university (Jones, 1992).



As part of the document review for this study, I looked at a variety of letters of support from stakeholders for the program. Each of the letters expressed optimism that this program was necessary and important. A letter dated January 1993 written by the then-superintendent of LAUSD reads,

I am taking this opportunity to share our complete endorsement of the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative and its cooperative programs with some of our middle schools. This initiative will address the needs of students who are members of the underrepresented minority groups for college admissions. This type of cooperation with a major university represents a significant process for addressing the needs of these students.

Another letter from February of 1993 written by the then assistant superintendent of LAUSD states,

Be assured that in working with Senior High Schools Division on this venture, you will have both our interest and our cooperation. With our combined efforts in this endeavor, I am certain that we can significantly impact the lives of the selected students as well as assist the schools from which they come.

In housing the NAI program, the university gives to the community, but the university also benefits from the service it provides. Through the program, the university welcomes more students from underrepresented backgrounds, and diversifies its population. A letter of support from the university's president in 1993 reads,

Over the past two years, as NAI has assumed responsibility for its first two classes of junior high students, I have been thrilled with the solid pedagogical basis of the program, the enthusiastic participation of the parents, and the close working relationship with the Los Angeles Unified School District.)

Any successful new program has a driving force behind it, and USC is fortunate to have found such leadership in you. Yet the genius of NAI is the dedication of the student "scholars" who demonstrate each day that, if given a chance, some positive support and a dream, they can succeed in college.

## **Student Code of Ethics**

The student code of ethics of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative outlines in seven tenets how the scholars of the NAI program are expected to comport themselves. The then executive director and his administrative team developed the code of ethics at the start of the program in 1991. From the very first cohort of scholars, the students have been held to these tenets. These are also frequently cited at student assemblies and in classes to remind students of how they should behave. The tenets of the NAI code of ethics are:

- As an NAI scholar I will treat everyone with respect.
- As an NAI scholar I will not cheat, steal, or lie. I will demonstrate behavior reflective of honesty and pride academically and personally at all times.
- As an NAI scholar I will take my academic responsibility seriously, and strive toward receiving a USC scholarship.
- As an NAI scholar I will attend my classes, complete assignments, and do as I'm told by my teachers and tutors.
- As an NAI scholar I will participate in all NAI activities.
- As an NAI scholar I will faithfully and totally support NAI.
- As an NAI scholar I will abide by the Scholar's Code of Ethics at all times

## **Parent Oath**

Another document reviewed for what it represents to the NAI program is the parent oath. This document has also been in existence since the program originated. Like the scholar's code of ethics, the parent oath is an important document for the program. The parent oath reads,

As a Family, we pledge our allegiance and support to the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative program and Family Development Institute. We fully commit our energies and our time to make these programs a total success for our scholars, our families and our communities. As part of this commitment, we consistently encourage our children to be the most well-behaved and productive scholars they can be at school, at home, and in the community. Likewise, we take advantage of every opportunity offered by the Family Development Institute to enhance our abilities to attain and enjoy a better life for our

scholars and our families. We affectionately embrace and celebrate the colors, histories, and cultures of all our family members.

This pledge was instated at the beginning of the program and has been recited at every Family Development Institute meeting since the program began. According to the NAI staff, this document was developed by the program's founding administrative team. The parent oath helps the parents connect with the reason for the many meetings they must attend and all of the work that they must put into the education of their children. It serves as a reminder that these families are doing something that is not the norm in their communities, but that within NAI is encouraged and celebrated. The oath serves to continue in the indoctrination of the parents, in believing that college is an expectation and that as a community they will uplift and support the students of the program. Additionally, the oath acts as a unifier for the NAI community; each person is there with the shared goal of helping their children get to college.

### **Neighborhood Academic Initiative Contract**

The contract that students and parents sign upon joining the program reveals what the students and parents agree to when they join. The parents and students are told that they will be held to this contract and teachers and administrators freely cite the contract. The contract is divided into five sections, a) student, b) parent, guardian or advocate, c) initiative executive director, d) University of Southern California, d) Los Angeles Unified School District. Each section outlines the expectations of each partner. The contract is signed by the student, the parent, the program's executive director, the university's vice president over the program, and the school principal.

The contract outlines the program's expectations for attendance, behavior and academic performance. The contract also stipulates that upon meeting the admissions criteria

for the university, the students will be granted a 4.5-year scholarship to USC. By signing the contract, parents agree to maintain communication with the program about any issues that the student may face, to attend the Family Development Institute and to attend all program-sponsored activities and to volunteer at at-least one NAI activity.

The executive director section of the contract says that the director will provide the students access to highly qualified staff, to meet with the students and parents to discuss any concerns, and to “maintain a high degree of respect, compassion, honesty and dignity in every interaction with students, parents and representatives from the community.”

A university representative (the Senior Vice President of the division under which USC is housed) also signs the contract on the university’s behalf. The university’s portion of the contract says that the university will provide financial aid to the students who are accepted to the university, to provide up to nine semesters of tuition to admitted students, and to honor the NAI scholarship for those students who decided to transfer to USC after attending a community college.

Finally, the Los Angeles School District agrees to give the students full course credit for the classes they take with NAI, provide NAI with access to student records, and to work collaboratively with the program to identify the teachers that will work with NAI.

### **Research Question 1**

In my review of the literature, I determined that there were five common features that successful college access programs share (Jun, 2002; Tierney & Jun, 2001, Swail & Perna, 2002). My first research question, “Which practices of a South Los Angeles college access program most impact a student’s ability to matriculate to college?” has to do with the features of

college access programs that most support at-risk students. This separates my findings from other college access program because the features that were identified were offered directly by the students. By using my collected data I was able to determine which features are most impactful for the students of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative. In my findings, I do not assume that the 5 common features from literature are the most impactful factors; however, I am sensitive to data that corroborates previous research. I will present the survey data first, and follow with the qualitative interview data.

### **Survey Data**

As discussed in Chapter 3, I administered a survey to the senior class of 2012. This survey was designed to shed light on student perceptions of the most impactful features of the program. Because this study seeks to utilize the voice and experience of its participants, the results of this survey are important, as they offer information directly from the perspective of the students. Below are two tables that summarize the student's responses to the survey. A table illustrating the survey responses is presented in Appendix I. Appendix J illustrates the most effective supports offered by NAI according to the students; these data were also gathered from the survey administered to the senior class. The data gathered from this survey will be discussed as I answer the research questions in the following section.

The table above represents the responses for each question of the survey taken by the senior class. Forty-six out of 54, or 85%, of students participated in the study because not all of them were present on the day that the survey was administered. A significant majority of the responses on the survey were favorable. Of all of the participants, only one student disagreed that NAI sets high academic expectations. There were no other students who registered a disagree

response for any of the other categories. In addition, only nine responses across all categories fell into the disagree column. What is most impressive is that when combining the somewhat agree and strongly agree responses, 97% of students believed that NAI set high academic expectations, 98% believed that they found the counselors beneficial at NAI, 93% felt exposed to arts and culture, 100% felt that the after school activities were very beneficial, 96% thought that the family component contributed to student success and 94% agreed that the Saturday Academy was beneficial. In terms of how students perceived their own self-esteem, 100% either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they believed themselves to be academically successful. Thus, when combining positive responses, including both somewhat agree and strongly agree, all categories reached over 90% positive ratings. This is a strong affirmation of the program.

The second part of the survey asked the students to identify the most effective supports of the program. Table 11 lists the most effective supports of NAI as identified by the participants of the study. This section was presented as an open-ended question that asked, “Please list the 3 structures (Saturday Academy, tutoring, staff support, FDI, etc.) within NAI that were **most** helpful to you on your pathway to college.” These responses are presented in Appendix J.

Though the second part of the survey was intended to be open-ended, it is likely that the participants were influenced by the suggestions I offered in the survey prompt (Saturday Academy, tutoring, staff support, FDI, etc.). I concluded this because each of the suggestions that appeared on the survey appeared as student responses. However, “summer programs” and “SAT prep” emerged as original supports; that is, supports that did not appear in the survey prompt. Though these two supports appeared the least number of times, it is significant that these appeared at all, as these are original answers on the part of the participants.

It is interesting to note that the top three mentioned supports in the survey are tutoring, Saturday Academy and staff support. Though this survey was only administered to the high school senior participants, mention of these supports also appeared in the interviews that were carried out with the adult participants. The senior participants also corroborated the top three supports in their journal entries. The tutoring and Saturday Academy components are linked to the notion of high academic expectations that the students expressed NAI sets for all of its students.

### **Most Effective Features of NAI as Identified by Participants**

This section of the chapter will organize the qualitative data according to the features that the participants of this study found to be the most effective within NAI. The following are the features identified by the students:

1. NAI provides students with the structure, access and guidance necessary to get to college
2. NAI immerses students in a college-going culture
3. NAI offers its students access to academic (internal) and cultural (external) resources
4. NAI sets high academic expectations
5. NAI engages the family of origin and creates a family within the program
6. NAI enhances the self-concept of its students – sees students as scholars

**NAI provides students with the structure, access and guidance necessary to get to college.** Each of the participants recalled that the most important component of the NAI program was the structure, access and guidance that it provided along the way. This was a theme that emerged in the journaling exercises, interviews and the survey completed by each of the participants. This section will present the data that highlights the structure of the college access program that the participants discussed.

***Structured academic program.*** For this study, “structured academic program” will refer to the pre-planned and highly regimented course plan that each NAI scholar must follow. The

Saturday Academy is a core structure of the academic program of NAI. Survey data indicated that 36% of the surveyed participants agreed and 58% strongly agreed that Saturday Academy is a helpful component of the NAI program. Robert, a participant interviewed for this study said that from the moment he entered NAI, he knew that he and his peers were part of a regimented program that would guide them to college. Robert shared,

We always had more to do than the non-NAI kids. We had to go to Saturday Academy, we had tutoring, our parents had meetings... They gave us SAT prep, and counseling...they were on us, but we knew that they had our backs. It was rigorous, but in the end, they kept their promise. (Robert, Interview #3)

The program is structured by design, and the students indicated that they understood this through the survey and interviews. Documents show that the program has a set plan for each cohort. The students understood that as part of the NAI program they would be on an honors academic track, and that they must attend the flagship Saturday Academy component, as indicated in the contract that is signed by each participant and parent. The curriculum shows that at Saturday Academy, the students are given added instructional time in an effort to remediate and strengthen basic skills at the middle school level, and supplement Monday through Friday instruction at the high school level. In one of his journal entries, Robert noted,

I believe that NAI is one of the major reasons as to why I am even going to college. Everything that the program does for its students, from mandatory summer school to SAT Prep course on Saturdays, serves as a preparation for college. I think making the students attend summer school every year has had one of the biggest impacts on the students. Not only does it help prepare students on different levels by providing art course and the regular math/English courses, but it also teaches students that time is valuable. It has taught me how to use my time wisely and productively. Saturday Academy serves as the most important piece of evidence when it comes to saying that NAI has helped prepare me for college. NAI Scholars learn how to go above and beyond. Monday through Friday is not enough for us scholars; Saturdays are added to ensure that we have the necessary tools to not only go to college, but also be successful once we are there. (Robert, Journal Entry #2, Week 1)



*Structured out-of-school time.* Another practice within NAI that students indicated to be the most impactful was the structure that these programs provide outside of school time. The survey data revealed that a combined 100% of the survey participants agreed and somewhat agreed that NAI's after school activities (tutoring, etc.) help students to become academically successful and get to college. Each of the participants indicated that the part of the structure that NAI offered that was not available to them anywhere else was the opportunity to remain engaged in positive activities during the out of school hours. Alex noted, "they had a lot of stuff for us to do – we were always busy. We had classes on campus in the morning, came back for tutoring, theater and mentoring. They really kept us busy" (Alex, Interview #1).

Additionally, the students offered their opinion about the tutoring program:

The NAI tutors went out of their way to help us. They really cared. I remember, one afternoon I was stressing over a calculus test that I was going to have the next day. After tutoring was over, a couple of the tutors who were NAI grads and who were now at 'SC offered to keep tutoring me after – on their own time! They were like, 'we're going to study with you until you get it. (Byron, Interview #2)

Another structure offered by NAI that guides its students toward positive engagement during the out of school hours relates to involvement in the arts. Survey data indicated that a combined 93% of the senior class felt that, NAI exposed [them] to the arts via field trips and access to cultural events. Further, over the past year, a teacher from NAI and a Saturday Academy English teacher founded the "USC NAI Theater Workshop." This theater program exposes students to the performing arts and classic pieces of literature. Documents suggest that the program is open to all NAI students and they meet a couple of afternoons a week and during the Saturday Academy elective hour to work on putting together various literary-based performance pieces. In the past year, the theater workshop has put on full-length productions of

“A Christmas Carol,” “Pride and Prejudice” and “Romeo and Juliet.” This project is meant to link academics with extra-curricular activities. As part of the project, every participant must read the text that they are producing that year. This is tied to the data collected around the structured academic program. NAI imbues each of its activities with academics. Once the production is ready for presentation, the students invite their families and community members to their shows. In the year of the study, there were 34 participants in the theater workshop, or 7% of the program’s high school population. The founding teacher of the project says,

One of the most exciting aspects of the workshop is seeing the students connect with literature in a totally different way. They are not just reading about it, they are in it. NAI really is a lifeline in this neighborhood; it takes students who normally wouldn’t even have the dream of going to college and then makes it a reality. (USC NAI Theater Workshop Promotional Video, Ms. Larios, NAI English teacher)

Robert commented that, “the theater workshop is so much fun. It’s really time consuming, but it’s a worthwhile commitment. Ms. Larios is amazing—she pushes us to give the best of us” (Robert, Interview #3).

***Structured support system.*** In this study, structured support system refers to the structured academic and socio-emotional counseling that the program offers to its students. According to the participants, the support system / safety net for them as scholars was crucial particularly during their high school years. A total of 98% of the senior students surveyed for this study indicated in the study that they took advantage of NAI’s counseling component and believe that it was beneficial to their high school experience. Byron shared that he felt that he was backed by a strong team of people who were available to offer help whenever it was necessary, particularly during the out of school hours. Marissa echoed Bryon’s sentiment and shared, “the staff was always there to help. When we were working on our college apps, Ms. Anthony was on

us. If I had questions, I knew that I could go to her at any time. Someone was always there to help, to answer any questions... (Marissa, Interview #2). Literature indicates that having the structure offered by a strong network of support during the out-of-school hours is especially important in a setting where the community itself poses many risk factors for its youth (Children Now, 2001).

Within NAI, the structured support system is offered by way of various program pieces that aim to ensure that the needs of students are met. The program maintains close communication with the teachers to identify the students' needs in time. Students who earn a grade point average under 2.75 are placed on academic probation. Probation requires the students to attend mandatory after-school tutoring and participate in weekly group counseling sessions.

***Structured college counseling.*** According to the survey administered to the senior class, a combined 98% of the participants of this study agreed that the counseling component of NAI was vital to their success. Students reported that NAI's college counselor ensures that they are not only on track for graduation, but that they are meeting all of the requirements and that they take the most rigorous courses. In addition, all of the participants cited how beneficial it was for them to have a senior counselor that began meeting with them and their families from the time they entered the eleventh grade to ensure that they had the necessary information and the steps for college-going, applications, and financial aid. One student remarked:

I remember that [during] senior year NAI went overboard with giving us the info we needed to get to college. We all knew we were going to college right from the start because that's what everybody told us, but senior year we had all of these different seminars to talk about financial aid, making sure we filled out the correct forms... Ms. Anthony [NAI's college counselor] was always checking in with us, even calling us at home to remind us of upcoming appointments and meetings. (Marcos, Interview #2)

Further, the students with whom I spoke mentioned of having access to their team of teachers and counselors any time they needed them. Michelle commented,

I felt like they [teachers] were always available, like I could contact them...we had an extra connection through NAI. With my other teachers, I felt like we had to wait for parent conferences, or we had to wait until something really comes up...but with NAI it wasn't like that...it was like, we're going to see them on Saturday, you know, if we need to relay a message, we could go directly to them... (Michelle, Interview #2)

The above quote serves to illustrate the structured support offered by NAI. Because the students of NAI develop a close connection with their NAI teachers, and because NAI teachers are connected to the students' families and their lives outside of school, the students feel supported. According to students like Michelle, this feeling of access and availability makes students feel like they were not on the journey alone and that an entire team was invested in seeing them prosper. In one of the journal entries submitted by Robert, he wrote,

We had support all along. I didn't have that at my home school, and I can honestly say that because NAI gave me attention, access and support, and created a family for us, I am going to the college of my dreams. (Robert, Journal Entry, Week 3, Prompt #1)

Robert's journal entry summarizes the impact of the structure that NAI offers its students. Robert felt that as a result of the hands-on guidance offered him by NAI, he was able to make it to college.

**NAI immerses its students in a college-going culture.** The participants of this study described how the Neighborhood Academic Initiative created a college-going culture from the moment the students joined the program.

They call us scholars. That's cool. No one else is called a scholar. Everyone knows, "oh those are the scholars..." (Alex, Interview #1)

Another student, a sixth grader, echoed Alex's sentiment. During one of the sessions of Saturday Academy, the program's executive director was leading a tour of the program for potential

donors. She walked into one of the boys' English classes and asked, "What makes you different from the other students at your school?" Many hands shot up. The director called on one student, and he responded, "We're different because we're scholars." The students take pride in belonging to a group that acknowledges and congratulates academic achievement and the desire to go to college.

According to NAI's program specialist, the NAI team "works really hard to make the kids believe that they can and will go to college—that's our priority" (Ms. Garcia, Interview #1). This sentiment was resonant in the interviews, observations, journal entries and the survey completed by the students for this study.

Participants reported that the college-going culture is built into every part of what the program does, and begins with the students in the sixth grade. In an interview with the executive director, she mentioned that it is especially important for the program to connect with the middle school students because they need to see themselves where they stand along the college pathway. The executive director says,

It's hard for a sixth grader to understand why they are giving up their Saturdays. It's a long journey. But this is where family comes in. We want kids who are hard workers and who can begin to see themselves as college students. If we have that, all we need to do along the way is remind them that they are on the right track and that they deserve it. (Ms. Blanco, Interview #1)

One example of this college-going culture was evident on the last day of Saturday Academy, when the program held an assembly for the middle school students. During the assembly the students listened to a speech about making the right choices; they heard from a motivational speaker who talked about prioritizing to maximize effectiveness and they watched recent news clips that highlighted the successes of the program, which profiled Robert, one of

the participants of this study. After showing the students the video clips of the graduates who were profiled in the news report, the executive director spoke to the students about making choices. In closing, she asked the students “Are you making a good choice being part of this program?” The scholars responded with a resounding “yes.” This too is part of the indoctrination that the students go through, and part of the college-going culture in which the students are immersed.

The participants of my study highlighted the fact that from the time that they enter the program they know that they are going to college someday. The scholars shared that once they enter the program, college becomes something tangible, regardless of whether college going is the norm in their home community or not. Marissa recalled,

...They (NAI) had college workshops all the time; they always asked us where we wanted to go to college. We always talked about where we wanted to go and it kind of made it possible for everyone to think that we could apply to all of these great places. The program helps us open our eyes to everything that is out there. (Marissa, Interview #1)

The executive director commented:

We take every opportunity to let the students know that they are in the right place and doing the right thing. It is important to acknowledge that they are doing something magnificent and that all of their hard work will pay off. (Ms. Blanco, Interview #1)

In the year of this study, 100 percent of the graduating class was headed to college. Twenty-eight were accepted to USC, but only 26 accepted the invitation to attend. Of the 2 who declined, one is Robert, who is headed to an Ivy League institution, and the other is his brother, who will be attending a prestigious military academy. According to the interviews with participants of the NAI program, college going is an expectation of all of the NAI scholars. Marcos explained,

[Going to college] was definitely an expectation. There was no alternative. No one talked about anything other than going to college after high school. We always knew what was next. (Marcos, Interview #1)

The students at the center of this study agreed that NAI creates a safe-space that makes it acceptable to be interested in school and to want to go to college – attitudes that are not the norm in these students' community. Robert said,

Definitely NAI made us better students. Not that the regular students aren't good students, but I think it exposed us to so many different resources that we wouldn't have as regular high school students. I mean, it's built a family for us...when we're in our home school is when we really realize what NAI has created for us. It's a safe place where we can say, 'ok, let's talk about college, let's talk about what we're doing over the summer for college...'and that definitely helps us! (Robert, Interview #2)

Students feel protected and understand that it is not only accepted, but an expectation that they demonstrate academic inclinations.

The annual awards ceremony hosted by NAI is another of the structures in place that emphasizes the importance of academic achievement, reinforces the college going culture and honors the successes and hard work of their students. On the night of the ceremony I observed, a large auditorium was filled to the brim with parents and students. Here, the program honored the achievements of all of the students. Graduates were awarded letterman jackets with the NAI name embroidered on them according to the grade point average that they had earned over the course of their tenure in the program. "The senior scholars who attain a cumulative GPA of 3.75 or above throughout their high school career will earn a letterman jacket" (NAI Guidelines for Academic Incentives"). Additional scholarships for the seniors were also awarded at the event. The program's strong college going culture was highlighted during one particularly touching moment in which the seniors received a NAI certificate of completion along with a pennant with the college that they had chosen. Each of the 54 graduates stood before the audience with a

certificate and a college pennant. This was significant as everyone applauded their accomplishment and the younger crop of scholars watched with excitement as they pictured themselves up on the stage one day.

**NAI offers its students access to academic (internal) and cultural (external) resources.** Participants reported that the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative offers its students access to cultural and social capital to help them become successful in accessing higher education in several ways. Apart from holding classes for the students on the college campus from Monday through Saturday, documents and interviews indicate that NAI also ensures that students are connected to the resources offered in the college setting. The students indicated that they find access to the resources useful along their pathway to college; Forty nine percent of the students who participated in the survey administered for this survey “agreed,” and 44% “strongly agreed” to the statement that read, “NAI exposed me to the arts via field trips and access to cultural events” and a combined 98% responded favorably to the statement that read, “I believe that NAI’s after school activities (tutoring, etc.) helped me become academically successful and get to college.” Some of these resources are internal (resources in the way of academic structures and supports) and some are external (cultural resources).

***Internal resources.*** For this research, “internal resources” refers to the academic structures and supports that NAI offers its students.

As an employee of the NAI program during the time of this research study, I have had access to an insiders’ perspective as to the daily activity at NAI. In observing the program, I had the unique opportunity of observing some of the unwritten and unofficial resources that the program offers. For example, I observed three African American boys who belong to the senior



class of 2013, benefit from an unusual experience because of NAI. These three African American males are the only African American males in their class. From their freshman year of high school, when the boys entered the program, these boys have had a mentor/mentee relationship with the university's senior vice president for government and civic engagement. A few times a year, the senior vice president meets with the boys to check-in, talk sports, and see what they need as they go through high school. In August of 2012, as the school year was beginning, I observed the senior vice president's secretary contact NAI's executive director to set up a quick check-in meeting. He blocked out some time in his calendar and had the boys pay him a visit. I asked one of the boys what it was like to be a part of those meetings, and he responded, "He (the senior vice president) is cool. He's just like a regular guy. His office is real nice, though. He basically just checks in with us to see how we're doing and if we need anything. It's nice." (Kory, Interview #1)

This type of relationship is a unique one. These boys, who fit the "at-risk" profile, are struggling academically. They have been on the NAI program's academic probation for several semesters each (a student is placed on academic probation if his/her grade point average falls below a 2.75. Scholars are typically granted two semesters of academic probation before they are dismissed (NAI Scholar's Contract). These boys have not been dismissed from the program because without guidance, the odds are stacked against them, and they are likely to fail. Though these boys are struggling, through NAI they are offered support, tutoring, counseling and the unofficial social capital such as the relationship with high-ranking university officials—these are all examples of the internal supports of the program.

According to the staff and students of the program, providing access to social capital is also at the forefront for NAI. The NAI scholars are offered opportunities to meet and network with individuals with whom they would not otherwise have the opportunity. At the recent Senior Gala (April 30, 2012), NAI scholars were seated among university dignitaries and other distinguished individuals. At one table, a NAI scholar and his parents sat alongside C.M. Max Nikias, USC's president and Ed Roski, the president of USC's board of trustees, a real-estate magnate, and accomplished mountain climber, who can boast of having climbed Mount Everest. Of this experience, Alex said,

... We did have connections to the university. At the senior banquet, all the people I met... I mean, I met Monica Lozano from La Opinion, I met Tom Sayles, the Senior Vice President at USC. They [NAI] really help us make connections with the USC environment and learn how to interact with these people. (Alex, Interview #2)

The internal resources that are offered to NAI students are not just in the way of connections to university officials. The students begin to see one another as a resource. Marissa shared that she was very good friends with Lauren, another NAI student who was one class ahead of her. This student helped Marissa complete her college applications and she was one of the people to seek out schools that were outside of her comfort zone. Marissa shared,

I had Lauren help me with everything. Like, it didn't matter if I called her in the middle of the night, we'd be on the phone and she'd be helping me with essays, applications, all that stuff that she had already done. (Marissa, Interview #2)

The students create their own family within the program, and this helps them as they make their way through. The NAI "family" is an insular one, according to the student participants. For the most part, each participant indicated that during their time in the program, their primary circle of friends was comprised of NAI students. When I asked why, I was told that it was because "[they] understand each other" (Marissa, Interview #1). Marissa even went on to

share that at her school, she could not have conversations at the same intellectual level as she can with her NAI peers. She said that for the most part, NAI students are interested in learning and what is going on around them. She believed that NAI students are critical thinkers and she liked that. Marissa shared,

I mean, it's not that we're smarter or anything, but maybe it's because of everything we've shared together, but we have the same interests, and NAI kids can keep up with different types of conversations. More intellectual conversations, I guess. (Marissa, Interview #1)

Alex also mentioned that though he socialized with everyone from his small high school, when he started in the program, he too kept to his own group of NAI scholars.

Now I hang out with everyone at my school, but especially when we started in the program, we pretty much all stuck together. I guess because we were together all the time anyway, on Saturdays and afterschool and stuff. But you can definitely tell which kids are the NAI kids on campus. They're always the ones that are either hanging out with another NAI kid or have a book or flashcards in their hands. (Alex, Interview #2)

According to the students, working in a cohort allows them to build within the program their own support system—an internal resource—that will help carry them through high school and toward college.

**External resources.** External resources are those that are offered outside of the program and that seek to enhance the cultural capital of the students. The study participants and current seniors pointed out the many resources that NAI and the university campus made possible to them throughout the course of their participation in the program. They indicated that the connections that are made possible for them via NAI are what set NAI students apart from the mainstream student body. First of all, NAI students have access to the university campus. This includes the use of classrooms daily, access to the libraries and access to a host of programs that partner with NAI (see Table 12). Alex recalled,

A couple of highlights [of the resources offered by NAI] are the neuroscience camp and the health symposium that NAI let us participate in. They were both USC activities that were offered to NAI kids. If I hadn't been in NAI I wouldn't have had that experience. I got to meet doctors from USC, medical students, you know, people you want to be like. They helped me see who I want to be. (Alex, Interview #2)

A relationship that aims to achieve the goal of giving students cultural and social capital was established by one of NAIs own teachers. One of the English teachers saw a formerly missed opportunity to connect the students to the intellectual community of the university campus. She reached out the university's Joint Educational Project (JEP) on campus. This program falls under the university's College of Letters Arts and Sciences and is the university's leading service learning provider. Through their partnership, NAI and JEP provide access to writing mentors, college students who receive course credit for mentoring a NAI scholar; in addition to the writing mentors, JEP opens the doors of college classes to these students through the Open Classroom project. Here, NAI scholars are invited to visit a variety of university classes. The idea behind this opportunity is to further demystify the college experience and make college matriculation something that feels tangible. Of the partnership with JEP, Alex shared:

Over spring break I was part of the Open Classroom project. I visited an English class that focused on Milton. I was a little scared walking in because I thought that the class might be too hard...it turned out to be interesting and the professor was great. She gave a lecture and honestly I didn't feel like I couldn't keep up. I felt like I got the stuff and I felt like I was part of the college environment... (Alex, Interview #1)

This type of resource that is not typically available to the students from the mainstream population at other under resourced high schools (Farmer-Hinton, 2008).

Students also mentioned the summer programs that NAI offers. Among these has been the Bill Cosby Film Institute, where NAI scholars had the opportunity to work alongside filmmakers to learn the art of making movies. The yearly art and music classes that NAI offers

the students were also a highlight for the students. According to the executive director, these classes contribute to the enhancement of the students' cultural capital. She noted, "It [summer classes] gives them an opportunity to try something new and perhaps discover an interest. Students really enjoy these types of offerings" (Ms. Blanco, Interview #1).

In his book about improving education for students from low-income communities, *Altered Destinies: Making Life Better for Schoolchildren in Need* (1999), Gene Maeroff profiled the NAI program. Of the cultural capital component, an NAI representative said, "We have a cultural agenda. We want them to acquire social skills. We want them to see that the world extends beyond their bounded area" (p. 264).

A table presented in Appendix K describes other types of internal and external resources within the program that I learned about during this research via observation and document review.

**NAI sets high academic expectations.** College access programs aim to prepare students to be academically competitive and apply and receive acceptance to the colleges of their choice. Ninety-eight percent of the students who participated in the survey administered as part of this study, agreed that NAI's culture of high expectations contributed to their academic success. Since the first graduating class in 1997, 98% of the students have gone on to enroll in postsecondary education. Students report that as NAI Scholars they are on an honors track at their high school, and from the moment they enter the high school program they know that they will take honors and Advanced Placement courses. In 2012, 26% of the NAI senior class passed Advanced Placement exam in calculus with a score of 3 or above (scores of 3 to 5 are passing

scores). All of the NAI students enrolled in AP courses take the exam that corresponds to the Advanced Placement course.

In this spirit, one common thread linked each of the interviews. When asked questions about the type of preparation that NAI offered to its students, every participant mentioned that it was the expectations that NAI placed on them that made them work so hard. About the culture of high academic expectations, Marcos recalled,

We couldn't get away with anything [in the program]. Everyone was on us. I mean, from the moment we join, we're told that we're different; that we are going to achieve great things, and even though we hate all of the extra stuff we have to do, we know we have to do it because we have all of these people telling us we can get through it. (Marcos, Interview #2)

The focus that NAI places on academic achievement and the academic success of its students appeared in the interviews and journal entries with much frequency. In the study participants mentioned the focused attention that the NAI staff placed on grade point average every semester. One of the participants mentioned that they would dread when a staff member from NAI walked in with letters in her hands after report cards had been distributed. They knew that these meant probation letters, and probation letters came with a host of additional requirements, among them mandatory tutoring, participation in the academic success program, and perhaps a parent conference. She said:

I remember when the counselor would walk into the class with letters. We all knew what the letters meant, so we'd groan...it was annoying, but now I know that they had to stay on top of us. Ultimately that's what helped so many of us stay on track. (Sofia, Interview #1)

The Saturday Academy component is an integral piece of the NAI program, and one to which the concept of high expectations is fused. My observation notes from a Saturday Academy observation read,

It seems almost automatic. The students mill around outside. Many of them are reviewing flashcards...serious looks on their faces. 7:55am, HS coordinator steps outside and calls, 'Scholars, get to class!' Kids don't hesitate. They all know where they're going, there is no confusion. The executive director moves outside of the building. She stands at one corner of the building, the corner that is closest to where some students are still being dropped off. One student turns the corner. Director sees the students and calls, 'Good morning, you're late. Get to class.' The student picks up his pace and rushes through the doors. Only a few students are late. It feels like a prep school. The kids look serious; they know why they're there. The staff runs a tight ship. Everything is structured – they have it together. (Observation Notes, Saturday Academy, February 18, 2012)

Throughout the interviews, document reviews and journal entries, Saturday Academy was one of the most mentioned pieces of the NAI program. Saturday Academy is inextricably linked to the high expectations of the program. The program demands rigor and hard work, the high expectations go hand in hand. Students indicate that there is no tolerance for disruptive behavior, and the executive director makes it clear that the students are there to work hard and learn. Each of the participants mentioned that though they disliked giving up their Saturdays, and though they would never admit it to the program, Saturday Academy played a major role in their ultimate academic success. Marcos remembered,

For example, we had Saturday Academy and what they did was prep us – prep us, prep us, prep us for the SAT, that's all they would do. I think that pushed us. Other students at the school didn't have that. (Marcos, Interview #1)

When asked to make suggestions for current and future NAI students, one participant suggested that students realize the importance of this component as it offers an assortment of benefits, among them test preparation and additional tutoring in math and science. NAI also gives the students grades for performance in Saturday Academy. Documents showed that when students join the program, they sign a contract that binds them to the requirements and expectations of the program. One of the rules that are stipulated in the contract is the successful performance in Saturday Academy. The NAI contract states,

We expect scholars and their parents to regard the Saturday Academy as they do their weekday classes in the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI). Since this program will provide additional preparation in meeting the higher standards for admissions into USC, all scholars are expected to complete each semester that they are enrolled in NAI.

The participants also linked the fact that their classes take place on a university campus to the expectations of academic excellence that are placed upon them. Marcos shared,

I think that [taking classes on the university campus] was the best part. I think that's one of the things they [NAI] did right...having the kids on campus everyday...one time I had a conversation in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. We were talking about turning in our work. My friend said to me, 'I don't understand the kids who don't turn in their work. Don't they feel bad?' I thought about it and I realized that we felt bad because we wanted to do well, we wanted to live up to our teachers' expectations... (Marcos, Interview #1)

The students all mentioned that by virtue of being scholars in the NAI program, they felt that they had a responsibility to work harder than the rest because that was the culture within the program. Michelle remembered,

It was very different to go to a classroom on campus instead of going to a regular classroom at school, where you hear a PA system, desks arranged a certain way, etc. Whereas when we were at 'SC in the mornings, even the desks were different. Anyone could have easily walked off campus...there are no bells on a college campus...you have to be there on time, and you have to make sure you're in your seat by the time the teacher got there. It just felt nice to be there. (Michelle, Interview #1)

I asked students how it was exactly that NAI made it known to the students that their expectations were high, and the students said that the teachers gave them work at a level that was not common at their home schools, further, the NAI administrative team kept close control on every student's grades and made sure that if a student was dropping or that if performance was waning, appropriate measures for intervention would be made. Students said that intervention components included one-on-one sessions with an NAI counselor, counseling sessions with one of the members of the social work team, after school tutoring, or participation in the Saturday



Academy Academic Success program. The executive director of the program stated that as a program, the team must stay on top of the students to make sure they do well.

We don't make concessions for the students. We know that they can achieve, and we remind them of that at every opportunity we get. If they are struggling, we have a host of supports for them. We see the students every day and remind them why they are on a university campus and why they are on this journey. Before our kids come to us they've been conditioned to believe that failure is inevitable – we teach them otherwise. We tell them to sit at the front of the class, always. One of things we always tell the kids is that they sit in the front because they **belong** in the front. (Ms. Blanco, Interview #1)

In one of the journal entries submitted for this research study, Marissa recalled a time when she wanted to quit and drop one of her classes, but one of her NAI teachers helped her push through. She wrote,

My most memorable experience in NAI was when I really, really wanted to drop my calculus class and was pretty much begging and crying for [my math teacher] to let me take another class and she refused to let me drop. I think that was one of those moments where you don't realize how it would affect you until later on. I think staying in that class really showed me what I am capable of, or more like reminded me of what I am made of. I don't know -- whatever it was, I really worked my butt off first semester and I passed. (Marissa, Journal Exercise, Week 2, Prompt #2)

Another aspect of high expectations is to make sure that students are receiving access to an appropriate and rigorous curriculum. Some students had expressed concern because they felt that their schools were not offering them the best preparation in the sciences. Alex addressed his concern around pursuing a health career in one of the interviews,

I am so scared. I don't know how I'm going to do. I know that I'm going to have to work harder than everyone else. My science classes in high school weren't that good. I know I'm going to have to find a tutor right away. (Alex, Interview #2)

In response to concerns like Alex's and to the underrepresentation of minorities in STEM fields, NAI wrote a grant to fund science programs. The executive director of NAI says,

Our goal isn't simply to get kids to college; our goal is to help them persist once there. We were finding that the kids who graduated from NAI and wanted to pursue majors in

the sciences were struggling because their schools had offered subpar exposure to the sciences. Our kids were in schools without labs, and if there were labs there weren't supplies. Our kids weren't exposed to hands-on, inquiry based science, and now we can ensure that for 21 Saturdays per semester, our kids are engaging in quality science instruction. (Ms. Blanco, Interview #1)

NAI launched its science component in January of 2012. As a result, every participant of the program from grades 6 through 12 now takes a science class during the Saturday Academy day. Saturday Academy was extended for an additional hour and forty minutes, and science teachers from the neighboring schools teach these classes and participate in a professional development series put on by USC's Rossier School of Education.

**NAI engages the family of origin and create a family within the program.** Two themes emerged around the concept of family. The first was the idea that involving the parents in the academic journey of the students was essential to the ultimate academic success of the students. The other was how strong the bond was among the participants of the program, and how this bond helped carry them along their individual journeys to college.

***Family of origin.*** In this study, I found that the family component is a vital factor of NAI, and something that each of the study participants cited as they discussed the most impactful components of the program. Ninety-three percent of the students who participated in the senior survey responded that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that read, "I believe that NAI's family involvement component contributed to my academic success and my going to college."

NAI's Family Development Institute (FDI) has been an integral feature of NAI since the program's beginnings. Documents indicate that over the course of the academic year, parents must attend 16 of these workshops, which are held on Saturday mornings, from 8:00 am to 11:00

am. Attendance obligations to FDI are also outlined in the contract that each family signs upon acceptance to the program. The contract reads,

- Participate in the Family Development Institute and maintain no less than an 80% rate of attendance or have a family representative - parent, guardian or advocate - participate regularly on behalf of the student.
- Attend or have a family representative (parent, guardian or advocate attend) all parent conferences as requested or needed.
- Attend or have a family representative (parent, guardian or advocate attend) all Academy-sponsored, student-focused activities.
- Take advantage of the educational and employment skills enhancement opportunities available to me in the Family Development Institute. (Document Review, NAI Contract)

The study participants all discussed the family component and all shared that this was beneficial on their road to college. The student participants cited the Family Development Institute (FDI) at NAI as equipping their parents with the knowledge about college going so that they could feel support in their homes; one participant noted that through the FDI meetings, her mother made her own friendships, thus expanding the network of individuals on whom she could count.

My mom was involved in the parent leadership board. Apart from knowing what was going on in the class and in the program as a whole, she knew what was going on with the other kids in the program. Sometimes she'd come home and tell me about what was going on with a friend of mine. That made me think, oh my gosh, I have to behave, if she knows what's going on with my friend, then my friend's mom is going to know what's going on with me! (Marissa, Interview #1)

For another participant, the family component was something that impacted him as a young child, even before having entered NAI. He would accompany his parents to the FDI meetings, which were mandatory for his family because his older sister was in the program. Marcos recalled,

I wanted to be in the program because my sister was in the program. I wanted to be here [at USC]. Sometimes I would have to go with my parents to FDI meetings and I was like, ‘what is this?’ and my parents would tell me, ‘you are going to come here [USC] one day.’ I really liked that. (Marcos, Interview #1)

The participants of this study indicated that ensuring that their parents were invested in their success was one of the great services provided by NAI. One of the study participants recalled that her mother befriended other NAI parents early on in her participation in the program. This helped ensure that everyone was on board with raising the child and that there was a wider net of support cast for NAI scholars. Some parents are so grateful to NAI and the Family Development Institute that they continue participating long after their children have graduated. Such is the case of one NAI parent volunteer who currently has two daughters at USC, one beginning her fourth year and the other beginning her third. This parent is still an active member of the Parent Leadership Board and serves as an important advocate for the program. She says,

I will be a part of NAI for as long as I am strong enough to do it. I am so thankful for everything the program did for my kids. I know my kids are smart and that they could have gone to college, but as a single parent I am eternally grateful for all of the support they gave me in guiding my girls. I couldn’t have done it alone. (Ms. Garcia, Interview #1)

The student participants also mentioned how though it was sometimes a nuisance, their parents were always informed as to what was happening in the lives of their children, what was going on in school and what support they needed along the way. When asked to comment on the difference between NAI and non-NAI scholars, Marissa shared,

I think we have more family support. My mom always comes home saying, ‘oh they [NAI staff at Family Development Institute meetings] told us this and that...’ and I think it makes our parents more involved than other kids’ parents. In the band parent association group, for example, I think all of the parents except for one are NAI parents. (Marissa, Interview #1)

In the above quote, Marissa expresses that all of the parents on the band parent group are parents of NAI scholars. This is an example of the influence that NAI has had on the parents. Most of the parents feel comfortable engaging in activities at the home school. Not all of the parents of band students are NAI scholars, yet all of the parents who serve on the association are NAI parents.

Marcos also mentioned the importance of the family component in one of his interviews. He recalled,

Our families actually knew each other. I know a lot of my friends' parents. Yeah, they all knew each other from the [FDI] meetings – they would talk to each other all the time. (Marcos, Interview #1)

Students indicated that this college access program not only becomes educational allies with the parents, the experience also opens leadership opportunities for the parents. Whereas a parent might have felt unwelcome at the child's school because of a language barrier or because of unfamiliarity with the school environment (Tierney, 2002), now they feel safe as they have developed the confidence to navigate the system and involve themselves in the education of their children in a genuine manner. Ms. Garcia, the parent volunteer whose daughters are current USC students continues to give her time and energy to NAI because she says that she understands the service that NAI gave to her family. She shared that because of her children's participation in NAI, she felt the need to become involved in every other aspect of her children's education. Today, she continues to serve on parent boards not only at NAI, but also at the high school that her daughters attended. As a parent ambassador for NAI, this parent aims to help other parents feel welcome in the school setting. She says,

It is so important for parents to participate. NAI makes this a requirement, and I want to make sure that other parents see it as more than just a requirement, but rather an opportunity to help their children reach their highest potential. (Ms. Garcia, Interview #1)

According to Ms. Flores, the coordinator of the family component of NAI,

The parents know that we are all in this together. They really trust us with their kids because they see how everyone plays a role. The kids know that there is an entire team of people behind them to take care of them when they need to be cared for, but also give them a push when they're slacking off. (Ms. Flores, Interview #1)

***Program family.*** The students reported feeling a sense of safety, knowing that they have a group of peers who are on the same pathway, without judgment. This makes an important difference for the students who are part of NAI. Michelle shared,

I felt really comfortable in my classes with NAI kids. I was really outspoken, and I had bold opinions. I definitely didn't feel that when I was in mixed classes [classes with non-NAI students]. With NAI kids, we were a family because we were together all the time. Our families knew each other...there definitely wasn't room for us to mess up. (Michelle, Interview #2)

Michelle's experience highlights the village mentality that NAI embraces. The concept of NAI as a "family" came up in every student interview. Aside from involving the students' own families along the college pathway, the students become their own family after having worked together for so many years and focusing on the same goal. Tierney and Venegas (2006) called this type of relationship "fictive kin." Here, students are bonded by a common goal. Tierney and Venegas write,

...to be a member of a fictive kinship does not suggest that everyone in the group is a best friend. Individuals function in the networks because there is an associational bond toward a group identity and/or goal. What is more important is whether fictive kinships enable peer groups to develop social

capital in a concerted way so that individuals are better able to cope with the challenges of applying to college. (p. 1692)

Marissa addresses this when she talks about the supports she had along her journey. She spoke highly of the NAI scholar who is now at an Ivy League school who served as an important mentor for her when she was still in high school and mentioned that she knows she can still count on her if she has any questions about college; whether the question be about filling out an application, to advice on writing a personal statement. In fact, all of the participants mentioned the family that is created within NAI and how that makes wanting to achieve a shared goal, and something that is embraced rather than looked down upon.

Alex noted that in his own home, NAI helped open the conversation about college, and the expectation for him to go.

Even my grandpa who doesn't know anything about college had a say. His opinion was that I should go to USC because it is close to home and that way I can keep coming back every weekend. My parents felt the same way. To them it was all about USC. Since my dad was the one who went to the FDI meetings, he was very strongly against any other school. He couldn't understand why I would want to go anywhere else. (Alex, Interview #3)

In Marissa's case, for instance, as the youngest child in her family, she would be the first to go to college. Marissa says,

My sisters could have gone to college, but I think they didn't know how to get there. I know my mom would have loved for them to go to college, but again, she didn't know how to help them. With me, though she didn't necessarily know how to help me, she learned because she had guidance. She was also kinda sad that I wasn't going to USC, but I know that she was proud that I had made it to college. (Marissa, Interview #3)

During the time of the data collection for this study, I was able to observe some of the activities that NAI organizes for the families to engage with the students. Both of the events took place close to the end of the year. One was the annual walk-a-thon. This fundraiser is organized

by the parent leadership board and is held on the USC campus. Here, parents and students walk or run laps around the university track and raise money for the program. Hundreds of people fill the track and excitedly support the program. Because the program operates on a very lean budget, the funds that are collected as a part of this fundraiser are used directly on students. This school year, for example, because the local school's budgets have been slashed and they cannot afford to contribute school buses for the daily transportation from USC back to the home school, the walk-a-thon earnings will be used to pay for the annual transportation costs. These types of activities help families establish community, feel like they belong, and help them feel like they are contributing with very necessary resources.

**NAI enhances the self-concept of its students: College access programs see students as scholars.** One hundred percent of the participants indicated that they considered themselves “academically successful” students and 96 percent indicated that NAI helped them to become more confident students. These data are significant and would be more so if compared against the responses of the mainstream population of the schools served by the NAI program. Maeroff's (1999) text about helping improve the school experience for low-income students profiled the NAI program. Here, one of NAI's teachers is quoted giving her impressions of a scholars' sense of confidence. She says,

What makes them different from the other kids is their attitude. They believe that they will succeed if they do the work. They are more self-confident than the others because they are trained by the program to be that way. This is not phony self-esteem. These kids know they can make it because they have done the work. (p. 162)

Each of the participants who were the focus of this study came across as highly motivated individuals who involved themselves in a variety of programs and extra-curricular activities. One characteristic shared by each of the participants was the high levels of confidence



that each participant demonstrated. This confidence came across in their interviews and in the way that they described their individual journeys to college. Each of the participants applied to an assortment of prestigious universities because they had the confidence that they were academically prepared and able to compete with students from perhaps more privileged backgrounds. One student commented:

I applied to the Ivy Leagues because I was like, ‘why not?’ Nothing was going to happen if I didn’t get in, but what if I did? I figured I would submit the application because it was an easy application. I was actually set on Stanford up until eleventh grade. When another scholar who was one year ahead of me got into Stanford that went down the hole. I wanted to be the first at NAI to go to Ivy University. (Robert, Interview #2)

Robert’s quote reflects an air of confidence. He went off to an Ivy League university in the fall of 2012. Though he received the full scholarship to USC from the NAI program he was also accepted to 3 Ivy Leagues and waitlisted at one.

The students also develop a strong sense of self because they understand that they are valued at their schools. The students are aware that they are the highest achieving at their schools and that they impact the school’s annual performance and that the schools and teachers appreciate them. Alex mentioned that he had witnessed teachers bicker over who gets to teach the NAI group because those students are generally well behaved, engaged and do their work. The NAI students, in turn gain the reputation of being the “smart-ones.” Of this, Robert said,

[Teachers] want to assist students because they think we’re great students or at least we’re seen as great students because of the work level that we can handle... (Robert, Interview #3)

So, over the course of their participation in the program and through all of the emphasis that is placed on getting to college, the NAI team indicated that it helped students build the confidence that they need to see themselves as college students.

Alex contributed that NAI, whether intentionally or not, positively contributed to students' confidence and self-concept. He shared,

NAI has definitely helped me build confidence. Especially at West HS. Every year I think, 'oh, my gosh, this is going to be so hard. I won't be able to do it. But then once you're in there and doing it, NAI gives you the confidence to believe that it can be done. (Alex, Interview #3)

The participants largely commented on what it means to be a "scholar" within the context of NAI and their own home schools. By virtue of being a scholar in the NAI program, the students believe, and teachers corroborate that they automatically earn respect at their home schools. The student participants commented on how they knew that because they were in NAI they had access to the better classes and the best teachers. In one of the interviews, Robert said, "I think NAI kids are privileged and lucky – we have these great teachers; they help us..." (Robert, Interview #3). Understanding this contributed to their enhanced self-esteem. Marsh, Keller, Trautweine, Ludtke and Baumert (2005) assert that there is a strong link between self-concept and academic achievement; the stronger ones concept of self is, the better one is likely to fare academically. All of the students who participated in this study talked about feeling good about their accomplishments and in the survey that was completed by the senior class.

The participants of this study agreed that each of the components of their college access program work in concert to help them get to college. This study reveals, however, from the perspective of the participants themselves, the most vital components of NAI, a successful college access program.

## **Research Question 2**

The answer to the second research question, “how can the epistemology of urban students inform the work of college access programs?” comes directly from the epistemologies of the students of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative. Maxwell (2011) defines epistemology as, “... a technical term in philosophy [that] refers to how we know and the relationship between the knower and the known.” In this study, epistemology refers to what the urban students at the center of this college access program bring with them as individuals and as students – who they are because of where they come from and what they have lived and experienced. In the operational definition used for this study, epistemology is closely linked to the funds of knowledge framework (Gonzalez et al., 2005) that honors and validates the resources that students carry with them based on their personal experiences.

The epistemology of a student of the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative is completely different from that of a student from an affluent community who was brought up in a world of privilege. The students from NAI, by virtue of belonging to this program, belong to a different group, one who needs access because of the understanding and societal acceptance that the education they are offered is subpar. I use epistemology in this research question to refer to the unique experiences and ways of knowing of the students of NAI.

From the data, I have identified four overarching themes that answer the question of how the epistemology of urban students can inform the future work of these programs. These themes were identified from coded interviews, coded observations and the coded surveys that were completed by the senior students. The following are the four themes as informed by the epistemologies of the community of learners of the NAI program:

- Theme 1: Students demand opportunities, not handouts

- Theme 2: Urban students need support along the pathway to college but also once they are in college
- Theme 3: To overcome the environmental factors often present in urban communities, urban high school students should be enclosed by a tightly woven net that ensures protection and advocacy.
- Theme 4: Urban students require the space to articulate, appreciate and understand the value of their epistemologies.

### **The Epistemologies of Urban students: Informing the Work of College Access Programs**

**Theme 1: Students demand opportunities, not handouts.** Alex's dilemma at the time of the data collection for this study was where he would go to college. Alex's story is very different from that of his counterparts in his community. Coming from a place where college going is not the norm, Alex had the world at his feet. For him the question had become not *if* he was going to college, but rather *which* college he would choose. As his class's valedictorian, Alex had earned admission to some of the top universities in the nation. However, instead of celebrating his tremendous accomplishments, Alex doubted himself. His accomplishments and multiple acceptance letters were overshadowed by his own feelings that somehow he had been given something he had not earned. In terms of USC, Alex wondered whether he had been accepted on his own merit, or simply because he met the minimum requirements for acceptance to USC as a student of the NAI program. Alex said, "Honestly, I think that without NAI I wouldn't have gotten into USC. I don't think I would have" (Alex, Interview #2). For Alex, he understands the huge service that NAI is doing for students from the community, but he wanted to feel like he could have gotten to USC without the NAI program's help.

For Marissa being denied admittance to USC was a huge blow. Though she understood that it was her lackadaisical attitude toward school early in high school that kept her from meeting the minimum requirements for acceptance to the university, she initially felt tremendous

disappointment after feeling that she had lost everything she had spent years working toward.

Marissa shared,

It was one of the hardest things getting that rejection letter, but when I had time to think about it, I was actually thankful. Though I know that NAI did a lot for me, I feel that I earned acceptance to [the college in the Midwest she will attend] on my own. No one gave me anything, and going there is going to take me away from my comfort zone and push me to grow in a way that I have never had to grow before. (Marissa, Interview #3)

Marissa's lesson was that though she was not accepted to USC, she felt a sense of pride in knowing that she had not been given anything and that the school that she had selected wanted her for what she had to offer.

The students at the center of this study expressed a sentiment of wanting to be seen as individuals with unique accomplishments, rather than being accepted for meeting the minimum requirements of a program seeking to get them to college – the students are aware that the requirements for acceptance are different for students of the NAI program. The required SAT score and GPA for admission to USC, the host university, is slightly lower than that of the general population.

**Theme 2: Urban students need support along the pathway to college but also once they are in college.** Because throughout their participation in the program, students who belong to college access programs are part of a very structured experience, where handholding happens throughout, students in this study shared that they often felt lost once they entered college. A common thread across the interviews of the adult participants was the idea that NAI students belong to a tight-knit community when they are part of the program and all of a sudden when they needed it the most, that support was gone. The university's Undergraduate Success Program (USP) is a program for graduates of NAI who attend USC. USP's website states,

Upon their admission to the university, NAI scholars become part of the Undergraduate Success Program (USP). USP offers a network of support for the continued educational, emotional, and social needs of this select group of talented students throughout their tenure at USC. Support services include regular meetings with program counselors to discuss their academic progress and performance, intervention strategies to assist students with the successful completion of their courses and degree programs, and workshops designed to facilitate student transition from high school to college. USP provides for these students' continued informational needs with regard to academic programs, time management, and career options.

However, despite the existence of this program, all of the scholars I interviewed who have graduated college or are currently in college talked about the lack of support they felt once they arrived. Sofia, a current student at USC and NAI graduate explained,

I felt like I was on my own in college. I know they have the USP program which is supposed to be kind of like an NAI for college kids, but they didn't really do what I think they were supposed to do. (Sofia, Interview #1)

According to Sofia, she was supposed to check in with the USP program before registering for classes, or visit them if she needed help, but there was no one reaching out to her. She still does not use the USP program for much.

Students agreed that though they felt ready to tackle college, once they arrived, they still felt behind, and at a disadvantage—they expressed a need for continued guidance, a place to learn and explore the norms of college; particularly the norms of the college classroom. Sofia noted,

In high school, I felt comfortable around my classmates, and I had no problem speaking up or asking questions, but once I got to college they [college students] would ask all kinds of questions that had nothing to do with the course. They had a lot of previous knowledge that I didn't even know how they knew! I felt that freshman year I lost a lot of confidence because I didn't understand how they knew this... (Sofia, Interview #1)

Though the scholars long for a sense of independence once they are out of the program, particularly because they have been part of a structured environment for so long, according to the students, they do find it difficult easing into college life.

**Theme 3: To overcome the environmental factors often present in urban communities, urban high school students should be enclosed by a tightly woven net that ensures protection and advocacy.** College access programs exist because there is an acceptance of the inequalities that exist in our system of education. These programs exist because of the accepted understanding that students from the communities being served by college access programs do not have the necessary resources to get to college. What the NAI program does, according to its participants, is to create a separate community—one that aims to protect the students from whatever turbulence is taking place in their families or community.

By far, the most mentioned aspect of NAI by each of the study participants was the fact that NAI took care of most of the student's needs. This care offered the students attention in the various needs to get them to college. Time and again, the students highlighted instances where they struggled, not academically, but personally, and the comfort that their families felt in reaching out to NAI for help. Sofia shared an anecdote of her times in NAI:

In eleventh grade we had a family issue with my sister who ran away from home. She was in NAI too. She had run away from home but she showed up to class in the morning. So my mom came to talk to Ms. Anthony, I think or Ms. Flores, and they were calling my sister and making sure that she was ok and that she was coming to class even if she wasn't going to go back home. My mom felt comfortable talking to Ms. Flores. She also had one of the social workers talk to my sister and I at Saturday school and worked with her to have her come back. NAI helped my sister realize that she was already a senior and that it wasn't worth it, dropping everything. (Sofia, Interview #1)

For Sofia, the situation that she and her family were facing could have resulted in serious academic repercussions, but the net that surrounded Sofia made provisions for the highly personal situation that her family was confronting.

During the time that this study was carried out, I was able to observe other scenarios where NAI provided support to its students to ensure that their needs were met. For example, toward the end of the school year, a father came to the office in tears, requesting to meet with NAI's social worker. His daughter (a current NAI student) had been removed from the home because of an incident that occurred in the family. The daughter had been placed in a foster home a great distance away from the USC campus. Immediately, NAI's social worker contacted the student's social worker and made arrangements for the child to participate in an honors residential program at USC for which certain NAI students had applied and been selected. This arrangement allowed for NAI to remain involved in the student's academics while her home situation improved.

**Theme 4: Urban students require the space to articulate, appreciate and understand the value of their epistemologies.** Alex raised another important issue when discussing confidence. He mentioned that throughout high school he felt confident, and that he could achieve anything. However, when talking about his transition to college, he talked about being afraid. Alex shared,

Right now I'm not that confident about college. I'm nervous...I'm nervous and I'm scared. I'm as excited as I can be. I am, but I know that the classes are going to be tough. I'm not that confident about them [the classes] and it's going to take a lot of time to get used to them. (Alex, Interview #3)



This was a common theme across all of the interviews. The students felt confident throughout high school. However, many of the participants demonstrated wariness about college. They worried about being unprepared academically because of the awareness of what is lacking in their own schools. Though they know that NAI has done everything to supplement their urban education, they are painfully aware of what they lacked as students from South Los Angeles. All of the seniors who participated in this study referred to the anxiety that they felt as they moved on to college. Though NAI succeeded at opening doors for the students, the anxiety of the unknown was still very much present. Robert said,

I don't know where I'm going to fit with these people. I'm going somewhere new, going to be in classes with people whom I've never taken classes with before. What if I don't fit? People like me don't go to [Ivy League University]. (Robert, Interview #2)

In addition, each of the adult graduates of NAI expressed the culture shock that they experienced once they arrived to college. For them, the shock was greater than simply leaving home for the first time and feeling homesick. The NAI scholars are taken from a setting where they feel comfortable, surrounded by students who all look like them and who all belong to the same socio-economic group, and are placed in a setting with the brightest students from a variety of cultures and from socio-economic groups much different than what they have ever known. Byron shared,

I did live on campus. I signed up to live on the Latino floor and I was looking forward to blending in. I thought it would make the transition easier. I knew that USC would be different from what I was used to, and I was looking forward to the cultural exploration but what I didn't expect and had never seen were the differences within the Latino community. I assumed that everyone [all the Latinos] would be like me, from a low socio-economic background, the first in their families to go to college, that they'd all be in tune with the culture. I did not expect to find folks who didn't speak Spanish, who

were second and third in their families to go to college, who were middle and upper-class... (Byron, Interview #2)

The adult participants of this study all shared the difficulty that they had in transitioning to college. Michelle discussed her experience about almost dropping out – coming from her school and the NAI program, where she had always been an over-achieving and top student, to getting to USC and feeling like she could not keep up. She did not know how to navigate her new setting, and she did not realize that there were still resources present for her to access. I interviewed another NAI graduate, and current college student who shared a similar sentiment. Lola noted,

I didn't realize just how different it was going to be. I think that as a high school student we know the campus and we know all about USC and I know that there were times during my high school experience where I was like, "oh, I don't want to go to USC because I know it and I've been here for so long," and that's a common attitude among NAI students, you know nobody really realized how different it is. When I got here I didn't know what culture shock was but I definitely had that shock of knowing how different I was, coming from the community, being a person of color, being a person who comes from a pretty poor family, and I didn't know how to deal with that because I thought, 'nobody ever told me about this. Everyone told me about how rigorous and academically challenging it was going to be but nobody told me about how I would feel...I struggled, this is one of the major things that I struggled with throughout my college experience, that hindered me in many ways, and I only realize it now because I've been able to deal with some of those things but I just always felt inadequate as a person on this campus. I never felt that I was part of this Trojan Family that everyone speaks so highly of...I never felt that connection. (Lola, Interview #1).

For Lola, this lack of connection and feelings of isolation led her to leave the university for a year. She felt unsupported and alone – that going to college had been the wrong choice for her. She returned to the university determined to make the best of it, but only after learning that she had to seek out her own resources to be successful. Upon her return she joined a program for

first-generation college students that would provide her with a mentor and support throughout the rest of her college journey.

Working so closely with the program gave me the opportunity to witness the difficulty that some of the seniors who went off to college were having in adjusting to college. The parent of one particular student visited the office asking if his daughter should leave the 4-year university and go to community college instead, in hopes of then transferring to USC the following year. Another student went through a similar situation—she visited the office looking for advice because she was severely struggling with fitting in at her school. She too wanted to leave the school and go to a community college because she felt alone, out of place, and as if she did not belong. She was experiencing the same struggle that other NAI graduates discussed encountering once they entered college. The issue went beyond homesickness—it was a feeling of not connecting with the new world of college.

### **Conclusion**

Learning about college access from the lens of the students themselves has allowed me to highlight the features that the students deem most important as well as learning from their own epistemology to strengthen and inform the future work of these programs. This chapter presented the data collected over the course of this study and identified major themes in the work of the college access program that is the focus of this study, the Neighborhood Academic Initiative. The chapter began by presenting some important documents that help understand the work of NAI. I presented some of the documents that were part of the document review. Among these documents were the NAI Graduate Survey, which illustrates graduation data from the first graduating class to the present; a variety of letters of support written for the program during

NAI's early year; and the Scholar's Code of Ethics, which enumerates the expectations of a student of the NAI program. After that section, I presented the data that answered the first research question posed in this study. There, I showcased the responses offered by the participants of this study in the survey that they completed. There, I also identified six overarching factors that, according to the participants of this study, must be present in a successful college access program. In the section that followed, I presented the data that answered the second research question of this study. There I organized the data into four themes that can inform the continued work of college access program, according to its participants.

In the following chapter I will provide an analysis of the findings of this research study and offer recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

I embarked on this study seeking to identify the features within a highly successful college access program that most strongly contribute to the academic success and college matriculation of its students by asking the questions:

1. Which practices of a south Los Angeles college access program most impact a student's ability to matriculate to college?
2. How can the epistemology of urban students inform the work of college access programs?

In carrying out this case study, however, I was able to uncover more than just those factors. Besides identifying the components that the students themselves found most beneficial, I was able to discover some remaining needs and areas for strengthening and enhancing the offerings of this program. Further, utilizing funds of knowledge as a theoretical framework allowed me to identify the ways in which the epistemologies of the participants are taken into account, and inadvertently neglected in the program's design and its various interventions. As a result of utilizing this theoretical framework as a lens, I was also able to find that in certain ways the program at the center of this study is not fully recognizing the students' funds of knowledge. The Neighborhood Academic Initiative achieves its mission of helping underserved students overcome the hurdles present in their communities to matriculate to college, but now is the time to begin identifying further supports to ensure that the students maximize their college experience and graduate.

This chapter will begin with an analysis of my findings. Under the analysis of the findings, I will return to the five features that I drew from literature as the most important in the

work of college access programs. Based on the responses of my study participants, I have prioritized these factors in order of importance. After that, I will continue discussing the additional findings of this study, including the emergence of a sixth finding, and the successful practices of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative. Then I will introduce and discuss the meaning of “masked epistemologies,” a finding of this study and an original term coined to describe the college experiences of the graduates of this comprehensive college access program. After that discussion, I will offer recommendations to the site, to the college access community and to policymakers. I will then present suggestions for future research and following that, I will conclude this work.

### **Analysis of the Findings**

#### **Finding #1: Corroborating the Five Factors**

For the literature review of this study, I developed a list of five factors, derived from key literature on the work of college access programs that serve as indicators of a successful program. In other words, previous literature indicates that these five features are present in all successful college access programs. In carrying out this study I discovered that each of these factors indeed appeared at the site of study. While I was able to corroborate literature on the factors of successful college access programs, one of the significant contributions of this study is the prioritization of these factors, from the point of view of the participants. I will present these factors in order of importance, as according to the students, each of these factors was not equally impactful. This study is concerned with identifying the most important features of college access programs, from the perspective of the students themselves. Ultimately if we are to utilize the

epistemology of the traditionally marginalized students, then we must take into account the voice and experiences of these students to inform the continued work of these programs.

Coding the various data that were collected for this study, including interviews, journaling exercises and a survey revealed that the factors were prioritized in the following order:

1. setting high academic expectations;
2. engaging families;
3. providing tools to navigate the urban environment;
4. enhancing cultural /social capital;
5. helping students develop a positive self-concept.

According to the data collected for this study, including surveys, journals and interviews, the high academic expectations that the program sets is essential to helping students get to college. The high expectations that NAI sets emerged as the most important factor within NAI. Students mentioned that NAI pushed them more than the students in the mainstream population were being pushed. The concept of engaging families emerged as the second most impactful factor. Students understood and appreciated that their families were involved, for it helped them stay on-track amidst an often-turbulent setting. This led to the third factor, which highlighted the tools that NAI offers to navigate the urban environment. NAI exists because of what is lacking in the community it serves. There is chaos, characterized by violence, neglect, and poverty, among others, and students discussed the importance of having a program like NAI protect them from those perils, and help them overcome those. Research consistently points to cultural and social capital as essentials for college matriculation and thriving once there. The students stated that through networking opportunities and access to a variety of cultural events, NAI successfully enhanced their own capital. Finally, the students indicated that the development of a positive

self-concept was the fifth most important factor of NAI. The students talked about feeling special, smart and like they could conquer it all as a result of the accolades and respect they received for being NAI scholars.

### **Finding #2: Structure and Accountability: The Sixth Factor**

Through this research I was able to uncover a new finding in the literature about college access programs. The idea of a structured program, one that takes into account the individual students – their experiences, their communities, their epistemologies, and one that holds them accountable for keeping up with the program’s demands, emerged as a key component of college access programs. I suggest that a sixth factor must be added to the previous five. I posit that the sixth factor must state that college access programs work at providing students with a rigid structure and accountability to navigate the college pathway. It is not only the structure that works to get the students to college; it is also the accountability that ensures that the students remain on task. The program staff works diligently to ensure that each student keeps up with the structure and accountability that the program establishes.

My findings suggest that the added factor of “structure and accountability” must also be considered in the discussion of successful college access programs. Each of the factors that were revealed by the students who participated in this study can fall under the umbrella of structure and accountability. For this research study, structure is defined as the regimented academic, emotional, social and financial supports that the Neighborhood Academic Initiative have in place to ensure that all of their students’ needs are met to ensure high school graduation and college matriculation. Seminal scholarship on college access programs implies a need for structure and accountability, but do not identify it as a standalone concept. In their work about improving



college access for minority first-generation students, for example, Martinez and Klopott (2002) make recommendations to college access programs. They write,

Require all students to take an academically rigorous core curriculum. Providing access to such a curriculum sends teachers and students a message that all students can complete high-level work. (Martinez & Klopott, 2002, p. 5)\_

In their recommendation, Gullat and Jan (2003) express that it is essential that college access programs offer all of the students an “academically rigorous core curriculum.” This implies structure and accountability. In order for these students to make it to college, they require access to a structured academic program, and for the program to hold them accountable. Therefore, it is the work of the college access program to create a curriculum model that offers rigorous coursework, and to ensure that every student takes those classes—to hold the students accountable. This is an example of structure and accountability. Without the aid of a college access program, many students from underserved backgrounds may not know that it is essential to take a rigorous course load.

Perhaps structure and accountability as an independent concept has been overlooked because it is implied in the many other features necessary for successful college access programs. While it might have been touched upon in previous literature, there was not consensus that structure was its own concept. For this reason, I did not identify this as one of the original five factors culled from literature. However, based on participant response in this study, structure and accountability are essential. NAI requires structure to function. The program must explicitly outline the necessary steps to get to college, because the students are first generation students, who are often unfamiliar with those steps. Structure is essential for NAI because they must

protect the students from the chaotic elements that are prevalent in the community; they must tell their students what they need to do to get them where they need to go.

The notion of structured programming is a new finding in this study. According to the students of NAI, it was the entire structured web that was built around them that contributed to their successful completion of high school and subsequent college matriculation; furthermore, it was this web that also shielded them from harmful elements present in their surroundings. My findings suggested that college access programs must be highly structured in order to be most effective.

Though structure is necessary to guide the students of college access programs to college, a discussion around the negative outcomes of such rigid structure must be had. For so many years, the students are led by hand through each necessary step to get to college, from taking the right classes, to being taken on cultural outings, to being provided with a mentor, to being prepared for the SAT, to college application, etc. Unfortunately, once these students make it to college, and definitely those interviewed for this study, felt lost – lost because they were on their own, and this was the first time they had had to experience independence outside of the structured culture of NAI. This will be discussed further later in this chapter.

### **Finding #3: Identifying the Practices of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative: A Culture of High Expectations, Transforming Family and Community, and College Guidance**

The USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative is making an important contribution to the community surrounding USC. Serving a school district with lackluster graduation rates, this program manages to guide 100% of its participants along the college pathway and help them matriculate to college. This is a remarkable feat, considering that in this county the department of

education noted that only 67% of its residents who are labeled “socioeconomically disadvantaged” graduate (California Department of Education, 2012). According to the participants of this study, the supports that the program provides work in tandem to ensure that each student makes it to college. The participants of this study agreed that the entire NAI team operates with the understanding that these students have promise and can succeed like any student from more privileged circumstances, but that all they are missing is the access to the social and cultural resources necessary to get to college and successfully navigate it once there. According to NAI’s mission statement, and original vision for the program, serving urban students and their families along the college pathway are the program’s core values.

**A culture of high expectations.** Of the many components of the program that emerged as essential for the students of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative, the notion that the students are immersed in a culture of high expectations frequently appeared. The various activities that the program offers to its students like Saturday Academy, afterschool tutoring and targeted counseling make it difficult for the students to fall off course. For many of the participants, the high academic expectations that the program set make the students work harder because they knew that their teachers and administrators believed that they could achieve. Literature on college access programs supports the notion that college access programs yield success because they set high expectations for their students (Swail, 2003).

Saturday Academy emerged as something that was of extreme importance to the participants of the program. Students expressed that the additional day of school offered them the opportunity to feel a part of something larger and become more connected with the program. According to the participants of this study, Saturday Academy also gave the administrative team

of NAI to have closer access to the students. It offered a convenient forum to pass along information, offer test preparation, promote college, and expose them to cultural and social affairs; this tightened the net around each of the students. Saturday Academy is a necessary component of the program. On Saturdays, the program is able to reach all 600-plus participants of the program. It serves as a place where the program's culture is established, and where the students learn the norms of the program, and thus become indoctrinated in the program's beliefs. The younger students see the older students who have traveled down the same road and each of the students benefit from the mentorship of NAI graduates who are now employed by NAI as tutors and mentors.

Throughout the interviews and journal exercises, the students of the NAI program showed themselves to be highly motivated and driven students. This common trait among the students can certainly be attributed to the culture of high expectations that the program establishes. The NAI students are highly involved within their own schools and they present themselves as confident and successful youth. Building this sort of culture is essential for students from these communities. However, it is still important that the program offers students the opportunity to engage with students and in activities outside of their program. The program sets very rigid rules around participating in every program-sponsored activity. Because the program keeps the students busy from Monday through Saturday and afterschool, this limits the kinds of access that the students might be able to have to other activities outside of their communities. The program must consider ways to maintain their culture of high expectations but also bring students access to different experiences outside of their own community.

**Transforming family and community.** The participants of this study asserted that NAI helped the families understand that academic achievement and going to college are important. With its comprehensive family engagement component the program sends the message that the students' homes are rich and substantive, and that the program sees and honors that. Further, the program made the idea of college a tangible possibility for the families. In the cases presented for this study, each of the participants shared that having their families as active participants along the college pathway made an important difference. The responses of the study participants indicate that NAI understands that engaging the family is crucial to the success of the students and makes family participation a core program component of its program. A study by Cheng, Ickes, and Verhofstadt (2011), that sought to identify how family support is related to students' GPA scores, found that the support of the family is crucial in student academic success. Equipping the families with the tools for getting to college is an important contribution in a community where families face various challenges in engaging in the education of the children. In Ms. Garcia's interview, she mentioned several times how essential it was for her to have support in educating her children, because she was a single parent. Smith, Kuzin, De Pedro, and Wohlsetter (2009), highlight this and other obstacles often present in urban communities, among them, "language barriers, work schedules and a sense of disenfranchisement" (p. 4).

Apart from helping students understand the importance of college and the steps to get there, participants indicated that the program helped their families feel at ease with the idea of college and with what college entails. The program serves the additional purpose of transforming the conversations that happen in the homes of the participants. Students of the NAI program and their families know with certainty that college is the next logical step after high school.

Additionally, the parents of the scholars feel like they belong to a village that is invested in the success of their children. Many parents continue to help in the program long after their children have left the program. The parents feel connected to the academic journeys of their children, and the children in turn feel the support of a family that extends beyond their own. Students are sent off with a sense of accountability to do well and bring pride to not just their own family, but also everyone who helped contribute to their success.

Because parents of NAI students become such strong advocates for their children's education and they see the benefits of involving themselves, they refer other family members and neighbors to the program. This, in turn, is potentially transforming the structure of the family and the community by validating the importance of a college education, and making it an expectation. For a community where college going is not the norm, the referral of other students to the program demonstrates the shift in thinking that is occurring, perhaps in part, because of the program and the reputation that it has gained in the community. NAI is making positive contributions to the community it serves, as many of the graduates return to their communities to give back and make an impact. The program currently employs over 30 graduates of NAI as tutors and in other positions that serve the current NAI students. Bringing educated individuals into the community to impact the lives of the current residents makes an important difference to the community.

In an interview with the NAI program's founder, she recalled the planning stages of the program. One of the program's larger aims was to educate members of the surrounding community to eventually gain acceptance to the university and increase representation of individuals of color in higher education. When looking at the community surrounding USC, the

founder and her team understood that they would be dealing with an at-risk community and therefore the program would need to shield its students from the dangers of such a place. The students talked about NAI as a family unit, one that protects each other and that guides one another toward positive ventures. The program's staff agrees that they must keep the students engaged in activities that will help them grow but also, keep them away from the risk factors that are prevalent in their surroundings.

**College guidance.** During every interview and several journal entries, the students and graduates of NAI emphasized that as students of the NAI program, they felt that they were constantly the focus of the program, and that NAI was very much in tune with their needs. They talked about NAI teachers always being present and not allowing them to quit, even when the students themselves did not think they could go on. The students also articulated that the counseling that the program offers helped them make sure they took the right classes and that they were on the right track for graduation.

The program ensures that the students have the necessary components in place to get them to college. To identify these necessary components, the program must recognize the pieces that are absent in the community it serves. Social and cultural capital is important on the roadway to college. Many of the participants of the study commented on the types of activities that NAI offers, and how those activities benefitted them on their path to college. From NAI's perspective, the access to cultural and social activities is designed to supplement that which is typically absent from their daily experiences. The students mentioned that they appreciated the access that NAI gave them to mentors, to the college experience, enrichment classes, and a variety of field trips designed to expose them to new experiences and ways of thinking. The

graduates of the program who participated in this study echoed this sentiment, and said that they were thankful to NAI for the access to such experiences, for it was not until they reached college that they understood how much they would have missed out on without NAI's efforts to offer them social and cultural experiences.

The students of NAI expressed that because of the protective net that is built around them to offer them a structured experience that ensures that they have everything they need to get to college, they experienced academic success. The program sought to meet each of the students' needs, whether, academic, social or emotional, in an effort to help them complete high school and matriculate to college.

The targeted college counseling offered by NAI also arose as an important and necessary piece of the program as well. NAI's college access counselor works closely with each cohort of students to ensure that they are on track for graduation, that they all have the information they need about applying to college, that they all apply, and that any questions raised by the parents are answered. In the survey completed by the senior class of 2012, 98% of the students agreed that they "...took advantage of NAI's counseling component and believe that it was beneficial to his/her high school experience." This corroborates the scholarship of Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, and Colyar (2004), who posit that a structured and dedicated counseling component is crucial for urban students, despite the unfortunate reality that the counseling component that is not available at most urban schools. They cite the over-worked and over-loaded guidance counselors who cannot dedicate adequate time to providing substantial service to each and every one of the students at the school. They write, "When students have negative perceptions of their counselors



and choose not to forge relationships with them, they diminish a possible channel for college-going information and support” (p. 454).

#### **Finding #4: Informing the Work of College Access Programs: Masked Epistemologies**

The participants of this study agreed that the Neighborhood Academic Initiative is a student-centered program. The analysis of the qualitative data gathered for this study corroborates this notion, and asserts that the program makes many provisions that honor the Funds of Knowledge of its participants and views their epistemologies as something of value by taking into account the needs of each individual student and catering to those to ensure that each student can achieve success; the program engages the families because it understands what an essential role families play in the success of their children. According to the program’s founder, the program model was designed in a way that was customized to the needs of the community it was to serve. According to the participants, what is most unique about the Neighborhood Academic Initiative is the customized support that it offers to its students and their families. The program does not take a “one size fits all” approach. It tailors its offerings to suit the specific and unique needs of each participant. Over the course of their participation in the program, the students and families develop a relationship of trust with the program, and really look at the program as an educational partner.

**Masked epistemologies.** The interviews with the adult participants revealed that the staff places the students at the center of everything they do, and the current high school students corroborated this as a fact. The participants of this study shared that they felt supported, encouraged and valued. However, with this knowledge, the most important and surprising finding of this study was the notion that upon leaving high school, the epistemologies of these

students, that were so highly praised and valued during high school become invisible as soon as they leave the protective net of the program.

Each of the adult participants of the program expressed how unprepared they were for what awaited them when they got to college. While the students are equipped with the cultural and social capital and academic preparation necessary to get to college, they are then left on their own in college and the further attainment of cultural and social capital is left up to them. However, because they have not had to seek it on their own, many of the scholars who make it to college struggle with the new social and cultural norms which college requires them to negotiate. Each of the adult participants of this study shared that they were surprised once they arrived at college, not because they could not keep up academically, but because of the social obstacles they were forced to confront. The program must take steps to help its students understand the full landscape of college, and open their eyes to the realities of society's class structure so that they can understand themselves in the context of the real world.

Research posits that first-generation students are especially at-risk of dropping out of college (Ishitani, 2003; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Some of this research points to the initial shock of feeling out of place in their new setting (Cushman, 2007)—students are faced with having to cohabitate with new people, live in a new place, and make friends. Though on its own, this experience is not a phenomenon, most college students experience some culture shock upon arriving. From this study I discovered that the shock is unique for participants of college access programs—these students share a common feeling that often goes unnoticed or unarticulated.

The term “masked epistemologies” is defined as the sense of invisibility and disregard that first generation college students who have entered college with the aid of a college access program face in their new setting. Over the course of my interviews with graduates of NAI, I discovered that each of the participants, each highly successful in high school and with all of the traditional tools necessary for adapting to college, encountered a severe culture shock that almost crippled them during their freshman year. Their epistemologies are not obliterated when these students enter college. Because the students feel invisible, they opt to mask their epistemologies, only to reveal them in settings where they feel safe and honored. Students who graduate the NAI program leave for college with luggage full of what NAI has packed for them over the course of their participation in the program. According to the individuals who participated in this study, they leave with high self-esteem, having become accustomed to being regarded as members of the highest echelon of learners, having been called “scholars” for years, and with lessons about what they will face when they enter the college classroom. However, when they get to college, these students find that while they are academically capable to handle college, they feel like outsiders in the new setting. Their epistemologies, or ways of knowing remain, but once in college, students feel that their epistemologies no longer matter because they do not fit with the mainstream. What was praised and highly regarded during their tenure in the NAI program goes from being respected, to being overlooked. These students go from being the center of attention to feeling like they are the most invisible members of their new world. To cope, many of these students close themselves off to the mainstream world of college, thus isolating themselves in the first few years of college while they learn to navigate the terrain.

The act of masking one's epistemology is an act of power. The urban students of color students who enter college via the aid of a college access program are confronted with the reality that their epistemologies are not part of the mainstream. The power in the act comes in choosing when to mask and when to reveal the epistemologies. The students are made to feel invisible, and thus they choose to remain that way by masking themselves so as to not place themselves in a vulnerable position. However, in settings where they are comfortable and honored, the students are free to showcase who they are.

The feeling of isolation and obscurity that comes with the notion of masked epistemology is rarely discussed, even among the students of the same group. In Michelle's case, she went off to college with many peers with whom she had gone to high school, but in her interview, Michelle said, "I couldn't talk about it with my friends. I was constantly on the phone with my boyfriend [who didn't go to USC]. He was my sounding board. I didn't think anyone else would understand" (Michelle, Interview #2). Byron had a similar experience. When he entered the university he opted to live on a Latino-centric floor of a residence hall, hoping to ease into college by surrounding himself with people with whom he would feel comfortable. What he found, however, was that even within the Latino community, he did not belong. Again, he could not express his frustrations, or could not even articulate why he felt so out of place, even belonging to a community of people from the same racial profile. Unfortunately, he realized that even within that group, he did not belong. For the students of NAI, the notion of invisibility has to do more with understanding of who they are. Class plays an important role, and many of the students of NAI enter college without an understanding that even those within their same culture

may be different from them because of a different socio-economic standing. Elizabeth, another graduate of NAI spoke of her experience with class shock upon entering college. She shared,

I really wasn't expecting some of the things I experienced [at USC]. When I got in to college, I was proud to not only be an NAI scholar, also because I had been named a "Topping Scholar." The Topping scholarship is given to students with financial need for academics and involvement in school— so I was honored – it was a big deal! This program gave each of the "scholars" a jacket to wear that had the name of the program on it. I wore this jacket all the time! One day, I was in line for dinner and I was wearing my jacket. Two girls were in line behind me and they were chatting. I guess they thought I couldn't hear them but one girl asks the other, "Topping scholar? What's that?" and the other girl responded, "Oh, it's that poor kid scholarship." I couldn't believe it! I mean, I was so proud to have the jacket, but that was embarrassing. That's all I was to these people, I was just a poor kid and I'd never experienced anything like that before. (Elizabeth, Interview #1)

The lack of experiences went beyond just financial disparities. Elizabeth also shared that though she was a model student at South High School, involved in a variety of extra-curricular activities, and maintained a high grade point average, she struggled once she got to college. Her feeling was similar to that of other participants of this study. She recalled,

I remember going to my science class and thinking that everyone was so smart. I was one of two Latinas in the class, and it stood out to me that everyone else was always raising their hands – like they knew what was going on. I would study and study, but I wasn't comfortable enough to contribute in the class...then one day we had a study group, and I remember just dreading that because I was sure my cover would be blown – that I didn't know anything. But once we were in the group, I learned that the other kids didn't know either! The reason they knew more than me was because they were going to office hours and having conversations with the TAs—I didn't even know you could do that! When I finally learned this piece of information, it was too late in the semester. (Elizabeth, Interview #1)

For Elizabeth, and other NAI students, college made their confidence dwindle. Though they all entered college academically competitive, each of the participants of this study shared that suffered a breakdown, of sorts, when they realized that they did not have all of the social capital necessary to thrive in college from the start.

The participants of this study were surprised to find that college was more than just about academic achievement. The adult participants revealed that they each encountered a severe culture shock once they arrived, as they did not know how to behave in their new surroundings. But they also did not know how to talk about what they were experiencing. There was a sense of shame associated with this feeling. The students thought that no one else would understand or that no one else was experiencing the same thing. Furthermore, expressing these feelings would call additional attention to the fact that they were different.

The masked epistemology phenomenon is the result of the lack of preparation for the world of college outside of academics, and this is where the college access program must pay attention. College goes beyond academics; students of college access programs are thrust into a world they have no concept of, though they have spent the last seven years on the college campus. Though the college access program prepares the students academically, the data collected from the adult graduates of the program suggest that the socio-cultural elements that have to do with college are not properly addressed in the college access program, or not addressed fully enough. The seniors who took part in this study shared that they were afraid of what awaited them in college - that they did not know whether they would fit in and that they were nervous that they would not find the necessary connections to thrive.

The students of NAI leave high school with high self-esteem, having been highly regarded and respected throughout high school. By setting high expectations and pushing students to give their best, NAI helps students develop a positive self-concept, according to the participants. Further, the students are aware that they are being groomed to succeed, and thus many of them carry themselves in such a manner. According to the participants, even their

teachers make them feel like NAI students are different, like they are going to do something that is out of the norm. This leads to the students leaving the program feeling like they are prepared and ready to compete. The students agreed that NAI provided them with a sense of security, like they had no room to fail because of the network of support that enclosed them.

Though NAI exists to serve the underrepresented groups of learners who live in the community surrounding USC, and by design, they honor each of their students by catering to their social and academic needs while in high school, this research reveals that the epistemologies of its students are also invisible to the NAI program. The program acknowledges that it serves first-generation students of color who need guidance and access to make it to college but it ignores that which it seeks to honor – their epistemologies. The program must not only address what the students need, but who the students are and help them understand what the world outside of their microcosm holds.

My unique experience as a graduate of the program and researcher allows me to have a first-hand historical perspective. When I first entered college in 1998, I entered with 27 other members of my graduating class, all students who had gone through the NAI program. Most of us opted to stick together, live in the same residence halls, and help each other through that difficult first semester. But even so, I observed the lack of connection that many of the students had with the mainstream population. In a personal communication with a member of one of the earlier cohorts of graduates, a student shared,

I didn't feel like I belonged to any of the major ethnic groups on campus. I wasn't white enough for the white kids, and I wasn't Latino enough for the Latino kids. I couldn't find my place. I didn't connect with many people. I chose to stick to what was comfortable, with the people I'd known forever. They knew me, they accepted me, they understood me... (Elsa, personal communication, March 23, 2012)

*Masked epistemologies—Race and class in NAI.* The program offers its students a world of experiences that contribute in making them well-rounded and academically prepared individuals. What this program fails to address, however, is the epistemology of the participants in the context of a real world setting. While the students thrive in the cohort model, many of them feel lost once they are without it, not because they do not know how to be self-sufficient, but rather because they have not been given the words to articulate who they are in the context of the world outside of their college access program. The students leave the program with limited tools for navigating the social landscape of college—but the students are not even aware of this, for they leave the program confident, and ready to conquer it all.

During their time in the NAI program, from middle through high school, the students only see and engage with people just like them—people from their same race and class. Even many of the adults with whom they interact via the program, the staff and mentors, come from similar class and racial backgrounds. While this yields myriad benefits, it can also pose as a further obstacle for the students, for it limits the experiences that they have with people who are different from them. Additionally, race and class are rarely discussed within the program. The program carries on with the assumption that with the rigorous academic program and the capital they provide, the students will thrive—and many do. The real issue, however, has to do with the shock that they students encounter when they leave the protective arms of the program. Many of the graduates of the program discussed feeling out of place even within their own culture once at college because they did not know how to interact with people from different class levels.

Though many colleges make provisions to help first generation college students with the transition from high school to college, many students still do not know how, or are not



comfortable approaching a new setting to ask for help. Students of college access programs have been accustomed to getting help instantaneously, often without even knowing that they needed help. In the example of the program at the center of this study, the students who attend University of Southern California from NAI are required to take part in a support program exclusively for members of NAI. This group is supposed to offer the now college students support in a way similar to NAI. However, the participants of this study shared that they did not feel that this program offered them as much support as they would have liked. Others mentioned feeling embarrassed to have to ask for help. Programs like these, though well-intentioned, must also analyze their strategies for engaging these students and ensure that the unique epistemologies of the students they aim to serve are taken into account, in order to make the strongest impact possible.

Each of the participants of this study mentioned in interviews and journal exercises that they knew upon entering the program that they would graduate high school and they would go on to college, because the program continuously emphasized that. What the students learned once they left high school was that they arrive to college with a set of experiences that are unique to having participated in a college access program. They enter college having come from a close-knit, but homogeneous community, where everyone is of the same ethnic group, and from the same socioeconomic status. While the participants acknowledged the advantages of such an experience, these experiences also contribute to the dramatic culture shock that the students experience once they arrive at college.

***Masked epistemologies—social obstacles.*** Graduates of college access programs struggle to fit in socially because they have lacked the exposure to different types of people and cultures.

They have traveled in a cohort of students just like themselves. Though their cultural and social capital has been enhanced by their participation in the program, they have never interacted academically or socially with members of a different social class; something they will certainly encounter once they enter college. All of these students have been members of an elite club within their own culturally homogenous schools. Throughout their participation in their college access program the students have not been given opportunities to engage with individuals from backgrounds different from their own. Arriving in a new setting and feeling like they do not belong is embarrassing and something that they would rather keep to themselves.

During the time of this study, I had the opportunity to see the senior class complete their senior year and go off to college. Because I work for the program and am at the host campus on a daily basis, I often see NAI alumni around campus. The first week of school, I ran into Alex, one of the participants of this study. When Alex spotted me walking on campus, he called my name and excitedly ran toward me. I too was pleased to see him and asked him how his first week was going. His response revealed very much about his own expectations of what college was to bring. Upon my question, Alex responded, “Oh my gosh, Ms. Z, it’s going so well! I like it so far, and you know what, no one has been racist yet! I thought everyone would look down on me ‘cause you know I’m from around here, but everyone has been really nice” (Alex, Personal communication, August 28, 2012). For Alex, though he was having a good time during the first week of college, he had entered college with the preconceived notion that he would not be accepted because of his background. The concern for Alex, as with the other individuals I interviewed for this study, was not whether or not he would be academically competent; the concern was whether he would be socially accepted.

Thus, though college access programs provide students with the social capital to get to college, they do not provide enough social capital for the students to thrive once there, because the students arrive with minimal understanding of or exposure to people from different ethnic and economic backgrounds. College access programs need to help their participants understand who they are and expose them to the variety of people that exist, and ultimately unveil the social structures that aim to keep students like them in the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

*Masked epistemologies—familial obstacles.* In the transition to college, the family that has been such an integral player in the academic success of the students also begins to disregard the epistemologies of the participants. Because the students are often the first in their families to go to college, and because the program promotes college as the ultimate goal, many of the parents assume that their work is done. I asked Ms. Garcia how she felt once her daughters had been accepted to college and how she supported them once they were in; she shared, “I felt like ‘we did it,’ and that’s it. I didn’t know that I should still ask them questions or check in about how they’re adjusting to college” (Ms. Garcia, Interview #1). Because these students are the first to go to college, the families do not understand or do not know that they must still engage in how the students are doing. They must continue to ask questions and must continue to offer them support. In the family setting, the epistemologies of the students inadvertently become invisible. The families do not engage not because they do not want to, but rather because they do not know that they should, and they do not know how.

As I analyzed the data, I began thinking more about the families once their children enter college. I wondered if the students made an effort at all to keep them engaged. I thought about the various opportunities that college offers families for participation, like orientation and family

weekend. In my interview with Ms. Garcia, I asked if she had attended orientation with her daughters, and she revealed that she had not even been aware that it was an option for parents to participate in orientation. That response was interesting to me, and made me reflect on my own experience as a graduate of the program. As I recall, no one from my student cohort invited parents to orientation, and neither did I. I do not even think I knew that parents could go. That made me curious about other NAI graduates across the years. Being that I am conveniently housed at the NAI office and have access to many NAI graduates who either work for NAI or visit the office regularly, I began asking who had invited their parents to graduation. I found that only one person out of 10 people I asked had taken her parent to orientation. The responses from the other nine ranged from. “I didn’t know that I should,” to “I didn’t even ask my parents because there was a cost attached and I knew my parents couldn’t afford it,” and “I didn’t want my parents to feel out of place because they don’t speak English.” This type of mentality is very telling. Right upon entry to college, these students already feel out of place—they go to an orientation where most people’s parents are present, and this cohort from an underserved and underrepresented community are there by themselves, already feeling invisible.

*Masked epistemologies—academic obstacles.* Students of college access programs must also deal with the feeling of their epistemologies being invisible in their college classes, so they must mask who they truly are to protect themselves in this dominant setting. Though each of the participants of this study expressed feeling academically competent, they also shared a feeling of inferiority when it came to their contributions to their courses. Sofia and Elizabeth shared the feeling of surprise at how much the other students in her classes knew. They even wondered where they had learned so much. Michelle shared a similar sentiment when she said that in her

high school classes she felt comfortable and was very vocal. Though the students at the center of this study are as academically competent as their peers and did not discuss any academic struggles, they did talk about feeling like though the college access program had given them a great deal, they were still at a disadvantage—the disadvantage was that they got to college unprepared to deal with the competition with which they were confronted.

### **Finding #5: Fostering Independence**

Apart from the struggle with masked epistemologies, graduates of college access programs must also confront the struggle with asserting themselves as independent individuals once they get to college. During their tenure in the program, the students are to do what they are told and to take part in every activity put on by the program. Further, if a student was facing a social or emotional issue, the program took steps to have them work with a counselor to overcome whatever the problem. Though well intended, this can hinder the students' sense of independence. For students who must negotiate a feeling of invisibility when they get to college, it is doubly difficult to have to come to grips with the notion that they have not been given the opportunity to become independent. Each of the adult participants of this study felt the challenge not knowing their place once in college, but this challenge perhaps could have been alleviated had the students arrived to college with a stronger sense of independence. Perhaps this would have pushed the students to be more vocal about what they were experiencing, or to seek the resources they needed to tackle the issues they were experiencing. Instead, these students felt lost because there was no one there to help guide them through what they were experiencing.

By design, the college access program model must provide structure to its students in order to ensure that they are taking all of the necessary steps to get their participants to college.

Participants indicated that the structure of the program, and the tight net surrounding them were beneficial in helping them meet their goals. However, such rigid structure may limit the development of the participants' sense of self. For the span of their middle and high school careers, these students' hands are held, though with a noble objective. However, students may become reliant on this hand-holding and thus, when confronted with the need to be who they are, they find themselves lost. One of the tenets of the program's "Scholar's Code of Ethics" reads, "As an NAI scholar I will attend my classes, complete assignments, and do as I'm told by my teachers and tutors." It is written into the very core of the program that scholars must do as they are told. The choice of wording for this tenet reveals the program's objective of guiding the students, but an undesired byproduct of this may be the resulting experience of invisibility and dependence that the students encounter.

The program is caught in a dilemma because though they must hold the students' hands to get them to college, and must offer them structure to ensure that they do everything that they need to do along the way, the program must also help the students become independent, while still maintaining the structure. The program must provide opportunities for the students to do certain things on their own so that they can grow and gain more exposure to the world outside of NAI. Students must be exposed to different classes and cultures and learn to assert their own epistemologies in relation to whatever situation they enter to ensure that they go to college with those experiences so that the shock they will inevitably experience does not result in a larger struggle.

Guidance is crucial when the students are in high school, but the program must negotiate how to guide the students while granting the students opportunities to grow. Because the

program takes such an active role in the academic journeys of its students, it must identify ways to help students experience certain things on their own. This will result in growth that will go hand-in-hand with helping students understand and accept their epistemologies and thus help them overcome the inevitable challenges they will be confronted with once in college.

## **Conclusion**

In this section, I identified the five factors most commonly present in college access programs and ranked them in order of importance according to the participants. Further, I identified structure as the most important component of these. In the conversation around college access programs, I also identified that NAI's additional successful practices are their transformation of family and community and the emphasis on the individual student. The most important finding of this study was the identification of the concept of masked epistemologies, and the need for encouraging student independence. My research unveiled the work that program access programs must do while their students are in high school to help them thrive once they get to college.

## **Recommendations for NAI**

The data gathered as a part of this study and the analysis of the data that I carried out asserts that the work of college access programs is necessary for underserved communities. These programs provide the much-needed network of support, guidance and capital that are often not available to these students. This network of support is essential, as the program's graduation and college matriculation data reveal—the students who participate in this program graduate high school and make it to college. However, this study revealed that more needs to be done in terms of helping these students learn how to articulate their epistemologies and understand how

to navigate a world outside of the protective cocoon in which they have been contained since middle school. The epistemologies of the participants of college access programs will remain invisible unless the educational community as a whole takes steps to accept and understand that they are valuable.

### **Site-Based Recommendations**

It is essential that college access programs help the students learn how to think critically about their epistemologies—their ways of knowing: who they are, how they have come to know what they do and how their unique experiences have shaped them. It is important for these students to have conversations about seeing their value in the context of the dominant culture. Students need to be able to articulate their epistemologies and understand that their epistemologies are definitely different from that of the mainstream, but it is that difference that contributes to the richness. The value of urban epistemologies is rarely discussed or even recognized, so urban students are swimming against a strong current.

**Making the invisible visible.** College access programs must look closely at the notion of masked epistemologies and identify ways to help students understand the concept and strategize how to make the invisible visible. If the largest obstacle that students of college access programs will encounter when they get to college is the feeling that who they are and their ways of knowing are invisible, and that it is something that they must mask, then college access programs must equip them with the tools to understand who they are, learn to articulate it, and navigate their new world while embracing themselves, and thus their epistemologies. Students must be exposed to different types of students and to different communities in order to get a sampling of how college will be. The program should consider partnering with schools from more privileged



areas to offer students access to activities at those schools. Perhaps the program can capitalize on its location and instead of having students visit a university class for a day, the host university can offer NAI seniors access to a class for a semester—this way, when students enter college, they will have already participated in an actual college class.

**Intentional dialogue.** One way in which college access programs can help students understand that what they have to contribute is valuable would be to have discussion groups with the students around the topics of society's realities, injustices and prejudices. Engaging students in a dialogue around real topics would allow them to begin making sense of the world they will enter once out of the safety net of the program. Because college access programs such as the one highlighted in this study have a cadre of graduates on whom they can count, they should host speakers' series where current college going students can talk about their experience beyond just academics and what is happening in the college setting, outside of the classroom. Further, these programs can host monthly call-ins for graduates of the program to discuss their experiences once they are in college.

The program should have active discussions with the students around topics relevant to not just college, but society as a whole. Once a month, for example, the program can host a seminar that focuses on a specific topic, like class. After a facilitator leads a conversation around the topic, the students can be given questions to consider and perhaps take-home assignments that will help promote critical thinking and help the students begin thinking about a world beyond NAI.

**Engaging the alumni network.** Based on their funds of knowledge, the experience of the NAI scholar once in college, is a unique one, and one that is unique to this group of students.

Because of their funds of knowledge of coming from a turbulent community, where education is not the norm, and belonging to this group that isolates them and protects and nurtures them along the college pathway, getting to college brings with it its own set of challenges. As much as NAI students aim to connect to the university campus, they need to feel guidance and support along the way. Because the program is housed at the host university, where a great number of NAI graduates study, the program should consider taking the current high school seniors and juniors on visits of the campus. Though the students go to the university campus in the mornings for their classes, this is early in the day, long before the hustle and bustle of the day begins. Students from this program should be exposed to the feel of the campus, the dorms, and the norms of the place. The alumni board should be created to design support interventions for the current high school and college students. The board can provide dialogue around real-life topics specific to members of their own community to help with the transition to and success in college.

The program should consider making more use of the vast network of graduates for the advantage of the NAI scholars currently in the program. While the program employs a generous number of graduates in various aspects of the program, NAI administrators should strategize ways in which to engage alumni in more intentional ways. Though the alumni employees of NAI fulfill the role of mentor to current students, the students would definitely benefit from engaging in dialogue about the college experience with other students who have gone down the same path. Intentional conversations with graduates of the program with current students would allow for the dialogue around the genuine experiences of urban students of color in a higher education setting to emerge.

It became apparent from the interviews that NAI helps its students build a strong network of individuals with whom they will likely remain connected to over the course of their lives, and it is imperative for the program to help more of its graduates contribute their strengths and experiences to enhancing what the program offers its students. Current NAI students can benefit greatly from the lived experiences and epistemologies of those who came before them. The program must help past students give back by offering them opportunities to engage with students who are walking down the same path they have already walked.

**Building bridges.** College access programs have the unique opportunity of seeing their students through most of their education, middle school through college. Being that the relationship with the university exists, the college access program must utilize the resources that are a byproduct of this relationship to improve the experiences of its participants once they enter college. A section from Jehangir's (2009) work looked at cultivating the voice of first-generation college students reads,

They [the students] need to have bridges that help them cross the divide between their home worlds (Howard 2001) and the academic world. These bridges need to represent a two-way process that invites students into the academic realm without demanding a type of assimilation that makes it impossible for them to return to their home worlds. In addition, curricula that acknowledge these students' input and experiences as valuable to the academy can serve to foster a sense of belonging and connection, which is critical to their academic integration (Rendón 1992, 1994; Tinto 1987). (Jehangir, 2009, p. 36)

The college access program is in a prime position to help students build these bridges, and to help them start with the foundation for these bridges as early as the high school years.

**Keeping the family close.** The NAI program succeeds at engaging the families in the academic journey of the students. However, parents also need guidance as their children transition from home to college. Checking in with alumni families once per semester or

quarterly, via telephone, in person or even newsletter will help parents remain connected to the program. The program can continue to serve as an important ally, help answer questions and offer assistance to the families once the students move on to college. Further, it would help parents understand that the journey is not really complete until the students make it out of college. This would also relay the message to the students that the same group that was behind them as they traveled along middle and high school remains interested and invested in their academic success.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Changes in policy are essential to helping urban students of color from underserved communities gain access to and graduate from college. Policy thus far has upheld a conservative educational discourse that aims to maintain social stratification. Darder (2012) posits that “It is precisely the acceptance of this social view that functions to guarantee that, for the most part, students from the dominant culture end up at the top of the hierarchy, and students from the subordinate cultures will end up at the bottom” (p. 5). If change is to occur within our educational system, policymakers must make the educational opportunities of urban students of color a priority.

Policy-makers must consider the educational access of poor students of color and work toward creating a level-playing field from elementary school all the way to college. It is unjust for poor students to attend schools with unchanging dismal graduation rates. Policy should address ways in which to support our poor but full of promise youth.

**Investing in the students.** One of the primary barriers to college access for urban youth is the lack of information about college and the importance of attending. Access to information

about college to students and their families is one way to begin opening doors. In addition to the lack of information, financial constraints pose another challenge for potential college-goers.

Offering financial support to future college students is another important way to help open doors.

**Investing in the model.** In an interview with the founder of the Neighborhood Academic Initiative, I asked if she thought that this was a replicable model, and she shared that indeed it was. She shared, “I think it is replicable. There are certain parts of this model that could be taken into any community and shaped to meet the unique needs of that community. What this program did was it confirmed that you can have collaboration between a university and a school district to implement this kind of program. That it probably wouldn’t work if it were only the university or only the school district” (Dr. Solomon, Interview #1). Communities should take advantage of the academic resources that are already present and establish relationships that can positively impact the academic experience of the youth.

Though transforming our entire educational system in one fell swoop is probably not feasible, emulating the program model employed by the NAI program for serving students of color is quite an achievable goal. NAI’s program model is ideal; it is a model that shows that with the right support and the right foundation, students from urban communities can go to college, persist once there and make tremendous contributions in the transformation of urban communities. Investing in alternative programs such as the Neighborhood Academic Initiative is a great way to ensure that while the entire system is not transformed at once, small, but concentrated efforts to help marginalized students are taking place.

## **Future Research**

Because the work of college access programs is unique, and full of possibilities to strengthen the already successful components of these, it is important to continue their study.

Below are some areas for future research:

1. There is enough evidence to support that college access programs make an important contribution in getting its students to college. However, a future study should follow students to college to identify persistence rates once the students enter college.
2. Analyze the networks that urban students of color belong to once in college to identify how these contribute to their graduation from college.
3. Design and implement a support group for first-generation college students once in college and evaluate the effects that participation will have on the participants.
4. Look at the experience of participants of college access programs who come from unstable home settings to identify the ways in which these programs compensate for the lack of support they have in the home.
5. Carry out a longitudinal study that looks at the experiences of graduates of college access programs while in college.
6. Study how the concept of masked epistemology impacts college completion.
7. Develop and measure the effectiveness of practices within the college access program that foster independence.

## **Conclusion**

Access to college is a critical issue in social justice. The fact that college access programs exist is an indicator that our system of education is inequitable. College has the potential of being a social equalizer, but the fact that so many barriers exist for some to get there calls attention to a social structure designed to keep some members of society at the margins.

College access programs provide an important service to members of marginalized groups. Each of the participants of this study indicated that though they probably would have wanted to go to college even without having participated in NAI, they know that it would have been much more difficult for them to get there without the support of a network. Research, including this study, point to the effectiveness of these programs—they work. However, more attention should be paid to persistence of college access participants once they get to college.

If we peel back the layers of urban communities and replace the common deficit perspective of these and begin looking through the lens of the funds of knowledge theory, we will find that what lies beneath is rich and can impart great lessons for how we educate our students. College access programs, though not the panacea for all of society's woes, have the power of transforming communities and helping its participants discover that their epistemologies are not invisible, and that they need to be heard. Looking closely at the model of a successful college access program, such as the one at the center of this study can provide key information of the pieces that are essential in the education of urban students.

## References

- Aronson, R. (2001). *At-risk students defy the odds: Overcoming barriers to educational success*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Bemak, F., Chi-Ying, R., Siroskey-Sabdo, L.A., (2005). Empowerment groups for academic success: An innovative approach to prevent high school failure for at-risk, urban African American students. *Professional School Counseling, 8(5)*, 377-389.
- Bergin, D. A., Cooks, H. C., & Bergin, C. C. (2007). Effects of a college access program for youth underrepresented in higher education: A randomized experiment. *Research in Higher Education, 48*, 727-750.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston: Pearson.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977a). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel and A.H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487-511). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 242-258). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- California Department of Education (2012, September 9) Dataquest report on graduation rates in Los Angeles County. Retrieved from California Department of Education dataquest website: <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.
- Ceballo, R. (2004). From barrios to Yale: The role of parenting strategies in Latino families. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 26 (2)*, 171-186.



- Cheng, W., Ickes, W., & Verhofstadt, L. (2011). How is family support related to students' GPA scores? A longitudinal study. *Higher Education, 64*(3), 399–420.
- Children Now. (2001). *After school care for children: Challenges for California*. Retrieved from Children Now website: [www.childrennow.org](http://www.childrennow.org)
- Constantine, M. G., Erickson, C. D., Banks, R. W., & Timberlake, T. L. (1998) Challenges to the career development of urban racial and ethnic minority youth: implications for vocational intervention. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development, 26*, 83-95.
- Couturier, L. K., & Cunningham, A. F. (2006). *Convergence: Trends threatening to narrow college opportunity in America*. Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Corwin, Z. B., Colyar, J. E., Tierney, W. G. (2005). Introduction: Engaging research and practice—Extracurricular and curricular influences on college access. In W.G. Tierney, Z. B. Corwin, & J. E. Colyar (Eds.), *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach* (pp. 1-9). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Corwin, Z. B., Venegas, K. M., Oliverez, P. M., & Colyar, J. E. (2004). School counsel: How appropriate guidance affects educational equity. *Urban Education, 39*(4), 442-457.
- Crosby, E. (1999). Urban schools: Forced to fail. *Phi Delta Kappa International, 81*(4), 298-303.
- Cushman, K. (2007). Facing the culture shock of college: First-generation college students talk about identity, class, and what helps them succeed. *Educational Leadership, 64*(7),
- Darder, A. (2012). *Culture and power in the classroom: Educational foundations for the*

- schooling of bicultural students* (20th anniversary ed.). St. Paul, MN: Paradigm Publishing.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). New standards and old inequalities: School reform and the education of African American students. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(4), 263-287.
- Daud, R., & Carruthers, C. (2008). Outcome study of an after-school program for youth in a high-risk environment. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 26(2), 95-114.
- Davis, III, T., & Paster, V. S. (2000). Nurturing resilience in early adolescence: A tool for future success. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 15(2), 17-33.
- Delgado-Bernal, D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, 105-126.
- Eamon, M. K., (2005). Social-demographic, school, neighborhood, and parenting influences on the academic achievement of Latino young adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34(2), 163-174.
- Engle, J. (2007). Postsecondary access and success for first-generation college students. *American Academic*, 3(1), 25-48.
- Farmer-Hinton, R. (2008). Social capital and college planning: Students of color using school networks for support and guidance. *Education and Urban Society*, 41(1), 127-157.
- Gandara, P. (2002). Meeting common goals: Linking k-12 and college interventions. In W. Tierney (Ed.), *Increasing access to college: Extending possibilities for all students*. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Gay, L. R., Mills, G. E., Airasian, P. (2009) *Education research competencies for analysis and applications*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In C. Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (pp. 143-168). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Ginsburg, K., Alexander, P., Hunt, J., Sullivan, M., Zhao, H., & Cnaan, A. (2002). Enhancing their likelihood for a positive future: The perspective of inner-city youth. *Pediatrics*, 109(6), 1136.
- Gonzales, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Goodwin, L. (2006). *Graduating class: Disadvantaged students crossing the bridge of higher education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gullat, Y., & Jan, W. (2003) *How do pre-collegiate academic outreach programs impact college-going among underrepresented students?* Washington, D.C.: Pathways to College Network Clearinghouse. Retrieved from the Pathways to College online library website: <http://www.pathwaylibrary.org/>
- Hagedorn, L. S., & Fogel, S. (2005). Cocurricular activities and students' college prospects: Is there a connection? In W. Tierney & L. Hagedorn (Eds.), *Increasing access to college* (pp. 169-193). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Hatch, A. J. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. New York: State University of New York Press.

- Hayward, G. C., Brandes, B. G., Kirst, M. W., & Mazzeo, C. (1997). *Higher education outreach program: A synthesis of evaluations*. Sacramento, CA: Policy Analysis for California Education.
- Hearn, J. C., & Holdsworth, J. M. (2005). Cocurricular activities and students' college prospects: Is there a connection? In W. Tierney & Z. Corwin & Colyar, J. (Eds.), *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach* (pp. 135-154). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Herbert, T. P. (1996). Portraits of resilience: The urban life experiences of gifted Latino young men. *Roeper Review*, 19(2), 82-91.
- Holland, N. E., & Farmer-Hinton, R. L. (2009). Leave no schools behind: the importance of a college culture in urban public high schools. *The High School Journal*, 92(3), 24-43.
- Horn, L. J., & Chen, X. (1998). *Toward resiliency: At risk students who make it to college*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Hotchkiss, L., & Borrow, H. (1996). Sociological perspective on work and career development. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 281-336). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ishitani, T. T. (2003). A longitudinal approach to assessing attrition behavior among first-generation students: Time-varying effects of pre-college characteristics. *Research in Higher Education*, 44(4), 433-449.
- Jehangir, R. (2009). Cultivating voice: First-generation students seek full academic citizenship in multicultural learning communities. *Innovative Higher Education*, 34(1), 33-49.

- Jones, C. (1992, July 19). USC dream team: Students become scholars in novel program. *The Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from: [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-07-19/local/me-4841\\_1\\_average-student/2](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-07-19/local/me-4841_1_average-student/2)
- Jun, A. (2001). *From here to university*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Kenny, M. E., Gallagher, L. A., Alvarez-Salvat, R., & Silsby, J. (2002). Sources of support and psychological distress among academically successful inner-city youth. *Adolescence*, 37(145), 161-182.
- Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Potter, W. J. (1996). *An analysis of thinking and research about qualitative methods*. London: Routledge.
- Luthar, S. S. (1991). Vulnerability and resilience: A study of high-risk adolescents. *Child Development*, 62, 600-616.
- Maeroff, G. (1999). *Altered destinies: Making life better for schoolchildren in need*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marsh, H. W., Trautwein, U., Leudtke, O., Keller, O., & Baumert, J. (2005). Academic self-concept, interest, grades and standardized test scores: Reciprocal effects models of causal ordering. *Child Development*, 76, 397-416.
- Martinez, M. R., & Klopott, S. (2003). *Improving college access for minority, low-income and first-generation students*. Retrieved from the Indiana pathways to college network website: <http://inpathways.net/improvingcollege.pdf>

- Martinez, C. R., DeGarmo, D. S., & Eddy, J. M. (2004). Promoting academic success among Latino youths. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 26(2), 128-151. doi: 10.1177/0739986304264573
- Maxwell, J. (2011). *A realist approach for qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- McClafferty, K. A., McDonough, P. M., & Nunez, A. M. (2002, April). What is a college culture? Facilitating college preparation through organizational change. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, New Orleans, LA.
- McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- McDonough, P. M. (2004). *The school-to-college transition: Challenges and prospects*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- McLeod, J. (1995). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations & attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc.
- McMillan, J. H., & Reed, D. F. (1994). At-risk students and resiliency: Factors contributing to academic success. *The Clearing House*, 67(3), 137-140. doi: 10.1080/00098655.1994.9956043
- McNeal, L. (2009). The re-segregation of public education now and after the end of Brown v. Board of Education. *Education and Urban Society*, 41(5), 562-574.
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: A qualitative approach to developing strategic connections between homes and classrooms. *Theory into practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Murnane, R. J. (2007). Improving the education of children living in poverty. *The Future of Children*. 17, 161-182.
- Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Necessary, J. R., & Parish, T. S. (1994). Who discerns the enhancement of students' self-concepts in an inner-city school? *Education*, 114(3), 355-357.
- Noguera, P. A. & Akom, A. (2000, June 19). The significance of race in the racial gap in academic achievement. *In Motion Magazine*, Retrieved from <http://inmotionmagazine.com>
- Noguera, P. A. (2008). And what will become of children like Miguel Fernandez?: Education, immigration, and the future of Latinos in the united states. In W. Ayers, G. Ladson-Billings, G. Michie & R. Dee (Eds.), *City kids, city schools: More reports from the front row* (pp. 255-272). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Noguera, P. A. & Wing, J. Y. (2006). *Unfinished business: Closing the racial achievement gap in our schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nora, A. (2002). A theoretical and practical view of student adjustment and academic achievement. In W. G. Tierney & L. S. Hagedorn (Eds.), *Increasing access to college: Extending possibilities for all students* (pp. 65-80). Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Orfield, G., Losen, D. J., Wald, J., & Swanson, C. B. (2004). *Losing our future: How minority youth are being left behind by the graduation rate crisis*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.
- Perna, L. W. (2005). The key to college access: Rigorous academic preparation. In W. Tierney, Z. Corwin & J. Colyar (Eds.), *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach* (pp. 113-134).
- Perna, L.W. Pre-college outreach programs: characteristics of programs serving historically underrepresented groups of students. *Journal of College Student Development*. 43.1 (2002).
- Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). First- and second-generation college students: A comparison of their engagement and intellectual development. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 76(3), 276-300.
- Rendón, R. (1992). From the barrio to the academy: Revelations of the Mexican American “scholarship girl.” In L. S. Zwerling, & H. B. London (Eds.), *New directions for community colleges: First generation college students, confronting the cultural issues* (pp. 55-64). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Rendón, R. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19(1), 33–52.
- Rodriguez, L. F., & Conchas, G. Q. (1999). Preventing truancy and dropout among urban middle school students: Understanding community-based action from the student perspective. *Education and Urban Society*, 41(2), 216-247.



- Simons, G. (2003). *Be the dream: Prep for Prep graduates share their stories*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- Singham, M. (2005). *The achievement gap in US education: Canaries in the mine*. Lake Dallas, TX: R&L Education.
- Sirin, S. R., Diemer, M. A., Jackson, L. R., Gonsalves, L., & Howell, A. (2004). Future aspirations of urban adolescents: A person-in-context model. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 17*, 437-459.
- Smith, J., Kuzin, C. A., De Pedro, K., & Wohlstetter, P. (2009). *Family engagement in education: Seven principles for success*. Washington, DC: National Resource Center on Charter School Finance & Governance.
- Swail, W. S. (2003). *Retaining minority students in higher education: A framework for success*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass
- Swail, W. S., & Perna, L. W. (2002). Pre-college outreach programs. In W. Tierney & L. Hagedorn (Eds.), *Increasing access to college: Extending possibilities for all students* (pp. 15-34). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Terenzini, P. T., Springer, L., Yaeger, P. M., Pascarella, E. T., & Nora, A. (1996). First-generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education, 37*, 1-22.
- Tierney, W. G. (2003). Academic triage: Challenges confronting college preparation programs. *Qualitative Inquiry, 10*(6), 950-962.
- Tierney, W. G., Corwin, Z. B., & Colyar, J. E. (Eds.) (2005). *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- Tierney, W. G., Bailey, T., Constantine, J., Finkelstein, N., & Hurd, N. F. (2009). *Helping students navigate the path to college: What high schools can do*. (Report number: NCEE 2009-4066). Retrieved from Institute of Education Sciences website:  
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/>.
- Tierney, W. G., & Hagedorn, L. S. (2002). *Increasing access to college: Extending possibilities for all students*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Tierney, W. G. & Jun, A. (2001) A university helps prepare low-income youths for college. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 72(2), 205-225.
- Tierney, W. G., & Venegas, K. M. (2006). Fictive kin and social capital: The role of peer groups in applying and paying for college. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49, 1687–1702.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tough, P. (2008). *Whatever it takes: Geoffrey Canada's quest to change Harlem and America*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- United States Department of Education (2010). *Trio programs*. Retrieved from:  
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Zamudio, M., Russell, C., Rios, M. A., & Bridgeman, J. L. (2011). *Critical race theory matters: Education and ideology*. New York, NY: Routledge.

# Appendix A

## Site Letter



December 7, 2011

Neighborhood  
Academic Initiative

To Whom It May Concern:

The purpose of this letter is to grant Lizette Zarate, a doctoral student at Loyola Marymount University permission to conduct research at the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) and for the name of our program to appear in the study. The project, "I am a Scholar: A Case Study of a South Los Angeles College Access Program" entails the participation of three current 12<sup>th</sup> graders who will be interviewed and will engage in a journaling exercise; interviews of three graduates of the program; and observations of the various program components. The study will take place in the spring of 2011, and Ms. Zarate has agreed to share her findings with NAI upon completion of the dissertation. I, Kim Thomas-Barrios, Executive Director of this program do hereby grant permission for Lizette Zarate to conduct her research at the USC Neighborhood Academic Initiative.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Kim Thomas-Barrios", is written over a horizontal line.

Kim Thomas-Barrios  
Executive Director  
USC Educational Partnerships  
Government and Civic Engagement

University of  
Southern California  
3375 South Hoover  
Street, Suite F-206  
Los Angeles,  
California 90089-7795  
Tel: 213 740 6313  
Fax: 213 740 1166

## Appendix B

Table B1

*Detailed Interview Profile*

Participant	Participant Type	Received NAI Scholarship	College Attended / Will Attend	Number of Interviews	Total Time (Approximat
Alex	Current Student (Primary Participant)	Yes	USC (Fall)	3	3 hours
Robert	Current Student (Primary Participant)	Yes	Ivy League (Fall)	3	3 hours
Marissa	Current Student (Primary Participant)	No	Private College (Fall)	3	3 hours
Michelle	Alum (Primary Participant)	Yes	USC – holds BA and MSW	3	3 hours
Marcos	Alum (Primary Participant)	Yes	USC – holds BS	3	3 hours
Byron	Alum (Primary Participant)	Yes	USC – holds BS	3	3 hours
Lola	Alum	Yes	Current USC Student	1	1 hour
Sofia	Alum	Yes	Current USC Student	1	1 hour
Ms. Garcia	Parent	N/A	N/A	1	1 hour
Brian	Saturday Academy Tutor	N/A	N/A	1	1 hour
Ms. Johnson	NAI English Teacher	N/A	N/A	1	1 hour
Ms. Flores	NAI Project Assistant	N/A	N/A	1	1 hour
Ms. Blanco	NAI Director	N/A	N/A	1	1 hour

Appendix C  
Observation Protocol

Activity: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Observation #: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe Participants:

Describe Setting:

Indicators of 5 factors:

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

#### **Interview Questions for Adult Alumni Participants:**

1. When did you join the program?
2. How did you hear about the program?
3. Why did you join the program?
4. What kind of student would you describe yourself as at the time of starting the program?
5. What kind of student would you describe yourself as at the time of graduating from the program?
6. Tell me about your experience in the program.
7. Where did you go to college?
8. Why did you select that college?
9. Did your participation in NAI help in your college selection?
10. Would you have gone to college had you not been a student in the program?
11. When you were in the program, did you hang out with students who were not in the program?
12. If yes, how was their high school experience different from yours, from your perspective?
13. Were your parents involved in the program?
14. Do you think that their participation in the program made a difference in your high school experience? How?
15. Would you have gone to college if you hadn't participated in the program?
16. What stands out for you as a highlight of your experience in the program?
17. What did the program give you that you would not have had otherwise?
18. What could the program have done better?
19. What do you hope for current and future students in the program?
20. Do you stay involved in the program? Why?

#### **Interview Questions for Youth Participants**

1. When did you join the program?
2. How did you hear about the program?
3. Why did you join the program?
4. What kind of student would you describe yourself as at the time of starting the program?
5. What kind of student would you describe yourself currently?
6. Tell me about your experience in the program.
7. To which colleges are you applying?

8. Why did you choose those schools?
9. Did your participation in NAI help in your college selection?
10. Do you hang out with students who are not in the program?
11. If yes, how is their high school experience different from yours, from your perspective?
12. Are your parents involved in the program? How?
13. Do you think that their participation in the program has made a difference in your high school experience? How?
14. Do you think you would be going to college if you hadn't participated in the program?
15. What stands out for you as a highlight of your experience in the program?
16. What has the program given you that you would not have had otherwise?
17. What could the program have done better?
18. What do you hope for current and future students in the program?
19. Do you plan to stay involved in the program once you are in college and even when you graduate? Why?

#### Interview Questions for Adult Key Staff

1. How long have you been with the program?
2. How did you join the NAI team?
3. What do you do for the program?
4. Tell me about your experience in the program?
5. What is your most memorable experience as a staff member at NAI?
6. How is the education of an NAI student different from that of a student who is not in the program but attends the high schools the program serves?
7. What is most unique about NAI?
8. What keeps you here?
9. What are the biggest challenges facing students at the schools that NAI serves?
10. What do you think it is that NAI does that most contributes to the academic success of its students?

Appendix E  
Journaling Prompts

<b>Journaling Prompts:</b> Student participants will respond to two journaling prompts a week for three consecutive weeks. Their journal entries will be due on each of the Saturdays when they will be interviewed.		
Journaling Week #1 –	Journaling Week #2 –	Journaling Week #3 –
<p><b>Prompt 1:</b> Why do you think NAI exists? What do you think is its mission? Do you think that this program is necessary? What would you do differently to help students in a program like this?</p>	<p><b>Prompt 1:</b> You are only a few months away from graduating high school and going on to college, do you feel prepared?</p>	<p><b>Prompt 1:</b> Write about your worst experience with NAI. What happened? How did you react? What do you wish had been done differently?</p>
<p><b>Prompt 2:</b> Do you feel that NAI has helped you prepare for college? If so, how?</p> <p>What pieces of the program do you feel were most beneficial in helping you get to college?</p>	<p><b>Prompt 2:</b> Write about your most memorable experience in NAI.</p>	<p><b>Prompt 2:</b> How do you think that your experience in NAI can help educators better understand and teach urban students?</p>



## Appendix F

Table F1

*Illustration of each of the survey questions and the factor to which each of the survey questions correspond*

<b>Survey Questions</b>	<b>Corresponding Factor</b>
1 I believe that NAI set high academic expectations.	<b>Factor 4:</b> Setting high academic expectations
2 I took advantage of NAI's counseling component and believe that it was beneficial to my high school experience.	<b>Factor 2:</b> Providing tools to navigate the urban environment: Engagement during out-of-school hours and counseling
3 NAI exposed me to the arts via field trips and access to cultural events.	<b>Factor 1:</b> Introducing cultural and social capital
4 I believe that NAI's after school activities (tutoring, etc.) helped me become academically successful and get to college.	<b>Factor 2:</b> Providing tools to navigate the urban environment: Engagement during out-of-school hours and counseling
5 I believe that NAI's family involvement component contributed to my academic success and my going to college.	<b>Factor 3:</b> Engaging the family
6 NAI helped me to become a confident student.	<b>Factor 5:</b> Developing self-concept
7 Saturday Academy is a helpful component of the NAI program.	<b>Factor 4:</b> Setting high academic expectations
8 I consider myself academically successful.	<b>Factor 5:</b> Developing self-concept

## Appendix G

Table G1

*Data Collection Profile*

<b>Collection Type</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Time Spent</b>
Interviews	13 interview Participants	25 interviews	25 hours
Observations (for detailed observations, see Observation Profile in Chapter 3)	N/A	Observation of morning NAI classes on USC campus, Saturday academy, after-school tutoring), Family Development Institute Meeting, Senior Banquet	18 hours
Document Review	N/A	Review of NAI website, publications by USC citing NAI	3 hours
Survey Administration	45 Seniors	Coding of survey and analysis	5 hours
Journaling	3 primary senior participants	6 journal submissions over 2 weeks	15 hours

Appendix H

Table H1

*NAI Graduate Survey*

Grad Year	Total Grads	USC	Other Private 4 year	UC System	Cal State	Other State System	Total Enrollment of 4 year colleges	Community College	Vocational Colleges	Working Military	Unknown/Enrolled	Not Enrolled	Total Post-Secondary Education
'97	46	22	0	2	2	1	27	15	0	4	4	42	42
		47%		4.3%	4.3%	2.2%	59%	33%		9%		91%	91%
'98	55	25	2	4	5	0	35	14	3	3	3	38	38
		45%	3.6%	5.5%	9.1%		64%	25%	5%	5%		97%	97%
'99	39	16	5	3	11	2	31	7	0	0	0	38	38
		41%	12.8%	7.7%	24.4%	5.1%	79%	18%				97%	97%
'00	45	8	10	10	11	2	41	2	0	2	2	43	43
		17.8%	22.2%	22.2%	24.4%	4.4%	91%	4%		4%		96%	96%
'01	46	11	9	9	10	0	39	4	0	2	2	43	43
		23.9%	19.6%	19.6%	21.7%		85%	9%		4%		93%	93%
'02	32	4	8	5	5	0	22	8	1	1	1	31	31
		12.5%	25%	15.6%	15.6%		69%	25%	3%	%		97%	97%
'03	32	15	3	8	4	2	32	0	0	0	0	32	32
		45%	9%	24%	12%	6%	100%					100%	100%
'04	33	12	3	8	7	0	30	3	0	0	0	33	33
		36%	1%	2%	2%		90%	9%				100%	100%
'05	42	12	6	8	6	0	32	10	0	0	0	42	42
		29%	14%	19%	14%		76%	24%				100%	100%
'06	42	7	6	13	11	1	38	4	0	0	0	42	42
		17%	14%	31%	26%	2%	90%	10%				100%	100%
'07	36	10	4	16	5	0	35	1	0	0	0	36	36
		28%	11%	44%	14%		97%	3%				100%	100%

Table H1 (Cont.)

Grad Year	Total Grads	USC	Other Private 4 year		UC System		Cal State		Other State System		Total Enrollment of 4 year colleges		Community College		Vocational Colleges		Unknown / Working / Military		Not Enrolled		Total Enrollment Post-Secondary Education		
			As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12	As of Fall '12
'08	43	20	3	3	5	3	8	7	0	0	36	38	7	2	0	0	0	0	3	43	40		
		47%	58%	7%	12%	7%	19%	16%			84%	88%	16%	5%					7%	100%	93%		
'09	43	15	3	4	9	4	3	3	0	0	30	33	13	2	0	0	0	0	8	43	35		
		35%	51%	7%	21%	9%	7%	7%			70%	77%	30%	5%					19%	100%	81%		
'10	56	26	0	0	6	5	7	9	0	0	39	47	17	4	0	1	0	0	4	56	52		
		46%	59%		11%	9%	13%	16%			70%	84%	30%	7%		2%			7%	100%	93%		
'11	46	12	7	7	11	10	6	5	0	0	36	35	10	10	0	0	0	0	1	46	45		
		26%	28%	15%	24%	22%	13%	11%			78%	76%	22%	22%					2%	100%	98%		

Appendix I

Table II

*Senior Class Survey Results*

	<b>Survey Statements</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree Responses</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree Responses</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree Responses</b>	<b>Strongly Agree Responses</b>
1	I believe that NAI set high academic expectations.	1 (.02%)	0	8 (17%)	37 (80%)
2	I took advantage of NAI's counseling component and believe that it was beneficial to my high school experience.	0	1 (.02%)	24 (52%)	21 (46%)
3	NAI exposed me to the arts via field trips and access to cultural events.	0	3 (.07%)	22 (49%)	20 (44%)
4	I believe that NAI's after school activities (tutoring, etc.) helped me become academically successful and get to college.	0	0	13 (29%)	32 (71%)
5	I believe that NAI's family involvement component contributed to my academic success and my going to college.	0	2 (.04%)	12 (27%)	31 (69%)
6	NAI helped me to become a confident student.	0	1	14 (31%)	30 (67%)
7	Saturday Academy is a helpful component of the NAI program.	0	3	16 (36%)	23 (58%)
8	I consider myself academically successful.	0	0	10 (22%)	36 (78%)

*Note.* n=54, Percentage of total responses presented in parentheses.

Appendix J

Table J1

*Most Effective Structures Within NAI According to Senior Class*

<b>Structure</b>	<b># of Mentions</b>
Tutoring	38
Saturday Academy	31
Staff Support	31
Family Development Institute	8
Summer Programs	8
SAT Prep	3

## Appendix K

Table K1

*Description of the Cultural / Academic Resources Offered by NAI*

<b>Name of Resource</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Type of Resource</b>
USC Open Classroom	Students can audit select college courses twice per semester	Cultural / Social
USC Freshman Seminar	NAI scholars can join a freshman seminar at USC where they are paired with a current college freshman. As part of the “(W)rites of Passage” course, students engage in dialogue about the transition to college and receive help with writing the personal statement for college	Cultural / Social
Writing Mentors	A service leaning project through USC that sends college students to the community to serve as mentors and help NAI scholars with their English courses. The college students receive course credit for this project.	Social
Cultural events (theater, lectures, etc.) at USC campus	Over the course of the academic year, NAI scholars are invited guests to a variety of cultural experiences on the USC campus. Notable events that scholars have attended in the past couple of years include a lecture by the Dalai Lama, President Obama’s visit to the USC campus, among others.	Cultural
Bill Cosby Film Institute	Scholars work alongside filmmakers and professors from USC’s School of Cinematic Arts to learn the basics of filmmaking	Cultural
USC Interfaith Club	On Saturdays, scholars can participate in this club which allows them to learn about world cultures and religions, through readings and discussions.	Cultural
NAI Theater Workshop	Student-run theater workshop that aims to bring works of literature to life and share with the community of NAI parents and the university.	Cultural / Social
Elective Creative Writing Class	Creative writing class taught as a Saturday Academy elective and taught by a graduate of the NAI program.	Cultural
Leaders of Health	Saturday club offered by students of the USC dental school during the school year and the summer session. Exposes the students of NAI to a variety of careers in the health field and engages them in hands-on, project-based activities. Students have toured the dental school and have had access to their facilities for various projects.	Cultural / Social