College Preparation and Aspirations Among African American Students

by

Anthony Paul Williams

Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice, Edinboro University, 2002

Master of Business Administration, Carlow University, 2009

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This dissertation was presented

by

Anthony Paul Williams

It was defended on

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and approved by

Lori Delale O'Connor, PhD, Admin and Policy Studies

Alaine M. Allen, EdD, Executive Director of Investing Now

Gerard Longo: PhD, Associate Professor and Advisor

Preparing College Aspirations Among African American High School Students

Anthony Paul Williams, EdD

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There is an education gap that exists in our nation. Black students are more likely to encounter obstacles and barriers that are associated with college attainment when compared to their White peers. This study sought to understand factors that hinder college readiness and success among Black students who graduated from The Neighborhood Academy (TNA). A total of 16 TNA graduates were interviewed in order to collect data regarding their college preparation and experience. The participants graduated from TNA within 2014-2018. In addition to the interview, a survey was distributed to all TNA graduates to better understand multiple facets of college readiness and experiences of all TNA graduates. Data was gathered which will be beneficial in addressing the challenges that Black students encounter in their pursuit of a higher education.

Throughout this study I learned the benefit of instilling college aspirations at an earlier age to best prepare underserved students and their families to acquire and afford a higher education. Intentional measures will equip students and their families to achieve this goal. I also examined how interpersonal relationships between school staff and underserved students can be an asset in supporting their college preparation and experience. My investigation found that ongoing communication by trusted school officials was beneficial for TNA graduates while attending college. The findings of this study will be used to implement new programs and relationships at TNA to increase student success in college and beyond. Study findings have implications for TNA and may be of use to similar educational systems.

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Preface

First and foremost, I would like to give all praises to my lord and savior Jesus Christ. My faith in God has provided me the strength and the guidance to see this milestone in my life. I pray that my work will impact the lives of others and that you will allow my body to be a vessel in order to do the work that you desire of me.

I also would like to thank my advisor Dr. Gerard Longo for his guidance and mentorship through this process. Due to our relationship I am a better writer and educational leader.

Next I would like to thank my mother for her love and her intentionality in raising me. Mom, you demonstrated to me that anything is possible and for that I will be forever grateful. I also would like to thank my family who supported my mother in raising me and always supported my dreams and aspirations. To my loving grandparents to my wonderful aunts, and finally my brothers-without your belief and ongoing support, I wouldn't be here without you.

I want to thank my children for their love and their understanding. Through this process there have been a lot of long days and early mornings. I love you three more than you'll ever know, and I will always be there for you. Please know that Daddy loves you and I am so proud of you.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife. I couldn't have picked a better life partner. I appreciate your willingness to support my dreams while not compromising your own. I look forward to growing older with you and witnessing how you are going to make the world a better and fairer place for everyone, especially those who are underserved.

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1.0 Problem of Practice Statement

Students dream about earning a college education. Unfortunately, attaining and affording that dream may be more challenging for underrepresented students than for privileged college bound students who often have an understanding of the college attainment process. My current place of practice is The Neighborhood Academy (TNA) which is a faith-based non-sectarian college preparatory school serving low-income students in metropolitan Pittsburgh. The mission of the school is to break the generational cycle of poverty through education. The student population is African American and bi-racial, 80% of the student body live in a household whose taxable income is under $30,000, and 72% of the student body is comprised of first-generation college bound students.

Given these statistics, the dream of attaining and affording a college education for our students represents significant challenge. Our students and families rely on TNA to prepare students for college. A problem that I commonly encounter in my professional work is that my students do not understand the necessary steps to attain a college education, nor do they have the financial resources necessary to afford their college aspirations.

Within the past four years, I have observed various challenges that our students face upon graduation. These issues include but are not limited to students encountering educational interruptions due to financial constraints, students borrowing an excessive amount of money to fund their higher education and students dropping out of college at a higher rate than TNA has previously encountered. I fear that if our school does not strategically address these issues, then the dreams of our students breaking the generational cycle of poverty will be just that, a dream.

TNA is very intentional in providing our students with ongoing access and exposure to various colleges within a 150-mile radius from Pittsburgh. Our school takes our students to over 45 college visits throughout their educational experience. We provide our students with a college counseling program in their junior and senior years. An issue within our organization is that our school does not have a college counseling program that works with our students during their ninth and tenth grade year. This is an issue because our students lose out on two years of college guidance and financial preparation for college.

TNA is a private school that annually fundraises the operating budget which is necessary for the school to provide the educational experience to approximately 150 students. Given that reality, there are areas in the school that have limitations when it comes to personnel and resources. One of those areas is in the College Counseling Department, which is currently staffed by two administrators who serve as College Counselors in addition to other roles and responsibilities within TNA.

Typically, our students are admitted into TNA with little formal college preparation, so they have not formulated an actionable plan to help navigate them through the college attainment process. They usually do not begin to think or discuss how they will afford their education until they are juniors in high school. Due to the lack of future planning, our students typically don't have a comprehensive financial plan to afford college, which causes great anxiety and uncertainty for our students and their families.

Often, I observe students (and their parents) taking out substantial loans to fund gaps in their financial aid package. These financial choices will have a huge impact on the quality of their lives upon completing college, if not sooner if they are forced to leave college due to financial challenges. This reality demonstrates the need for our students to be engaged in a high-quality

college preparatory experience so that their college attainment process could be more manageable and affordable.

Throughout my studies I had the opportunity to understand the challenges that students encounter who represent the same demographics as the students I serve at TNA. Understanding these issues through literature produced by individuals who are experts on this subject matter was critical. I also gained a better understanding of the challenges my students encounter in the college attainment process through the lens of TNA graduates. To further investigate the degree in which TNA prepares its students for college success, I collected data by asking the following questions to students who have graduated from TNA:

- How can The Neighborhood Academy better prepare its students for college readiness?

- Are there obstacles and barriers regarding successful college readiness that TNA is not considering within its current holistic educational model?

- Do TNA alumni have a sustainable financial plan that allow them to afford their higher education?

- What unanticipated challenges have TNA alumni encountered during their higher education experience?

Throughout my study, I have examined the measures TNA should take to support college aspirations with our students so that they will be successful in college. I also examined what measures should be taken to support students in their financial planning so that students can afford a higher education. By completing these tasks, I hope to instill systems and processes within the school which will diminish obstacles and barriers that my students encounter when they pursue a higher education. If this problem of practice is not addressed, the recent decline in TNA's five-year graduation rate from college, may ultimately compromise the mission of the school. It is

imperative that this problem of practice is addressed so that recent issues do not continue to affect the college aspirations of students at TNA.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Impact Parents Have on African American College Bound Students

College enrollment rates have significantly increased over the years and there are more African-American students enrolled in college than ever before (Strayhorn, 2011). However, there are various factors that have a significant impact on a student's ability to successfully matriculate from high school to college. One of those factors is the degree to which a student's family understands the process for college attainment for their child. Parent's ability to instill college aspirations at an early age can play a significant role regarding the African-American student's ability to matriculate from high school to college (CLASP, 2014).

There is significant data which indicates that African American students are less likely to have a high-quality early childhood educational experience that will adequately prepare children for kindergarten (Clasp, 2014). This disparity can cause a gap in fundamental learning at an early age which can be detrimental to a student's academic future. Another milestone in the educational pipeline, which is critical to African-American students, is the learning experience within Middle School (CLASP, 2014). Research indicates that an African American student's Middle School experience can serve as a fork in the road if that student fails multiple subjects, is absent over 30 days in one academic year, and is repeatedly suspended (CLASP, 2014).

Parenting practices during a student's middle school years have an impact on academic performance, aspirations, and eventually college enrollment (Hill & Wang, 2015). Multiple factors such as poor attendance records, lack of course completion, problematic behavior can be directly associated with the probability of students either dropping out or withdrawing from school

(CLASP, 2014). Furthermore, parental monitoring appears to have a significant and positive impact amongst African American students/children regarding fostering college aspirations according to a study led by Hill and Wang (Hill & Wang, 2015). This information emphasizes the importance of African American parents playing a significant role in strengthening college aspirations at an earlier age.

Parental influence still remains as one of the most critical factors affecting aspirations of high school students towards future goals and career pathways (Hill & Wang, 2015). There is significant data suggesting that parenting practices being heavily influential on student engagement in school, grade point averages, and ultimately postsecondary aspirations (Hill & Wang, 2015). There could be variations in the parenting practices (for example warmth, monitoring, and autonomy support) among different ethnicities and their impact that has on the performance of students (Hill & Wang, 2015).

Parental monitoring appears to have a higher impact on college bound African-American students compared to parental autonomy support among European American college bound students (Hill & Wang, 2015). Hill and Wang (2015) also found that with parenting practices of African-American parents, a balance of parental control and parental monitoring is necessary in order to promote academic achievement and college readiness (Hill & Wang, 2015). Although parenting practices and student engagement do not solely determine whether or not a student will successfully enroll into college, data shows that they play a significant role toward postsecondary aspirations (Hill & Wang, 2015).

With the increasing cost of a higher education, it is imperative that both students and in many cases their parents understand the obstacles and barriers that may exist when attempting to afford a higher education. At times the perceived cost of affording a higher education and the

actual cost can be confusing and discouraging for college bound students and their families (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). Both students and families can have a preconceived notion that college attendance can be correlated with borrowing a substantial amount of debt which will be more detrimental than beneficial to a student's future (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). Within our nation there seems to be a growing pessimism about the value of a college education especially amongst African-American college bound students and their families (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). Laura Perna stated in her study "Studying College Access and Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model" that "individuals with low family incomes, individuals whose parents have not attended college, African-Americans, and Hispanics are less likely than other individuals to enroll in college" (2006). This brings to light a troubling disparity that students of color and students of low socio-economic status may be more prone to encounter issues regarding their college readiness while in their pursuit of attaining a college degree.

College readiness and educational experiences attained at a postsecondary level are critical milestones for students who desire to successfully enter the workforce (Hill & Wang, 2015). What is also important is how students and their families anticipate affording that higher education. Many African Americans families are poorly informed about the actual cost of affording a college education (Perna, L. W., 2006). Lack of information can pose a huge problem if an African American child does not have the support of a well-informed parent and/or a college preparatory system in place at an early age when deciding to apply to college. By not having an informed parent who has experience or understanding of the financial implications of affording a college degree or a comprehensive college readiness program, students who are pursuing this option can be placed at a huge disadvantage.

There are other potentially problematic aspects of the college matriculation process that may not be taken into consideration. In a study conducted by Rebecca Cox, which sampled African American and Latinx students, she found three complicating factors that her participants encountered in their college enrollment process (Cox, 2016). These factors were guardian arrangements, financial difficulties, and transitionary housing (Cox, 2016). The family configurations and the degree of stability seem to have an impact on the college enrollment and attainment process of the participants in the study (2016). Lack of household stability, and at times transitionary living, had an impact on students and served to be a stressor in the enrollment process (Cox, 2016). The study outlined how difficulties within the home had a direct effect on the college aspirations of students of color and how those factors affected their lives.

Unfortunately, the complicated situations that the participants systematically experienced, interrupted or shifted the college aspirations of all the participants in the study (Cox, 2016). Perhaps if these students had a better understanding of the college attainment process, they would have been able to navigate their way through these complicated situations and their trajectory could have been different. It appears that parental practices and understandings of the college attainment practice can influence college bound students. There is also significant data that points to family dynamics being influential on college bound students.

2.2 Family Ties

There are various stressors and challenges that African American college bound students encounter. Family dynamics can have a tremendous impact on the vision that students create for themselves and how significant a role that college education factors within that vision. While the

possibility of college attendance is a dream for many, that concept can cause a great degree of dysfunction for some families. College attendance can pose various challenges in the structure, functionality, and household income among first generational students and their families that can create various dilemmas for those students and their families (Carey, 2018).

In a study conducted by Roderick Carey (2018), findings revealed that even though families supported and encouraged the idea of their African-American and Latino boys attending college, the participants of the study expressed a great deal of concern for how the family would sustain their life style without their presence and contribution. These concerns were divided into both internal and external issues and dilemmas. Internal dilemmas were classified as fears and anxieties that participants had regarding the degree of college readiness which were heavily influenced by their families perceptions (Carey, 2018). External dilemmas were obstacles and barriers that participants perceived to encounter, which would prevent college attainment and enrollment (Carey, 2018). Participants families also heavily influenced these external dilemmas whether they were family perceptions or systemic issues that families encountered such as poverty. Research has displayed that, after college acceptance, family dynamics continue to have a major impact on the experiences of students of color after they are enrolled in college (Carey, 2018).

It is also critical for not only college bound students but also their families to understand the financial implications of affording college (Carey, 2018). If parents do not fully understand the financial aid process, they may be easily intimidated by astronomical numbers and urge their children away from the college attainment process (Carey, 2018). There are many costs and fees associated with a higher education and rarely do they remain the same from year to year. Parents and students should and often do fear on a yearly basis an increase in the cost of tuition and other fees (Sky Lark, 2012). Tuition rates have increased annually since 1988, and it is not rare that the

cost of affording a higher education exceeds the total family income of most low-income families (Sky Lark, 2012).

Colleges are big business and there is a competitive nature amongst colleges to recruit and enroll prospective students, have impressive campuses that attract students and quality faculty to advance their institutions (Sky Lark, 2012). This competitive nature typically equates to higher costs for students to fund these efforts. High tuition costs may have a drastic impact on how families pay for their children's higher education. In many cases low-income students are forced to take out loans to cover gaps in their financial aid packages in their efforts to afford a higher education (Sky Lark, 2012). These loans can have a tremendous impact on the quality of life that these students later experience. Various factors in the United States of America have led to undergraduate African-American students having higher student loan debt compared to their Caucasian, Hispanic, and Asian peers (Sky Lark, 2012). It is recommended that legislation, colleges, and universities craft and implement policies to address these financial issues that low-income and minority students encounter in their efforts to afford a higher education (Sky Lark, 2012).

It is important that College Counselors have a relationship with the student and family of college bound African-American and Latino students (Carey, 2018). It is ideal that high school personnel have a positive relationship and a degree of trust regarding students and their families. It is also important for College Counselors and Guidance Counselors to begin to prepare students to fully understand how their roles within their families will change once they go to college and the potential impact that a college education could have on future generations within their family (Carey, 2018). Counselors should be taught techniques and coping mechanisms to handle family

difficulties prior to going to college so that these challenges do not affect their studies and their academic standing while they are in college (Carey, 2018).

The preparation that a student receives outside the classroom regarding college readiness is imperative to a successful transition to college. Educators should consider the conflicts that may arise regarding immediate and future aspirations of low-income college bound students and how their aspirations will impact their family (Carey, 2018). For example, negative experiences regarding college attainment and readiness that were experienced by older siblings or family members can have devasting impacts on future college bound students within a family (Carey, 2018). It is essential for College Counselors and Guidance Counselors to have a thorough understanding of both positive and negative experiences that families encounter regarding the college planning process (Carey, 2018). The college counseling experience that African American students receive while they are in high school can play a critical role in their matriculation from high school to college and beyond. Therefore, it is imperative that African American students receive a quality College Counseling experience during their high school years.

There are various stressors and challenges that African American college bound students encounter. Family dynamics can have a tremendous impact on the vision that students create for themselves and how significant a role that college education factors within that vision. While the possibility of college attendance is a dream for many, that concept can cause a great degree of dysfunction for some families. College attendance can pose various challenges in the structure, functionality, and household income among first generational students and their families that can create various dilemmas for those students and their families (Carey, 2018).

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college, the participants of the study expressed a great deal of concern for how the family would sustain their life style without their presence and contribution. These concerns were divided into both internal and external issues and dilemmas. Internal dilemmas were classified as fears and anxieties that participants had regarding the degree of college readiness which were heavily influenced by their families perceptions (Carey, 2018). External dilemmas were obstacles and barriers that participants perceived to encounter, which would prevent college attainment and enrollment (Carey, 2018). Participants families also heavily influenced these external dilemmas whether they were family perceptions or systemic issues that families encountered such as poverty. Research has displayed that, after college acceptance, family dynamics continue to have a major impact on the experiences of students of color once after they are enrolled in college (Carey, 2018).

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There are many issues that are evaluated when examining the challenges that African American students encounter in their efforts towards college attainment. There is a substantial amount of data that indicates that African-American high school graduates are less likely to have the academic preparation to successfully matriculate to a college level curriculum (Cokley, Obaseki, Moran-Jackson, Jones, & Vohra-Gupta, 2016). There is evidence that indicates that African-American students and Latino students are more likely to remediate courses in their high school career as opposed to their white peers (Cokley et al., 2016). Course selection for college bound students can also play a significant factor regarding college readiness. Taking AP courses has been correlated with increased levels of college readiness amongst students enrolled in AP courses. There is significant data that indicates that African-American students are less likely to enroll into AP and Honor courses and that these courses are less likely to be offered at schools who have large populations of African-American and Latino students (Cokley et al., 2016). The results of standardized test scores has also served as a major barrier not only to college access but also access to scholarships which grant African-American students the opportunity to afford their higher education (Cokley et al., 2016). While it is very important to examine these traditional

barriers that many African American students encounter, it also important to examine the College Counseling experience that African American students receive during high school and during their college bound process.

Now more than ever it is critical that students who come from underrepresented backgrounds receive quality preparation for college due to the increased cost of affording a college education. This educational experience should extend outside of the classroom context in the form of guidance, career, and college counseling especially for African-American males (Harris & Hines, 2016). It is important that teachers, youth workers, and school counselors are well versed with culturally responsive pedagogy in order to effectively prepare college bound students who come from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (CLASP, 2014). This preparation appears to be essential when working with African American male students. African American male students have been historically underrepresented within college enrollment (CLASP, 2014). The implications of this educational disparity can be catastrophic for African American males if not strategically addressed.

There is significant data that demonstrates that African-American males are far behind their peers in areas of social and educational advancement (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). African-American men between the age of 18-24 encounter various obstacles and barriers when attempting to attain and afford a higher education (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). During the 2007/2008 school year, only 46% of African American males were enrolled as full-time undergraduate students (Ross et al., 2012). In 2013 only 28 percent of African-Americans possessed an Associates or Undergraduate degree, compared to 41% of men holding similar degrees amongst all other races (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015).

There is also significant data that shows that African American males are performing at lower rates than their counter parts. The table listed below displays the representation of conferred Bachelor Degrees by post-secondary institutions in 2016/2017. This data demonstrates the underrepresentation of Black men in postsecondary degree attainment.

Table 1 2016/2017 Bachelor Degrees conferred by Post-Secondary Institutions

	Men	Women
African American	70,554	125,746
Caucasian	521,421	674,586
Hispanic	99,331	152,835

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2018)

These statistics affirm the need for intentional measures that should take place during high school through the efforts of college counseling to assist individuals within this demographic to successfully matriculate from high school to college. Without intentional interventions through effective college counseling, African American males can be at a huge disadvantage compared to their college bound peers.

Research also indicates that African-American male college bound students are more likely to come from a family who has low socio economic status and are less likely to understand the college attainment process (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). This reality can indicate a barrier for these students in their attempt to attain a higher education due to the unfamiliarity of the college attainment process that the family possess. There is significant data that indicates that academically average students who come from a high family income are more likely to complete college within four-years (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). It is critical that training for pre-service school counselors is constantly evaluated and adapted in order to equip counselors

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with the necessary skills in order to work with all students including those students who traditionally are underserved (Harris & Hines, 2016).

Despite these staggering statistics, there is a lot of data that provides a counternarrative to the success of African American males. In 2012 Shaun R. Harper & Charles H. F. Davis III conducted a study titled They (Don't) Care about Education: A Counternarrative on Black Male Students' Responses to Inequitable Schooling. Within this study Harper and Davis sought out to combat the narratives of hopelessness, academic under achievement, and educational disinterest that are typically associated among African American males. Utilizing an oppositional culture theory framework, Harper and Davis systematically analyzed the essays of 304 undergraduate African American male students who attended college throughout the United States of America. Participants in the study were prospective African American male applicants who were applying to be enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania's Grad Prep Academy, which is an initiative for college juniors to earn a PhD in the field of education (Harper & Davis III, 2012). The applicants provided up to a 650 words response to the following questions:

What are your intellectual interest and long-term career aspirations relative to education, and how were they developed?

If you had a Ph.D. in education, what would you do in response to the educational problems or social phenomena that concern you most? (Harper & Davis III, 2012)

As a result of this study, three themes were surfaced that were responses to inequitable schooling. The three themes were awareness of educational inequities, beliefs in education as the great equalizer, and purposeful pursuits of the Ph.D. in education (Harper & Davis III, 2012). The participants acknowledged the inequities and challenges that they encountered throughout their educational experience from kindergarten throughout master's level studies. There was a great

degree of what seemed to be insurmountable challenges for the African American male to overcome in order to achieve academic success. But, despite those challenges there was an overwhelming degree of hope that education would ultimately be the great equalizer to provide opportunity for the African American male.

There is much material and content that needs to be covered to adequately prepare secondary counselors to educate and work with underrepresented youth (Harris & Hines, 2016). Due to the potential overwhelming amount of learning, it is not uncommon for secondary counselors to continue this learning when they are actually working through on the job training and experiences that they encounter (Harris & Hines, 2016). It is also worth mentioning that the vast majority of theories that are utilized to prepare counselors to work with college bound students in counselor educational programs are framed to work with Caucasian populations, and not necessarily African-American male students (Harris & Hines, 2016).

African-American students must be counseled regarding the importance of graduating from college within the framework of their four-year undergraduate degree (America, 2014). It has become all too common that African-American students graduate from a four year college within a six year plan and that African-American students graduate from a two year open access institution in three years (America, 2014). The more time that students spend enrolled in college the more resources they will have to secure to fund their college education. On time graduation rates are significantly low within four year public institutions within the United States. (America, 2014). Only 19% of full-time African-American students who attend a four year bachelor program within a non-flagship college graduate on time, and only 36% of African-American full-time students who attend flagship colleges graduate on time (America, 2014).

Increased time attending college not only costs students additional financial resources, but it also puts students at a disadvantage when they delay career opportunities and ultimately lose potential wages that they could have earned if they graduated on time (America, 2014). Before graduating from high school and throughout college, students should be counseled about potential undergraduate major selection (America, 2014). Students should also be counseled regarding how undergraduate math aligns with their major in college (America, 2014). Students should be provided with and understand an academic map of their anticipated coursework (America, 2014). College Bound students should be advised of default pathways if they are not successful with their original academic map (America, 2014). Finally, they should be given extensive academic advising throughout their educational experience (America, 2014).

Underrepresented students also need to have a clear understanding of the challenges associated with the college admissions process, selection criteria, how to best afford a higher education, and other factors that are associated with attaining a higher education (Harris & Hines, 2016). While many underserved students aspire to attain a college education, they do not have a comprehensive understanding of the preparation or the counseling which is necessary to attain a higher education (Harris & Hines, 2016). For many college bound students, financial aid plays a significant role in their ability to afford a higher education. The FAFSA application typically is the gateway for students to receive much needed aid to afford their education. While completing the FAFSA application sounds like an easy task, it can serve as a huge obstacle for college bound students.

2.3 The FAFSA Application

The FAFSA was created due to the efforts of the Title IV Higher Education Act of 1965, to manage authorized funds that were to be distributed to students who sought out a higher education (FAFSA, 2018). The FAFSA is a component of the U.S. Department of Education and is the largest provider of financial aid in the United States of America (FAFSA, 2018). The FAFSA provides over 13 million students over $120 billion worth of financial resources for those students to afford a post-secondary education (FAFSA, 2018). More than 6,000 colleges and career schools utilize the FAFSA to disperse financial aid to prospective students (FAFSA, 2018). Prospective FAFSA users can apply for aid electronically on-line through the FAFSA website or by completing a paper application (FAFSA, 2018).

In the short term the FAFSA application provides students with the ability to apply and receive federal financial aid that is critical in their efforts to afford a higher education. Due to the financial constraints that some college bound families have, the FAFSA plays a critical role in accessing grants and low interest loans which play a significant role in student's financial aid package. Without these grants and loans, many students would not be able to enroll in a post-secondary institution. Over 13 million students and more than 6000 institutions utilize the FAFSA to process information provided by students to identify federal financial resources that students are eligible for, which are necessary to generate student aid reports (FAFSA, 2018). This statistic demonstrates that the FAFSA has the necessary infrastructure to service a large volume of students and institutions.

Due to the capacity of the FAFSA, students can apply to a wide array of schools knowing that, if their FAFSA is completed correctly, those institutions will be able to generate a student aid report that will summarize all financial aid received and the impact it has on their ability to afford

a higher education. This opportunity allows students to apply to the colleges or trade schools that they feel would be the best fit for them without restriction.

There are many complexities and implementation challenges that are associated with successfully completing the FAFSA application that often are not realized by many individuals. While the FAFSA application can serve as a wonderful resource for college bound students to access federal resources to afford their higher education, the FAFSA can also serve as a huge obstacle and barrier for successful matriculation from high school to post-secondary education (B. Castleman & Page, 2015).

It is assumed by many that students who complete the FAFSA application will have their information processed by the FAFSA and then distributed to prospective institutions of higher learning that the FAFSA user provided. It is also then assumed by many that by completing the FAFSA students will receive the necessary financial aid that is needed to fund their post-secondary education. However, these assumptions do not always represent reality.

There are challenges and obstacles associated with completing the FAFSA that many students encounter which serve as barriers for students. In addition to the assumptions that I previously mentioned, there are more complexities associated with the FAFSA that serve as barriers for various students. It is assumed that FAFSA users will understand the application process and will be able to successfully navigate their way through challenges that they encounter by either asking for assistance or utilizing the help functions that are available on-line. However, that may not be the case for all FAFSA users, especially first-generation college bound students.

In a study conducted by Ben Castleman & Lindsay Page titled *Beyond FAFSA Completion*, challenges are discussed that students and their families encounter when attempting to complete the FAFSA process (2015). Castleman & Page (2015) stated that "Complexities in the financial-

aid application process deter students from qualifying for the aid for which they are eligible and as a result, from enrolling or persisting in college." (p.28). The study also indicated that complexities that students encounter in completing the FAFSA process deter them from completing the application, which ultimately restricts them from being eligible for most federal, state, and possibly institutional aid (B. Castleman & Page, 2015). The study emphasizes how high the stakes are for low- to moderate income students who desperately need grant funding to afford their education. Castleman & Page (2015) proceed to discuss the challenges that low-income minority families encounter when completing the FAFSA due to the information that they must provide in order to complete the application (B. Castleman & Page, 2015). These challenges include providing information to more than one college, submitting the FAFSA even if they miss priority deadlines, and providing information to the United States Department of Education regarding assets and family information if their application is flagged (B. Castleman & Page, 2015).

Issues arise when there is a lack of understanding on how students can successfully navigate their way through the FAFSA process, especially for low-income college bound students who otherwise do not have the resources to afford a higher education. Distribution of federal aid is one of the few times in life when having less could be a benefit. Student's family income is taken into consideration when federal and state aid is calculated utilizing the FAFSA. However, there are challenges that can pose a threat to receiving much needed financial support if families do not complete the FAFSA application accurately. Inaccurate or incomplete applications could lead to gaps in the necessary financial aid that is needed to afford a higher education.

It is imperative that FAFSA users provide accurate information while completing the application. Completing this process can at times be a frustrating experience especially if students

are not familiar with the process or do not have assistance in completing the application. In Castleman & Page's (2015) study, they indicate that only 33 percent of black students and 37 percent of low social economic students successfully file their FAFSA applications by the March 1st priority deadline (B. Castleman & Page, 2015). This statistic points to challenges when it comes to these minoritized groups affording a higher education and ultimately receiving a similar education as their peers who better understand the FAFSA application. Insufficient amounts of financial aid awarded to low-income students could lead to students ultimately taking out excessive loans to afford a higher education and irresponsible borrowing that can drastically impact the quality of life of students upon graduation from college. There are new techniques and tactics that have been designed to address complexities that college bound students encounter during their matriculation from high school to college with an emphasis on the summer before their first year of college.

2.4 Summer Melt

The summer after high school graduation can serve as a critical time for high school students in their matriculation process to college. This statement can be especially true for disadvantaged students who may be unfamiliar with the necessary steps to enroll into college and begin their first year. Research has displayed high rates of attrition for low social economic status students during this summer period and this new phenomena has been given the title "summer melt" (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Harvard University, 2014). Significant data has indicated that summer melt has contributed to a socioeconomic divide due to the reduction of low-income student college enrollment (Arnold, Chewning, Castleman, & Page, 2015).

Even after a student is admitted to college, successful matriculation to college is contingent upon students completing various tasks during the summer months when students may have little access to college or guidance counselors (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014). These tasks can include but are not limited to verifying necessary documents for financial aid purposes, completing housing forms, securing, and mailing deposit forms, taking placement tests, submitting medical forms etc. Completing these tasks can be instrumental in the student's college attainment process or they can serve as a detriment that can deter students from successful enrollment into their prospective college.

There is increasing data indicating that college bound students are most successful when they develop various infrastructures and support systems during their college attainment process. Microsystems for college bound students include school teachers, peers, and out of school learning programs encourage college expectations and behaviors (Arnold et al., 2015). The summer after graduation poses a threat to these ecosystems and can ultimately play a factor in a student's original intent to matriculate to college due to the separation or disconnection from these microsystem (Arnold et al., 2015). Research indicates that these microsystems play an integral role in student's college attainment process and the need for these systems to be supplemented by other support systems if they are not readily available to college bound students during their matriculation process.

Students may also encounter challenges affording their first semester of college due to unanticipated costs that might surface during the summer (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014). In previous longitude studies conducted in 2002 Castleman, Page, and Schooley found that approximately 10 percent of kids who planned to matriculate to college did not, and that rate was even higher for low SES students (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014). Adequate college

counseling over the summer can be of added value for students for multiple reasons. Students could be more receptive to advice regarding college enrollment in the summer due to the fact that college is a reality and no longer is a dream (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014). This intervention can be referred to as a mesosystem and is associated with the interactions and intersections of the microsystems that students have within their lives (Arnold et al., 2015). The overlapping of the mesosystems and microsystems in a student's college attainment process can have a significant effect on summer melt (Arnold et al., 2015).

The summer can pose as a difficult transition time for students for an abundance of reasons. There are a lot of major decisions that students need to make over the summer months regarding their college matriculation process especially decisions that pertain to students affording their higher education (Arnold et al., 2015). To make this task more complicated many of these decisions need to be made at a time in the calendar year when students may not have access to high school counselors and college microsystems are not yet established to aid students (Arnold et al., 2015).

Castleman, Page, and Schooley (2014) investigated the impact of an intervention utilizing counselors who were not employed by the student's high schools and were hired to work with a population of students over the course of three months over the summer. They found that these counselors could help students address the financial barriers by assisting in the application of scholarships, setting up payment plans, waiving unnecessary charges from fees that students may not need (for example medical coverage that they may not need), and if necessary working with students to enroll in more affordable institutions or higher education (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014).

This additional counseling which can be very beneficial to participants can be offered at a relatively inexpensive cost. In the study conducted by Castleman, Page, and Schooley, they projected that to offer college aspiring students an additional two to three hours of support by college counselors would cost approximately $100-$200 per student and could increase college enrollment amongst low-income students by eight to twelve percent (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014). There were challenges that were associated with this intervention. Family issues and parents beliefs around a college education played a significant challenge towards the students college attainment journey (Arnold et al., 2015). However one of the largest challenges that the counselors encountered was whether to encourage a student to pursue their college attainment dreams despite the fact that their college attainment plan seemed to be unfeasible and perhaps not in the students best interest .(Arnold et al., 2015)

There are new interventions that are arising to mitigate summer melt amongst low-income college bound students. These efforts are known as summer nudging. Castleman and Page conducted a study in 2014 to test if peer mentoring and a text messaging campaign would increase the participants likelihood to matriculate to college. College bound students and their parents received ten text messages over the summer before they were slated to go to college (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). These text messages contained information that pertained to critical steps and tasks that students had to complete to successfully enroll into college. This information provided to each student was campus specific in order to satisfy deadline requirements that were established by each university (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). The text messages were sent to students by individuals who have college counseling experience, and each text message allowed students to request assistance if needed (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015).

Another measure that was taken was to have personal outreach conducted by peer mentors who were currently enrolled in college (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). Two college counseling organizations uAspire and Mastery selected, trained, supervised, and provided ongoing support for the peer mentors (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). The peer mentors made initial contact with the college bound students to assess their readiness for matriculation to college (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). They ensured that the students were still planning to enroll into college; that they completed the FAFSA; that prospective students received and understood their financial aid letter; and that they registered for all of their college placement tests (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). Upon completing this conversation the peer mentors would arrange either a face to face meeting or a follow up phone conversation to ensure that the college bound students did not have any additional questions or concerns (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). Peer mentors did not work on tasks such as assisting students with completing the FAFSA or other tasks that required students to share personal or financial information with the peer mentors (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). Instead, the peer mentors would refer the students to a supervising counselor who would be able to assist with these tasks (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015).

Both methods of Summer Nudging seemed to be highly effective and relatively low cost. The peer mentoring program increased college enrollment by 4.5 percent amongst the participants in the program (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). The text messaging campaign cost $7 per students which accounted for the expenses of hiring the counselors who supported students who required additional assistance with the task prompted by the ten texts (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). These methods of support are two examples of how interventions can be utilized to reinforce the college bound student's mesosystems and microsystems during their matriculation process from high school to college. During a time when students may need additional support, that support can

be provided at a low cost which will have a significant impact on the trajectory of that student who may not otherwise have access to much needed guidance and support.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

Through this review of literature, I have deepened my understanding of my problem of practice and how it impacts the students that I serve at TNA. When I initially examined my problem of practice, I analyzed the problem through a surface level approach based upon my professional and personal experiences. Although I was familiar with various obstacles and barriers that hinder my students from attaining a college education, I did not fully understand the breadth of the complexities.

Through the literature I have a better understanding of the impact that African American parents have on their college bound children. It is imperative that African-American families instill college aspirations at an early age and that they are intentional upon intervening in their child's academic career when necessary but especially in their child's middle school years (CLASP), 2014). Various parenting practices influence and can ultimately shape the trajectory of college bound African American students either in a positive manner or as a detriment.

While conducting this literature review, I was able to better understand the perceived responsibility that some African American students have towards their families and how that understanding influences their college attainment process. Internal and external dilemmas can have a detrimental impact on both a college bound student and their family as well. Family dynamics can also play a significant impact of African American college bound students. It is imperative that, as I attempt to address my problem of practice, I intentionally increase engagement with the

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families of my students. Otherwise that disconnect can lead to complications among my student's matriculation process.

It is critical to provide college bound African American students with a high-quality college counseling experience while they are in high school. There is substantial data that indicates that African-American students are less prepared for college readiness compared to their Caucasian peers (Cokley et al., 2016). Therefore, it is essential that high quality college counseling takes place during student's high school experience to support students along their college attainment process. It is also essential that College and Guidance Counselors are adequately prepared to work with African American students in high school. While addressing my problem of practice, it will be necessary to evaluate TNA's College Counseling program and to address areas of expansion within the program to better serve our students.

The financial implications of affording a higher education may be more critical now than ever before. It is imperative that students and their parents understand the actual cost of a student's prospective college education and the financial aid packages that they seek. Many families do not fully understand the financial aid process, nor do they have a comprehensive plan put in place to afford a higher education degree. This lack of understanding and preparation places college bound African American students at a huge disadvantage. It will be imperative in my efforts to address my problem of practice that I instill intentional measures to address financial planning and literacy so that my students and their families have a comprehensive understanding on how they will afford their child's higher education.

There are many challenges associated with securing the necessary financial aid to afford a higher education. One of those challenges that can often be unnoticed is the complexities that may be associated with the FAFSA application. This application could possibly pose as a huge barrier

to college bound students who are attempting to secure federal, state, and at times institutional funding that is necessary to secure aid to afford a higher education. Inaccurate or incomplete applications could result in the lack of access to government grants and low interest loans that might be instrumental in college bound student's financial aid packages.

Individuals who are not familiar with completing the FAFSA often find the application process to be intimidating and frustrating (B. Castleman & Page, 2015). These feelings can deter students and their families from completing the process which will ultimately place those students at a financial disadvantage (B. Castleman & Page, 2015). These challenges can further complicate conditions that students that I serve at TNA encounter when they attempt to secure funding to afford their higher education. In addressing my problem of practice, it will be imperative to spend dedicated time and attention with my students and their parents to ensure that any obstacles and barriers that may exist when attempting to complete the FAFSA are absolved through intentional interventions.

Through my literature review I was fascinated to learn about new protocols and interventions that are utilized to combat the challenges that students encounter in their college attainment process. Summer Melt is a term that is utilized to describe high attrition rates for low social economic students during the summer period in between graduating from high school and enrolling into their freshman year of college (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Harvard University, 2014). There are various measures that contribute to Summer Melt such as the need to submit documentation for financial aid, submitting documentation to prospective colleges for enrollment purposes, students lacking access to both microsystems and mesosystems etc. (B. L. Castleman, Page, & Harvard University, 2014). These challenges can be detrimental to a student's matriculation process and can ultimately lead to a student not attending college. Throughout my

professional career working at TNA, I have observed the impact that Summer Melt has had on various students who graduate from TNA. We have attempted to address these issues by maintaining ongoing communication with our graduates. However, as we continue to grow as a school and as we have more students graduating from TNA, it will be imperative that we increase our efforts towards a more formal graduate support program to provide our students with the necessary supports that they will need to successfully navigate their way thru their college attainment process and success. Given the fact that over 72% of our students are first generational college bound students, our institution must have a strong and intentional graduate support program to support their college success efforts.

There are multiple low cost methods of intervention that can be instrumental in combating these challenges that are referred to as Summer Nudging (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). These interventions include a text messaging campaign to address enrollment issues, outreach to college bound students by peer mentors, and college counseling sessions conducted by experienced college counselors who work for an organization that is not affiliated with the student's high school or prospective college. (B. L. Castleman & Page, 2015). These interventions can be critical in absolving obstacles and barriers that impact my problem of practice as my students prepare to make the transition from high school to college.

By conducting this literature review I now have a better understanding of my problem of practice and how this problem affects other students who represent the same demographic of the students that I serve at TNA. As a result. I am more confident in developing effective strategies to address this problem while conducting my research project.

3.0 Methods

3.1 Study Context

Data indicates that a student's race and socioeconomic status continue to be a factor regarding college enrollment (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016). Low-income college bound African American students are more likely to encounter obstacles and barriers towards college attainment when compared to Caucasian college bound students (Cox, 2016). College Bound low-income African American students tend to be unfamiliar with various systems and processes that are necessary for successful matriculation from high school to college (Cox, 2016). Therefore, low-income African American students are more likely to encounter situations which lead to interruptions or failure to complete their college attainment process.

College and career readiness programs play a significant role in the preparation of African American college bound students (Harris & Hines, 2016). These programs assist college bound students in college attainment tasks such as completing an undergraduate application for admission, filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), securing tuition and housing deposits, taking placement tests which are necessary for college attainment etc. If low-income college bound African American students do not have access to a quality college and career readiness programs, they are less likely to achieve their college aspirations.

The college attainment process can be further complicated if this student demographic does not have a comprehensive financial plan for how they plan to afford their college aspirations. A student's matriculation to college can be compromised if a student and their family aren't able to successfully complete the financial aid process and other necessary college enrollment tasks.

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Challenges that students encounter in completing the financial aid process can deter students from accessing state, federal, and university funds that are critical components in affording their higher education (B. Castleman & Page, 2015). Unfortunately, all too often that student's college enrollment is disrupted due to the financial obligations that college bound students and or their families encounter.

3.2 Inquiry Setting

TNA is a faith based non-sectarian college preparatory school which serves disadvantaged youth. The mission of TNA is to break the cycle of generational poverty by empowering youth and preparing them for college and citizenship. TNA serves students in grades 6-12 throughout the city of Pittsburgh. TNA is committed to educating financially disadvantaged students and removing barriers that may pose as a challenge to college access.

TNA offers its students a holistic educational model that is unique to the Pittsburgh region. TNA has an extended school day that provides students with a rigorous college preparatory curriculum designed to cultivate habits which are conducive to college success. Students arrive at TNA at 7:30 a.m. to receive the first of three meals throughout the school day. TNA students attend school 10 hours a day Monday through Thursday and are engaged in sports, arts, and afternoons study. This structure was put in place to ensure that students are engaged in healthy structured activities which are conducive to positive facets of life. Students are also fed dinner after activities on Monday through Thursday and are dismissed at 3:30 pm on Friday. Within the extended school day, students are immersed in a college preparatory curriculum with emphasis on both liberal arts and STEM education that prepares students for college readiness.

Cultural norms and clear expectations are driving forces within TNA, shaping the student's academic experience. TNA believes in the value of contributing towards the betterment of society within the world in which we live. Therefore, students participate in community service opportunities four times each academic school year. TNA has an array of academic and social emotional support services to assist students throughout their educational journey at TNA, so they can achieve their academic goals. The policies and support systems are imbedded within the student experience to adequately ready students for college and citizenship.

TNA has a college readiness program that is intentional in providing students access and exposure to various college during a student's enrollment at TNA. Students who attend TNA will have visited over 40 colleges during their high school career. TNA believes that this degree of access and exposure, in conjunction with a College Counseling program in 11th and 12th grade will assist students in the development of their college aspirations and will also strengthen their college attainment process. Through the College Counseling Program, students engage in an individualized program with TNA staff to guide them through college application and financial aid process in order to enhance students' opportunities to successfully matriculate from high school to college. Given this focus on college attainment, TNA hopes to minimize obstacles and barriers that stand in the way of low-income college bound African Americans to successfully enter and succeed in college.

3.3 Participants

TNA serves students throughout metropolitan Pittsburgh. TNA is intentional in serving low-income students in grades 6-12. Eighty percent of TNA families have a taxable income of

$30,000 or less and are unlikely to have the resources to afford a college preparatory independent high school. One hundred percent of TNA's students identify as African American or are bi-racial. Sixty-five percent of TNA students live in a single parent household and 92% of TNA student's feeder schools are categorized as a "low-performing" school as determined by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

One of the challenges that TNA students face is that often they and their parents do not fully understand the college attainment process because the parents did not pursue a college degree. Approximately 72% of TNA students are first generational college bound students. Due to the lack of familiarity regarding the college attainment process, typically there is little or no financial savings to assist in affording a higher education. This fact represents a huge barrier for students who plan to pursue a higher education. Throughout this study it will be essential for me to gain an understanding on how TNA can better prepare students and their parents for college readiness and college success, particularly as attainment relates to financial obligations associated with the cost of higher education.

3.4 Inquiry Approach

The participants in this study included alumni of TNA who have graduated from TNA within a one to five-year period. I hypothesized that it is imperative for participants to possess at least one year of college experience to provide a perspective on at least one completed academic year. I also wanted to capture a student's background and recent experience regarding their transition from high school to college. The sample size of this study was 10-15 TNA alumni who have graduated within the last five years.

3.5 Data Collection/Procedures

I conducted an action research study designed to evaluate ways to inform my problem of practice. By utilizing an inquiry design, I had the ability as a working practitioner to collect data with the potential to directly address a wicked issue within my organization. TNA employs a unique educational model that has been very successful in providing its students college access and success. TNA is experiencing a new trend that indicates that TNA alumni's college graduation rate is being interrupted at a higher rate than what TNA has traditionally experienced. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of underlying issues so that TNA can better prepare and support TNA students for both college readiness and college success.

A semi-structured interview was utilized to collect data for this study. The interview protocol ensured that there was a high degree of consistency among the questions asked so that the data that was derived from the interview was deemed reliable. Probes were utilized with each research question to surface deeper answers to each question that participants were asked. The interview protocol that I used is outlined in the Appendix section.

To mitigate any risks that might have been associated with the interview process and to protect the participants, a signed and dated consent form was completed before the interview. The interviews took place either in person or via telephone based upon the participants availability and preference. Each interview was audio recorded, and the length of each interview depended on the participants answers to each question.

3.6 Design, Method, and Evidence

Table 2 Design, Method, and Evidence Table

Inquiry Questions	Method	Evidence	Analysis
1. How can The Neighborhood Academy (TNA) better prepare its students for college readiness?	Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data utilizing this method. These interviews were conducted with 16 TNA alumni. The interview process allowed an opportunity for further exploration of participants responses when necessary.	Through an interview process the participants had an opportunity to speak about what college readiness facets of TNA prepared them for college and they had the opportunity to make recommendations for improvement within TNA.	The data collected by the interview was analyzed and evaluated to surface themes that were derived from utilizing this method. Themes were identified utilizing a coding plan. A table was created to display a visual representation of the coding summary.
2. Are there obstacles and barriers regarding successful college readiness that TNA is not considering within its current holistic educational model?	Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data utilizing this method. These interviews were conducted with 16 TNA alumni. The interview process allowed an opportunity for further exploration of participants responses when necessary.	Data collected from this method allowed participants an opportunity to identify and articulate obstacles and barriers that either hindered, interrupted or ultimately ended their college enrollment. Data collected acknowledged successes that participants encountered in college and ways that TNA is successfully preparing students for college.	The data collected by the interview method was analyzed and evaluated to surface themes that were derived by utilizing this method. Themes were identified and a coding plan was utilized to analyze the data.

3. Do TNA alumni have a sustainable financial plan that allows them to afford their higher education?	A semi-structured individual interview was utilized to capture data that displayed how participants funded their higher education and how participants covered their financial "gap" (if any financial gap existed) regarding how much financial aid the participant received in comparison to the cost of college attendance.	The data collected suggested whether the financial plan to afford a higher education was sustainable over a four to five-year period based upon the participants perspective.	Data collected by this method was analyzed and displayed in a chart. The purpose of the chart is to display the costs that TNA alumni are incurring during the pursuit of their higher education. By visualizing this data, readers will be able to have a deeper understanding of the financial investment that students are making in their education and what portion of their investment is made up by grants, scholarships, loans, and other financial sources.
4. What unanticipated challenges have TNA alumni encountered during their higher education experience?	Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data utilizing this method. These interviews were conducted with 16 TNA alumni. The interview process allowed an opportunity for further exploration of participants responses when necessary.	Through this method data was collected that indicated obstacles or barriers that TNA students encounter during their undergraduate experience that hindered their ability to be successful.	The data collected in this method was utilized to directly impact how TNA prepares its students for college. Recommendations were made to TNA on how to best prepare current students for college success.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

Once the interviews were conducted the data was transcribed and stored onto my laptop computer in a password protected file utilizing Microsoft Word and Excel. A coding scheme was utilized to categorize the data that was retrieved from the research in efforts to draw themes that were reported as findings from the research study. I took appropriate measures to ensure that this Qualitative research study was trustworthy, credible and reliable.

3.7.1 Trustworthiness

Once my Dissertation Review Committee approved my topic, I gained approval from the University of Pittsburgh's IRB. Through this review process appropriate measures were utilized to ensure that ethical considerations were established and maintained throughout the research study. I actively listened and respected the narratives that each participant provided during the interview process. No matter how successful or challenging, everyone's experience was in college, there was essential information gained from each person's experience. Confidentiality was upheld by not utilizing participants names throughout the entire research project and those measures were explained verbally. Participants had the ability to withdraw from the research process at any time.

3.7.2 Credibility

It was imperative throughout the study that I drew from the participants experiences and that all data that I interpreted accurately reflected the participants experience. Each participant received a summary of the purpose of the study and how the results will be presented. Participants

had an opportunity to ask questions during any phase of the project and about the findings of the project.

3.7.3 Reliability

It is important that each reader of this study have confidence that the research was conducted in a reliable manner. Therefore, I was intentional in ensuring that each facet of the interviews and the interpretation of data were conducted in a very consistent way. I was certain to read each interview question slowly and clearly to allow each participant an opportunity to thoroughly express their experience as it pertains to the research question. The same interview protocol was utilized for each interview. There was careful consideration in the design of this research study to allow consistency to be present throughout the study.

3.8 Limitations

There are various limitations that exist within this research project. The first limitation that exist is the sample size of the study. TNA is currently in its 19th year of operation and has had 15 graduating classes. TNA has an average graduation class size of 13. The sample population of this study will represent anywhere from 7-11% of TNA graduates based upon the number of participants in the study.

The second limitation of this study is the option of participants having the opportunity to engage in the study through a phone interview. In conducting a phone interview, the principal investigator will not have the opportunity to observe the participants non-verbal reactions to

questions. This may impact the need for additional probe questions if participants desire additional clarity or rephrasing a question.

The last limitation that I foresee is my role within the school as I am now the Headmaster of TNA. I can bring an unintentional bias to the research process due to my professional longevity within the school and my belief in the mission. Since I have worked with each participant of this study regarding their college application process, the participants may be reserved or biased with the information that they share regarding their experiences. It was imperative that I maintained a neutral unbiased opinion throughout the research process.

<center>**4.0 Findings**</center>

For my research project, I conducted an action research study to further evaluate ways to address my problem of practice. As a working practitioner, the data that I collected will allow me an opportunity to directly address a critical issue within my organization. The participants in this study are graduates of TNA.

A semi-structured interview was utilized to collect data for this study. A total of 16 TNA graduates were interviewed, the participants graduated from TNA within one to five-years prior to the study. In addition to the interview, a survey was distributed to all TNA graduates to capture perspectives of college preparation that they received and to better understand their college experience.

4.1 Finding 1: The Neighborhood Academy's approach towards college readiness adequately prepares their graduates

TNA has a distinct model that prepares its students for college readiness. The structure of the school day is one that infuses academic rigor with intentional academic support programs. As a result of the preparation that students have received while attending TNA, I found that TNA prepares its graduates for success in college. "TNA taught me what it meant to be an academic scholar. I was able to earn an academic scholarship that paid for my college education. They taught me how to buckle down and handle my business." (Interview #6). Twenty-three graduates of TNA participated in the survey regarding their college preparation and their experience in college. Of

the 23 students who completed the survey, 100% of the participants were either satisfied or very satisfied with their college preparation experience.

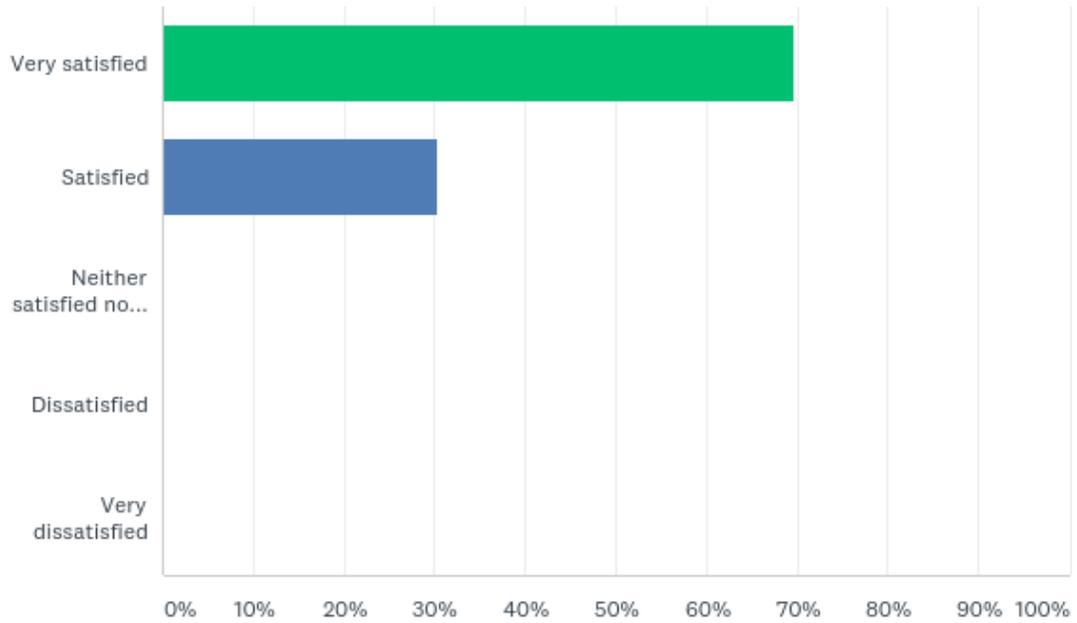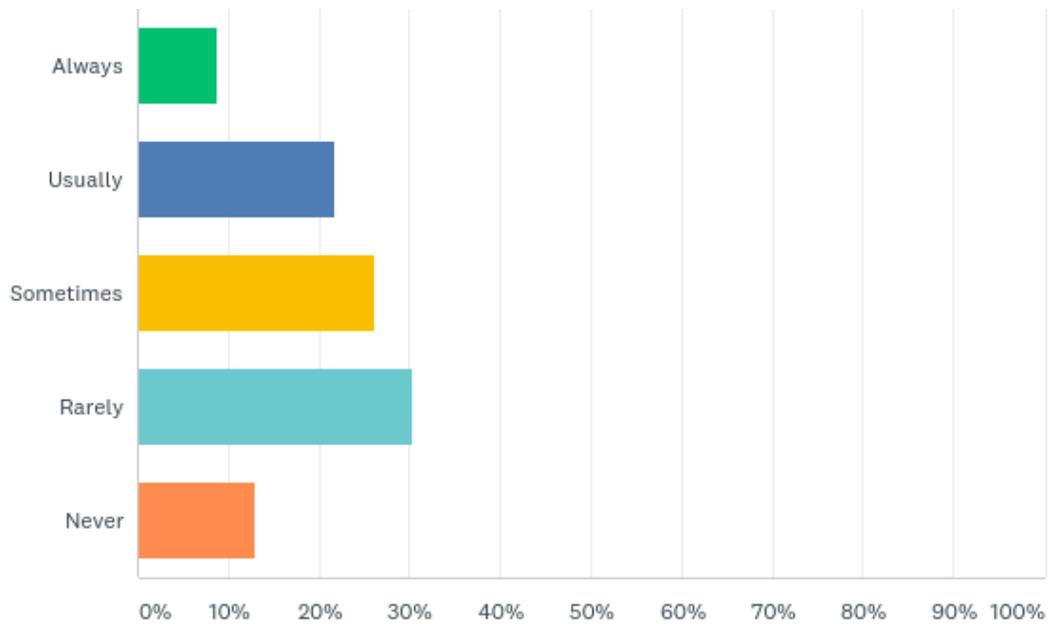**Table 3 Question: How satisfied were you with the preparation for college that you received from TNA?**

Table 4 During your first year of college, how often were you overwhelmed with academic work?

TNA graduates emphasized how their writing skills stood out in comparison to their college peers and how they were well prepared for the expectation of good writing. "Certain things that were overwhelming to my peers were not overwhelming to me. For example, due to my experience at TNA I was able to complete a six to eight-page paper in a couple of hours, when my peers may struggle with the same assignment for a couple of days". (Interview #7).

Students who were interviewed also indicated that their experience at TNA cultivated a great degree of accountability regarding their academic responsibilities. "I felt that the structure, the discipline, and the heavy workload prepared me for college and what to expect in college." (Interview#1). There were several narratives throughout the interview process that echoed this participant's comment.

TNA graduates appear to struggle in high level math and science courses in college. "When I was in college, I really struggled with upper level math and science courses such as Chemistry 1, Chemistry 2, and Statistics. I took Statistics twice in order to earn a B. My first time taking the class I withdrew from the class and the second time I took the class I met with a tutor twice a week for the entire semester." (Interview #8). Similar comments were conveyed on numerous occasions throughout the interview process indicating the challenges students face when taking college math and science courses.

The college counseling program at TNA was reported to be an asset to students in their preparation for college. Through the program students are provided with valuable experiences that graduates directly associated with their success in college. "The college counseling at TNA is essential for our students. I work with Pittsburgh Public School kids and they are doing those kids a disservice. I think we are doing a fantastic job in the support that we provide our students by taking them to college visits and filling out college and financial aid applications with them, to

providing them with scholarship opportunities. TNA puts us in a great position compared to the public-school systems that I know of." (Interview #1). Through the College Counseling program, students tour various colleges throughout their middle and high school experience. They receive assistance completing necessary forms for admission and financial aid and have conversations about college that may not take place within their households. "In my household, talking about college wasn't a normal dinner time conversation. None of my family members went to college, and therefore they didn't understand what it took to go to college. By going to TNA, I was able to talk to staff members about college, and those conversations were very helpful for me." (Interview #16). There were many narratives by participants in the interview process that spoke to the value and need for TNA's College Counseling program for first generation college students.

4.2 Finding 2: Ongoing support and guidance are imperative for TNA graduates to be successful in college

TNA provides its students with an intimate learning environment and a high degree of structure during student's experiences in middle and high school. There appears to be a desire to have a similar experience on a larger scale while TNA graduates are in college. "When I first got to college I felt very alone and disconnected from my new community. I am glad that the TNA staff kept in contact with me and answered questions that I had about college." (Interview #7). TNA graduates typically sought out ongoing communication while in college both from their current institution and TNA.

The experience that TNA graduates have with their college advisor seems to be a critical factor in their college experience. Eighty eight percent of TNA graduates who participated in the

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interview process indicated that, they had a good relationship with their college advisor. The advice and guidance that they received from their advisor regarding their academic plan and affording their education were essential within their experience. Thirty eight percent of the students who were interviewed shared that they had to change their advisor due to the experience that they had with them: "My first college advisor was terrible. I was given inaccurate information regarding the courses that I needed to take for my major. As a result of that I took classes that I didn't need to take and wasted time and money" (Interview #8). It appears that a supportive relationship with their academic advisor is an essential component for TNA graduate's experience in college. This finding was mentioned often by participants throughout the interview process.

There were various offices that TNA students listed in order to receive ongoing support while on their college campuses. These offices included the financial aid office, student government, career services, writing center, Act 101 etc. The office that seemed to be the most influential among TNA graduates is the Office of Multicultural Affairs (or the equivalent office). Eighty eight percent of TNA graduates indicated that the Multicultural Affairs Office played a significant role in their college experience. "Being in college at a PWI (Primary White Institution) was vastly different than going to school with all African Americans. I spent a lot of time engaging with the Multicultural Affairs Office." (Interview #13). With a high proportion of TNA graduates attending a PWI, there appears to be a need for the support of an office whose primary purpose is to support Black students.

TNA recognizes that many of their graduates are first generation college bound students, and therefore students need additional support that some peers may not need. Therefore, TNA has a graduate support program that is offered to all TNA graduates. This program serves as a supporting mechanism for many TNA graduates: "During my undergraduate experience, TNA

played a significant role in my support system while I was in college. It was typically my first line of defense when I was making any decision." (Interview #16). The desire to continue a relationship with a member of the TNA community often appeared through the interview process, thus reinforcing the need to provide mentor opportunities for first generation college students.

One hundred percent of the participants who were interviewed utilized the graduate support program to some extent. The graduate support program offers students' academic counseling, assistance with completing financial aid applications, assistance with workforce opportunities, and at times the program will provide graduates emergency financial assistance for graduates to fund their higher education: "Support from TNA staff has been tremendous. Learning the FAFSA process helped me significantly when applying for aid in college. Having a mentor to guide you before, during, and after college was huge for me." (Interview #12). Many participants in the interview process provided similar narratives regarding the ongoing support that they received while in college from TNA staff.

TNA graduates emphasized how critical this program is both in the survey and in the interviews. The program is currently staffed by two staff members and three volunteers. Given the increase in enrollment at TNA, the current staffing model may not satisfy the intimate experience that graduates once found very beneficial to their college preparation experience

4.3 Finding 3: TNA should expand its college and career readiness programs in order to better prepare TNA graduates for the transition to college and beyond

The transition from high school to college can be a challenging transition for any college bound student. While graduates from TNA appear to do well with this transition, there are ways

that TNA could better prepare their students. There is a unique transition that takes place from high school to college for graduates of TNA. In high school, TNA students are required to participate in a ten-hour school day Monday through Thursday and an eight-hour day on Friday. While in college students typically spend 12-18 hours formally in class and have a substantial amount of free time. While there was a consensus from TNA students that the structure of the day was very helpful in preparing them for college, there also was a consistent concern about their challenges with being more independent at their new college home: "It was a huge culture shock adapting to my college schedule compared to the structure of TNA. At TNA we were in school 12 hours a day, while at college we had so much more free time." (Interview #11). There appears to be a need for balance between the nurture of a structured environment and the challenges that students face when they are on their own. "In college I didn't have adults looking over my shoulder forcing me to do my work, I had to become more independent and hold myself accountable for my workload." (Interview #12).

TNA is an intentionally small school that serves 140 Black students. Both the size and the racial composition of the student body are typically different than the experience than most TNA graduates experience once they attend college. Ninety six percent of the participants in the survey attend PWIs whose enrollments are at least 3,000 students. Imbedded in the structure of TNA experience are academic support services that assist students to be successful inside and outside of the classroom. These services include academic advising, academic tutorial, afternoon study hall, ongoing communication with parents, writing, and math centers. While these are like the services on most college campuses, typically students must seek these services as opposed to them being mandated. This experience is vastly different than what TNA students encountered while at TNA: "TNA is very small, and we are around each other almost 24/7. It is a strength and a weakness. I

expected a similar experience in college. The thing about college is that you're by yourself most of the time and you must learn to be independent. Because we were so close at TNA, I expected to be close to my community in college, but in college due to the size of the campus you aren't as close as we were at TNA." (Interview #4). This quote speaks to the opportunities and challenges of a small and intimate learning environment. In this case, the strength of TNA (small size and intimacy) may also be a weakness to address.

Due to the size and intimacy of TNA there are limitations when it comes to both the academic curriculum and activities that take place outside of the classroom for TNA students. While TNA is intentional about offerings, due to the size of the student body and financial constraints, there are limitations on offerings that can limit student's exposure to experiences that could lead to both job and life readiness: "Other schools like Penn Hills offer a lot of programs for their students that are different than my experience at TNA. Even Allderdice offered programs for their students where they went to other schools to learn about nursing and other career fields. Our curriculum was more basic." (Interview #4). The size of TNA appears to be both an asset and a detriment.

TNA has some programs that provide students exposure to career related fields such as Mock Trial and a Robotics program. However larger schools and districts offer additional opportunities due to their size and budgets: "A lot of my peers in college were able to participate in specialized programs that their high school offered them. The programs were different clubs, activities, and electives that had a career focus. I wish that I was able to have that experience while I was at TNA." (Interview #11). Exposure to a variety of extracurricular programs could peak students' interest to engage in career related activities that they otherwise would not have access.

4.4 Finding 4: TNA graduates and their parents struggle to afford higher education

Affording a higher education is difficult for many. Finances can represent insurmountable obstacle for college bound students. Also, a family's perceived cost of affording a higher education can be different than the actual cost of a higher education (Yaffe & Educational Testing Services, 2015). Misinterpreting this information can be prevalent among first generation college bound families and can cause challenges (Yaffe & Educational Testing Services, 2015). Unfortunately, the cost of affording a higher education also serves as a difficult challenge for graduates of TNA. Seventy seven percent of the participants who took the survey indicated that the cost of room, board, tuition, and fees served as the number one significant barrier in affording a higher education.

Table 5 Which of the following were significant barriers to enrolling in college? Check all that apply?
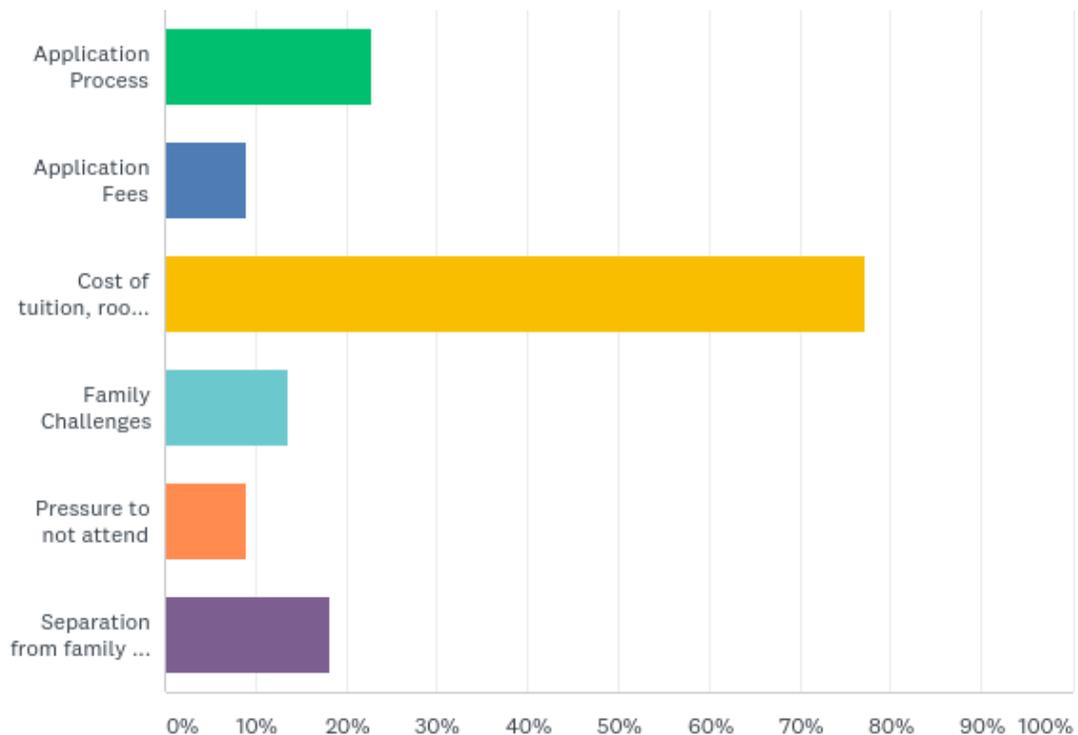
This data demonstrates the challenges that TNA graduates encounter in their pursuit of affording a higher education. This information is coupled with the data collected in the interview, which indicated that 94% of the participants families did not have any money set aside to afford their student's college education: "My family didn't have money set aside to pay for my college education. They wanted to help me out, but they just couldn't. They had to be more worried about how to keep the lights on, food in our stomachs, and clothes on our back. I mean life happens." (Interview #5). It appears that financial constraints within the families of TNA graduates is a problem and that the school must investigate ways to help prepare for this challenge to a student's opportunity to receive a college education.

When interview participants were asked if they had a four-year plan to afford their higher education, 81% stated that they did not have a four-year plan. This indicates the need for an extensive amount of financial planning prior to the transition from high school to college for TNA students: "My only plan was that I am going to go in and get out in four years. But I didn't have a concrete plan of how that was going to get done on a yearly basis and how much money was needed in order to accomplish that goal." The lack of four-year plan to afford and pay for a higher education emerged in the majority of the interviews, thus signaling an area of focus for TNA.

Financial constraints are a bitter reality to TNA families. The average taxable median income of 2019/2020 TNA parents are $17,565.00. Limited financial resources serve as a challenge for TNA graduates when attempting to afford a higher education. It is common for TNA graduates to have gaps in their financial aid packages. A gap is a shortfall from the amount of financial aid that a student is awarded compared to the actual cost of their higher education. Eighty four percent of the participants in the interviews expressed having gaps in their financial aid packages at some point of their college career. TNA graduates reported relying on loans in order

to secure the necessary funds needed to pay for their college education. In the survey that was administered to TNA graduates, loans were the leading factor allowing students to afford their higher education: "I took out loans to cover my gap in my financial aid package. I plan to move off campus next year so that my mother and I will not have to take out another Parent Plus Loan again." (Interview #15). Taking out loans to afford a higher education was the number one factor to afford a higher education provided by TNA graduates who participated in the survey.

Table 6 How are you paying for college? Check all that apply.
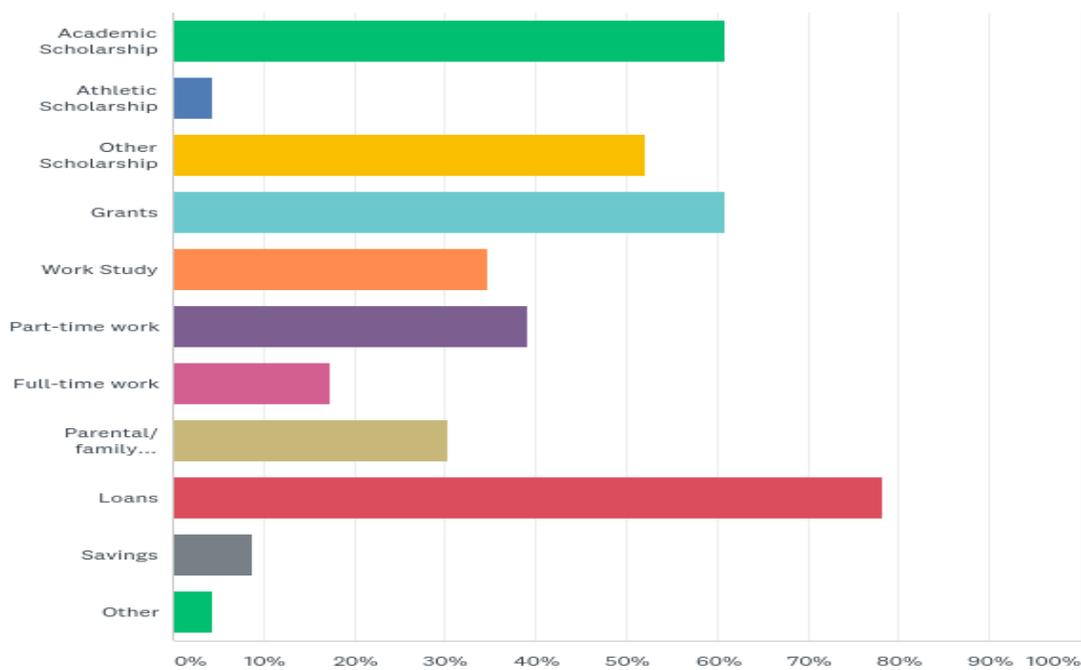
There are unanticipated factors that are a detriment to student's educational experience due to financial hardships. Eighty four percent of the students who participated in the interviews expressed that they encountered a great degree of stress while attempting to afford their higher education. Fifty percent of the participants stated that they experienced some degree of depression due to the stress of affording their higher education.

This data speaks to the mental health challenges that TNA graduates could potentially experience when attempting to afford their higher education: "I remember when I had to drop out of school for a semester because I didn't have enough money to pay for my last semester or my upcoming semester. I was so depressed, that I didn't come out of my house for two weeks. I eventually got two jobs to pay off my past due balance and I am on a payment plan to afford my education." (Interview #3). Mental health challenges that were associated with affording a higher education emerged in several interviews. "I wasn't prepared for how life and financial circumstances could impact my mental health. There was a time when I was living off campus and I popped two tires and at that time my car was my only way to get to campus and my job. At that time, I only had $5 in my bank account until my next pay and I thought to myself, what the hell am I going to do?" (Interview #1). All participants within the interview process expressed a degree of stress that was associated with affording their higher education. TNA needs to prepare students for not only the cost associated with earning a degree, but ways to manage the stress that they may encounter.

There was a consensus that TNA does a good job in the college application and financial aid process. Eighty one percent of the graduates who participated in the interview felt that TNA provided them with enough knowledge to develop a financial plan to afford their higher education. However, there was a consensus that TNA should provide additional information when considering how to afford a higher education. Topics of concern included finding multiple year scholarships, providing more in-depth information regarding financial literacy, loan repayment terms and conditions, etc.: "I feel that TNA did a great job assisting me with completing the financial aid process and providing me with scholarship information. I wish you guys would have provided me with more multiyear scholarships and a better understanding on the repayment terms

of my college loans." (Interview #13). Providing TNA students and graduates with resources to successfully plan for expenses associated with their higher education is imperative for student success beyond graduation and something the school and its partners must consider.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Quality of Education

Throughout the nation there is concern regarding the quality of education that African American students receive in preparation for college and other forms of post-secondary education (CLASP,2014). There is also an ongoing concern that low-income African American students are less likely to enroll in college for a multitude of reasons, which includes affording a higher education (Cox, 2016). This fact can lead to an increase in both an educational and income gap among racial groups throughout the nation.

TNA's mission is to break the generational cycle of poverty that exists among underserved African American youth in the Pittsburgh region. Through a holistic model which includes high academic expectations and support, TNA prepares its students for college readiness and success. Throughout my project I collected data which affirmed that TNA students are satisfied with their college preparation experience. In fact, 100% of the participants surveyed were satisfied with their college preparatory experience and 70% of the participants were very satisfied with the preparation that they received for college. While there are areas that TNA can improve the college preparation experience, my research indicates that overall TNA graduates are prepared for college studies.

There are experiences that TNA students receive while at TNA that appear to be instrumental in their readiness for college. When interviewed participants were asked to describe how TNA prepared them for college, the top responses were college exposure/access, time management, work ethic, writing skills, and structure. I believe that these areas of academic focus are critical in the college preparation for disadvantaged students. While having a strong academic

experience is imperative in preparing students for college, my research indicates that the preparation that students receive out of school is also important.

Through the student interviews I was able to gain a better understanding of the impact of the educational model of TNA. There are aspects of the school's program that differentiates the experiences of TNA students when compared to their peers. Through an extended school day that has high academic standards and cultural expectations, TNA sets a standard of how students in the school should perform and treat one another. The research suggests that academic interventions in African American students during their high school experience are essential components in their college readiness process (CLASP, 2014). Integrating high academic standards into the educational experience for disadvantaged students appears to be beneficial for TNA students. There are also cultural standards that drive the TNA experience. For example, there is a zero tolerance for physical violence at the school. If students should engage within a physical altercation either inside or outside of school, they will be dismissed from TNA. While these components of the school can serve as a challenge for student retention, they appear to be instrumental in the college preparation experience of TNA graduates. Having elevated standards and expectations for TNA students, TNA helps them to develop skills and habits that graduates typically find to be beneficial during their college experience.

A strong curricular experience in the classroom is not enough to successfully prepare underserved students for college. There are programmatic and academic support systems that are key components in the preparation of disadvantaged youth for success in college. Instilling academic awareness and self-advocacy skills are critical components of the educational experience at TNA. These facets of the educational experience are a force for student success. By infusing high academic standards and cultural norms into student's academic experience, students will have

a high probability of developing habits and routines to better prepare them for success in college. While there were recommendations for TNA to evaluate different facets of the school, I found value in the educational model that TNA students receive in preparation for college.

5.2 Ongoing Support

Underserved students encounter significant challenges transitioning from high school to college. I have found consistent data within my literature review that supports structures put into place at TNA which are instrumental to a successful transition. My literature review also suggests single event barriers such as the FASFA, or transitioning to college post-graduation, are significant barriers to matriculation (Castleman & Page 2015). Besides the lack of familial knowledge and experience, traditional support structures such as guidance counselors are not easily available, which can lead to "Summer Melt" wherein otherwise qualified students do not successfully matriculate to college (Castleman & Page 2014).

At TNA, this initial transition was also found to be a critical period to predict student success. Graduates who left college within early college years frequently did so because they felt unable to access the necessary support resources their families were unable to provide. However, successful TNA graduates consistently reported that TNA provided an intimate level of support, due to the rapport with faculty and staff that they had developed while at TNA. Because TNA students had learned the value of support structures such as writing centers, financial aid counselors and academic advisors, 76% reported seeking out similar resources in college.

I believe this intimate rapport between students and trusted adults is a defining mechanism which separates TNA's success from the summer melt which is common among disadvantaged

students. Due to TNA's small size and the school's focus on community and relationships over test scores and achievements, students are able to overcome challenges that otherwise may be associated with their college aspirations. However, it is possible that this intimacy is a contributor to student attrition. Just as Castleman and Page identified the loss of high school supports such as guidance counselors in more traditional schools, it is possible that some TNA graduates have relied too much on their rapport at TNA. Because colleges provide similar, but less intimate support structures (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), it may be the very feature which define TNA's success in post high school matriculation is also one of its greatest challenges. My research supports the consensus conclusion that a lack of ongoing support is a barrier to success, while also extending the notion that an intimate level of support and mentorship beyond the high school program can serve as an insurmountable challenge for undeserved students.

Research on student success demonstrates that caring, and skilled staff, sufficient in number, is key to providing ongoing graduate support (Carey, 2018). At TNA, the current college counseling program is staffed by one full-time staff member, with academic advising support from one faculty member. As enrollment increases in the school, and the number of graduates likewise increases, it will be challenging to provide levels of intimate support that graduates of TNA reported valuing so highly. However, research on pre-college, post-graduation counseling suggests that it is possible to provide effective support even with limited resources. Castleman, Page and Schooley (2014) argue that receiving as little as three hours of counseling during the first post high school summer, at a cost of a few hundred dollars, can have a significant impact on matriculation rates. While TNA prides itself on intimate relationships in order to differentiate itself from less programs, one possible avenue to coping with enrollment pressures is increasing the frequency of low-cost assistance to prevent a first year fadeaway. TNA can increase their

ability to effectively communicate with graduates by utilizing electronic applications, social media platforms, video conferencing, and other methods of communication to stay connected with graduates.

5.3 Expansion of College Counseling and Career Readiness Service

There are many possibilities to consider when examining ways to increase the degree of a student's college readiness. Previous studies indicate that there are best practices in order to prepare African American students for college readiness. In addition to a rigorous academic experience in high school, it is also imperative to expose African American students to an array of colleges and career opportunities (CLASP, 2014). College visits and career experiences can reinforce and instill college aspirations that can ultimately influence students to better perform academically. This can be especially relevant for African American students who are of low socioeconomic status and who otherwise may not have access to these resources and opportunities (CLASP, 2014).

Graduates from TNA who participated in this research project were generally satisfied with their college preparation experience from TNA. Through the interview process, when asked if there are aspects of TNA that are critical to preserve the college preparation of TNA, 100% of the participants commented on the College Counseling experience that they received while at TNA. This data affirms that TNA provides students with a College Counseling program that is critical within the college preparatory experience. College Counseling programs serve as a critical resource in the preparation for college readiness for African American students (Harris & Hines, 2016). TNA graduates generally acknowledge the assistance that they received from TNA

regarding ongoing support, information regarding college and the access that they receive during their experience at TNA as being very helpful during their experience at TNA and beyond.

However, there are various aspects of the College Counseling experience that TNA should examine to strengthen the program for students. TNA could consider the ways that they intimately work with both students and families in order to best prepare them for college readiness. The literature points to the training and the intentionality that is necessary to successfully counsel African American students during their college experience (Carey, 2018). While TNA has experienced a great degree of success thus far in preparing students for college through their College Counseling program, TNA should carefully evaluate if the measures that have been effective thus far will be enough in the future.

TNA should also consider the professional development that College Counselors receive and the impact that the professional growth can have on both current students and parents. It is important for College Counselors to receive the necessary preparation to adequately prepare them to counsel African American students (Harris & Hines, 2016). Due to most TNA students being first generation college bound students, TNA should ensure that College Counselors are adequately prepared and supported in their efforts to assist students with college preparation. TNA might also ensure that there is an appropriate amount of staff within the College Counseling Department. Due to the increasing population of TNA coupled with leadership transitions, TNA should preserve the intimate experience within the College Counseling department that participants in the research study found valuable.

TNA should evaluate how information and experiences provided to students will have a positive impact on student's trajectories. Affording a higher education is a complicated task for any college bound students; however, data indicates that it can be particularly difficult for low-

income African American students (CLASP, 2014). Ninety four percent of participants in the interview indicated that their Families didn't have any money saved in order to assist them in affording their higher education. Eighty one percent of students that participated in the interview also indicated that they didn't have a four-year plan in order to afford their higher education. These two data points indicate that TNA should be very intentional in structuring programming that works with both students and families in their planning for affording a higher education. With the cost of a higher education rising on an annual basis, TNA families need to be well prepared and very strategic on how they take on this proposition.

TNA might also consider ways that they can provide students with opportunities that could lead to multiple year scholarships. TNA graduates that participated in the interview spoke highly of one-year scholarship information that they received from TNA; however, there was a desire to receive scholarship information that could be applicable to multiple years of support. Several students in the interview encouraged TNA to evaluate activities and experiences that TNA could allow students to engage in that could lead to scholarship opportunities. Examples that were provided included enhancing the athletic program so that athletic scholarships could be a possibility and offering activities that could expose students to career pathways such as Mock Trial, Debate Teams, STEM related clubs etc. These experiences could lead to scholarship offers and potential career interests.

5.4 Affording a Higher Education

Affording a higher education continues to be a challenge for many college bound students. Rising tuition cost accompanied by state funding cuts and policies imposed by federal government

can present a challenge for affording a higher education (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). The cost of affording a higher education is further complicated when considering the amount of time that students spend in college. Most undergraduate students do not graduate from college within four years (America, 2014). It has become standard to measure four-year graduation rates on a six-year time period (America, 2014). This two-year difference costs families across the nation billions of dollars (America, 2014).

Affording a higher education continues to challenge students who graduate from TNA. When asked how to do you afford your higher education, 78% of the participants indicated loans to be the number one factor in affording their higher education. This demonstrates the significance that loans factor into TNA graduates financial aid packages. It also raises the question; how much financial preparation takes place for TNA students to afford their higher education? Given the financial limitations that TNA families have, there appears to be a need for an immense amount of knowledge to be provided to families when considering how to afford a higher education for students at TNA. It also raises the question of what is the impact on the quality of life that TNA graduates experience after graduating from college with substantial debt? Given the reality that loans play a significant factor in affording a higher education for TNA graduates, there should be an intentional approach on the behalf of TNA to ensure that their graduates are borrowing responsibly. While TNA cannot control the actions of its graduates, TNA can ensure that graduates understand basic concepts of borrowing money and the financial implications associated with it.

Heather McGhee (2015), President of the Public Policy Demos stated that "Over the past 20 years, tuition at four-year public universities doubled as states cut back their higher education funding," (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). This statement speaks to the increasing financial challenges that TNA students can encounter when attempting to afford their education

due to the rising cost of education and the decrease of readily available state grant support. The rising cost of affording a higher education is problematic for TNA families given their financial constraints.

Families who enrolled their students into TNA for the 2019-2020 school year have a taxable median income of $17,565. When you couple this data with the fact that 81% of participants who were interviewed did not have a four-year plan to afford their higher education, you better understand the complexities associated with the affordability challenges that graduates from TNA encounter. Not only are there challenges with actionable plans to afford a higher education, but there are also limited resources available for families to contribute to student's college aspirations. This poses a dilemma.

While TNA has programmatic aspects in place to work with families in affording their child's education, appropriate infrastructure is not in place to effectively address this facet of the school. All those interviewed reported a challenge in affording their higher education and ongoing financial concerns. Eighty one percent of the students who participated in the interview did not have a four-year plan to afford their higher education which indicates a lack of financial planning to accomplish the task of paying for college. These realities represent an insurmountable challenge for TNA graduates. Southern University's President Ronald Mason Jr. stated that "the state (Louisiana) once paid 70% of the cost of higher education while students paid 30%; today (2015) those shares have reversed. Not only is the burden being put more and more on poor students, but the impact on Black students is even more critical." (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). Maximum Pell Grant awards and state relate aid typically do not cover the full cost of tuition, room and board (Yaffe & Educational Testing Service, 2015). This fact typically places TNA

students and their families in a position to borrow an excessive amount of money in order to finance a higher education.

5.5 Recommendations

5.5.1 Explore collaborations that will enhance the number and kind of opportunities available to TNA students.

Due to the size of the student body and financial constraints within the educational model of TNA, TNA has a limited number of activities that they offer their students. Some of the activities are offered due to the generosity of volunteers and other activities are funded by the school. There are 21 activities that are offered to students throughout the school year in both the arts and sports. While TNA deems that to be appropriate, there is only one activity that has a direct alignment to a potential career path. That activity is Mock Trial, and it is offered to a limited number of students during one season.

In order to enhance student activity offerings that could lead to college major or career interests, TNA should examine collaborations with non-profits, local high schools, or for-profit businesses within the Pittsburgh region. By partnering with programs that have intentional focuses on different career paths, TNA could potentially provide students with a higher quality experience without spending an extensive amount of money on programming. There are also non-profit organizations within the Pittsburgh region that focus on college preparation and college readiness. TNA should look to develop relationships from these non-profits in order to better understand the ways that they have been highly effective in preparing minority students for college readiness and

preparation. TNA may also want to explore ways that potential partnerships could benefit the students of TNA. By developing partnerships TNA could expand different offerings to students that could be beneficial to college readiness and success.

There are many public, charter, and independent schools in the Pittsburgh region. TNA can benefit by both communicating and joining associations with these schools in order to gain insight and learning promising practices on how to best prepare Black students for college readiness and success. Currently TNA is a member of two associations, the Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools (PAIS) and the Nativity Miguel Network. While there is a benefit in the association of these partnerships, there are glaring differences as well. TNA is the only non-tuition driven school within the PAIS. In addition to that notion, is the fact that TNA is the only school in the association on the western side of Pennsylvania that intentionally serves predominately Black students.

The Nativity Miguel Network is intentional in serving economically disadvantaged students and uses federal guidelines in order to determine enrollment criteria. Schools in this network have high standards for their students in order to prepare their students for entry into high performing high schools and eventually college. Every school in the association also has extended school days and years. This provides a clear alignment with both mission and students that are served by the educational models of TNA and other Nativity Miguel schools. The glaring difference with all other Nativity Miguel schools and TNA is that TNA is the only school in the association that has a high school. All other Nativity Miguel schools are elementary and middle schools.

Partnering with local colleges and universities could also be a viable option in order expand TNA's programs to provide students opportunities to have experiences that may lead to major and

career interests. There are several universities within a five-mile radius of TNA. It may be worthwhile exploring the possibility of collaboration with not only university officials but also student led clubs and activities. It would be very beneficial to provide students with opportunities to gain knowledge in an array of career paths so that they may develop aspirations that may lead to future career goals and college major interest.

As the cost of affording a higher education continues to rise, TNA should examine how to leverage Community College of Allegheny College (CCAC) as a viable option in order to afford their higher education. Understanding the financial constraints that families from TNA have, TNA should consider how CCAC could provide two years of education within a four-year plan. That could include taking course work at CCAC while students are still enrolled at TNA, TNA graduates entering CCAC directly after high school, or graduates taking summer courses at CCAC. CCAC is a quality educational option that needs to be introduced to TNA students to afford their college education.

5.5.2 Expand graduate support program and incorporate a mentorship program to better support TNA alumni.

Throughout my study there were several narratives from TNA alumni that indicated that the support that they received from TNA staff during their college experience was very valuable. Those narratives demonstrated the impact that TNA staff have on graduates by continuing to offer ongoing support to students after graduation. The increase in student enrollment and the fact that the Graduate Support program has not grown, presents a challenge for ongoing support for TNA graduates.

TNA graduates indicated that networking and developing relationships are critical for their success in high school and beyond. Fostering positive relationships that provide TNA graduates with useful advice and consultations appears to have a direct correlation with their success. TNA graduates typically desired a connection with Diversity offices and offices of Multicultural Affairs for support during their college experience. TNA could benefit by providing opportunities of engagement with individuals who have overcame similar circumstances as their students through a mentoring program. This could be especially true in ensuring that there is a diverse representation among those individuals who engage with the students. The engagements could be formal presentations, lunch and learns that are held at the school, or they could be mentoring programs that are held at the school. TNA could find great benefit in having a group of individuals engaging with TNA students on an ongoing basis in order to provide them with information about college experiences, career readiness, overcoming obstacles in life etc.

TNA should consider expanding the Graduate Support program with another staff person or perhaps integrating a mentoring program into its Graduate Support program. The mentoring program could be comprised of TNA volunteers or it could be a collaboration with a local Non-profit that is in the Pittsburgh area. Either way TNA should explore ways to enhance their efforts to support their graduates while they are in college.

5.5.3 Begin working with parents upon admission to TNA in order to better prepare students and families for college and its impact on family income and relationships.

The cost of affording higher education increases on an annual basis. This cost includes but is not limited to tuition, room, board, and other educational expenses. This endeavor is challenging for any family, but it seems to be especially challenging for TNA families. Given the reality that

80% of the families in TNA have a taxable income of $30,000 or less, affording a higher education can seem like an insurmountable challenge. Coupled with the fact that the number one source that TNA students use to afford their college education are loans, this presents a potential challenging proposition.

Currently TNA staff work with families regarding their efforts to afford a college education by offering two to three workshops a year. The College Counseling program also becomes more intentional for students entering their Junior year. TNA should be more intentional on how they can educate their families on how to afford a college education beginning when students enroll into TNA. Providing parents with information and resources on how to afford college at an earlier point in their TNA experience could strengthen college aspirations for both students and parents. This information can also have a drastic impact on how families save their resources in order to invest in their child's education.

5.5.4 Revise the current curriculum in order to better prepare students for advanced collegiate mathematics and science classes in college.

Given the narratives and the feedback that graduates from TNA provided in the interviews that were conducted, TNA should examine how they prepare students for advanced Math and Science experiences in college. Minority employees are underrepresented in STEM related fields. This presents an opportunity for students at TNA as they are minority students who are being prepared for a higher education. By strengthening STEM related experiences both in programming and curriculum, TNA can better prepare students to become viable candidates for STEM related careers.

5.5.5 Deepen student understanding of how to plan for a higher education by expanding the College Counseling program.

Within the current structure of TNA, the College Counseling program provides exposure and access to college beginning in the 6th grade. This primarily happens by taking students on college visits both in the fall and in the spring. The program becomes more intentional in the junior year where the students begin a College Counseling class that takes place twice a week. During these classes; students have intentional conversations about college, and they receive preparation for the SATs. They search for college scholarship and engage in other college related activities.

TNA should develop and integrate a much more intentional College Counseling program that begins as soon as students enter TNA. By strengthening college aspirations at an earlier age, there may be a higher correlation between student motivation and performance. If students are more motivated and better informed about college perhaps, they will have greater academic success. If their grade point averages are higher not only will they be stronger candidates for college admission, but they will also be stronger candidates for financial scholarships. This point can begin to address affordability challenges that TNA students seem to struggle with.

5.6 Limitations

There are limitations that are associated with this research study. The sample size of this research study is relatively small. I chose to capture data from graduates of TNA who graduated in between one to five years ago to ensure that their experience is applicable to current times. The number of TNA graduates who graduated within that time span was 41 students. The proportion

of students that I interviewed represented 39% of the total number of eligible graduates to participate in the study. With a larger sample size of participants, additional data could be collected that may have impacted the results and findings of this research project. In addition, my role within the school could have served as a limitation within the research study. I have worked as a staff member within TNA for 18.5 years now, and I have worked with each participant within this study. While I don't believe that my position served as a detriment to honest answers within this research project, there is always a possibility that my involvement within this project served as a barrier for participants responses within this study.

5.7 Implications

This study sought to examine the college readiness experience of students from TNA and to explore ways to better prepare students for success in college. Based upon the student's responses and the data that was compiled from the research, I have found that TNA adequately prepares its students for college. Through a unique model that focuses on student achievement, academic support, and school cultural expectations, TNA prepares its students for college.

There are recommendations that TNA should explore in order to better prepare its students for college readiness. TNA has experienced a significant increase in enrollment that has impacted the intimacy of the educational model and has increased the workload of all faculty and staff. TNA should evaluate how capacity impacts the educational experience of current and future students. TNA experiences limitations within the college counseling department both within the program and personnel. TNA needs to examine how these limitations impact the college readiness

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experience of both students and their families. These recommendations will be critical in order to better support students as TNA continues to grow.

There is an ongoing discussion about the preparation that African American students receive in order to succeed in college. This examination covers a multitude of facets that are associated with college readiness. These areas include but are not limited to the quality of education that African American students receive throughout their PK-12 education, the impact of socio-economic resources, disparities that this population of students often encounter, ways in which culturally responsive pedagogy are infused within the curricular experience of these students etc. The list can go on and on regarding the challenges that African American students may encounter within their educational experience that is necessary for college preparation.

TNA serves as a model that others may study when examining how to successfully prepare underserved students for college readiness and success. TNA has demonstrated that by infusing key components into the educational experience of underserved students, these students can be prepared for college despite disparities that they previously encountered. There are key components within the educational experience at TNA that appear to be instrumental in the preparation of their students for success in college. TNA has limitations within the college counseling department that play a role within the preparation that students receive in order to be college ready. TNA also has limitations within the curriculum that can have an impact on student's college preparation process especially in math and sciences. Despite these challenges, TNA has been successful in preparing students for college. This study affirms that through an intentional model, underserved students can be successfully prepared for college despite challenges and disparities that they may encounter within their educational experience if schools are willing to devote the necessary resources for all students.

Interview Protocol Questions:

1. Navigating your way through the process to achieve college attainment can be a challenging task to do on your own. During high school you attended The Neighborhood Academy (TNA) which is a faith-based college preparatory school whose mission is to break the generational cycle of poverty through education. Now that you are (or were) a college student, please tell me about the preparation that you received at TNA and to what degree your experience prepared you for college.

     a. Can you describe how TNA prepared you for college?
         - *Probe*: Are there areas of your college experience that you are excelling in that you would contribute to your preparation at TNA?
         - *Probe*: Are there areas of your college experience that you currently struggle with that you feel TNA could have better prepared you?

     b. As leadership has changed at TNA and I have assumed the position of Head of School, I am very interested in evaluating various facets of the school to determine ways that we can improve the college readiness experience of TNA. If you were in my shoes what if any aspect of TNA would you evaluate to better prepare current students for college success?
         - *Probe*: Are there programmatic aspects of the school that you would modify?
         - *Probe*: Are there curricular aspects of the school that you would modify?
         - *Probe*: Are there aspects of the school that are non-negotiables to preserve the college preparation of TNA?

2. Attaining a college education can be a very difficult task for anyone to accomplish. I would like to hear your thoughts regarding any support systems or barriers that you encountered during your college experience, and if you feel there are ways that TNA could better prepare students to face those challenges.

a. Based upon your experience in college thus far, are there any support systems or barriers that you encountered that you feel TNA is not considering in its current college preparatory model?
- *Probe*: If you could make recommendations about how TNA could better prepare students for college what would they be?
- *Probe*: What skills do you think are critical for successful matriculation from high school to college?

b. When reflecting on your college experience, what offices or systems have been instrumental to your college success?
- *Probe*: Are there people on your college campus that you go to for support?
- *Probe*: Is there any aspect of your college experience that you feel that you are missing in order to be successful in college?

3. The cost of affording a college education includes but is not limited to tuition, room, board, fees, educational expenses etc. I would like to discuss how you afford your college education.
a. How is your college education funded?
- *Probe*: Do you have a four-year plan to afford your college education?
- *Probe*: Do you have a "gap" in your financial aid package?
   If so, how do you fill those gaps?
- *Probe*: Do you or your family have money set aside to assist you in affording your college education?
- *Probe*: Have you ever encountered a time when you didn't have enough money to pay for college or the necessities of life and if so, what did you do?

b. Do you feel that TNA provided you with the appropriate amount of knowledge to develop a financial plan to afford your college education?
- *Probe*: Are there aspects of affording a college education that you encountered at college that you feel should have been discussed at TNA during your College Counseling program?
- *Probe*: Are there recommendations that you would make to TNA to assist students in developing a plan to afford their college education?

4. Navigating your way through college can be a difficult task. Along the way you may encounter unanticipated challenges. I would like to inquire about any unanticipated challenges that you might have encountered during your college experience thus far.

    a. Have you encountered any unanticipated challenges thus far during your college experience?

        - *Probe*: What has been the most difficult challenge that you encountered in college?

        - *Probe:* Have you ever considered dropping out of college and if so, what were the reasons why?

        - *Probe*: Did TNA provide you with enough information or resources to reduce the possibility of encountering unanticipated challenges?

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