Postsecondary Opportunities for Young Black Males from Urban Communities: The Barriers of College Entrance Exams

Steven J. Mitchell

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, smitch13@vols.utk.edu

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Steven J. Mitchell entitled "Postsecondary Opportunities for Young Black Males from Urban Communities: The Barriers of College Entrance Exams." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Educational Leadership.

Pamela A. Angelle, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Mary L. Derrington, Jesse Wood

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)
DEDICATION

To my Heavenly Father:

You are the source of all good things. I thank You for granting me favor, wisdom, discernment, and the strength to persevere through the toughest of times, especially over these past four years. Your constant serenity has been my guiding light throughout this journey.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the experiences of young Black males from Tennessee urban communities regarding their postsecondary opportunities shaped by college entrance exams. Through a narrative qualitative approach, this study explores the challenges and triumphs faced by these individuals as they navigated the complex landscape of higher education admissions.

The research site encompassed urban public high schools in West Tennessee, providing a context rich in diversity yet full of systemic barriers to equitable access to postsecondary education. The participants included three young Black males who are freshmen at three different Tennessee postsecondary institutions, each offering unique insights into their journeys through in-depth interviews conducted to capture the nuances of their experiences. The data collection involved guided interviews that allowed participants to share their stories, including the struggles and successes.

Several key findings were revealed in the thematic analysis. Participants highlighted the challenges posed by standardized testing, including a lack of preparatory resources, time constraints due to part-time jobs and extracurricular activities, and the presence of culturally biased questions on college entrance exams. Conditional admission emerged as another significant theme, with participants expressing frustration over the requirement to take remedial courses, the financial burden incurred, and the potential delay in graduation beyond the typical four-year timeframe. Despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated resilience and personal growth. They relied on family and community support networks, sought out scholarships and part-time employment opportunities, and navigated cultural and social transitions as they transitioned to predominantly white institutions (PWIs).
The implications of these findings are far-reaching. They underscore the need for policy changes and interventions to address systemic inequities in the college admissions process. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of equitable access to quality postsecondary education and the role of supportive networks in empowering marginalized populations to succeed in higher education. Overall, this research offers valuable insights into the experiences of young Black males navigating the postsecondary landscape in Tennessee. It advocates for a more holistic approach to college admissions that considers the diverse backgrounds and challenges faced by minority students, particularly young Black males, ultimately striving for a more equitable and inclusive educational system.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

If students are to succeed in higher education, they must be academically competitive among peers within their schools, across their school districts, within their home states, and throughout the nation. To meet these expectations, young Black male students who reside in urban communities must compete on comparable playing fields as their peers and perform to the best of their abilities on national standardized tests, particularly college entrance exams.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), the data from 2021 indicates significant disparities in immediate college enrollment rates based on both sex and race/ethnicity, particularly with a focus on young Black males. From a gender-based disparity standpoint, in 2021, the immediate college enrollment rate for male students was 55%, which was notably lower than the rate for female students, which stood at 70% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This discrepancy was primarily driven by a lower percentage of male students immediately enrolling in four-year institutions (36%) compared to female students at 51% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). There was no substantial difference in the immediate college enrollment rates between male and female students in two-year institutions. The immediate college enrollment rate for male students in 2021 (55%) was lower than in 2010 (63%), while the rates for female students in these two years showed no significant change (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

From a race/ethnicity-based disparity standpoint, in 2021, there were disparities in immediate college enrollment rates among different racial/ethnic groups (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Asian students had the highest immediate college enrollment rate at 85%, followed by White students at 62%, Black students at 59%, and Hispanic students at 59%
(National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Over the period from 2010 to 2021, the immediate college enrollment rates for Asian, Black, and Hispanic students remained relatively stable, with no significant differences (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). However, White students experienced a decline in their immediate college enrollment rate, dropping from 70% in 2010 to 62% in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Across all racial/ethnic groups, a higher percentage of students immediately enrolled in four-year institutions compared to two-year institutions in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

In comparing the racial/ethnic groups for 2021, Asian students had the highest immediate enrollment rate in four-year institutions at 76%, followed by White students at 43%, Black students at 42%, and Hispanic students at 40% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In contrast, only a small percentage of students from each group immediately enrolled in two-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). These findings highlight the existence of disparities in immediate college enrollment rates based on both sex and race/ethnicity. Young Black males, in particular, face challenges in terms of immediate college enrollment compared to their female counterparts and students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds.

One aspect of a ‘comparable playing field’ is college entrance exams that are not culturally biased in an effort to afford underrepresented students, particularly young Black males, the same opportunity to achieve competitive scores as their peers when exploring postsecondary opportunities (Schudson, 1972). Researchers have explored factors that may support underrepresented students in fulfilling their postsecondary goals, such as adequate preparatory
materials and instruction (Hines et al., 2020) and equity in areas that are often the basis for admission, particularly high-stakes test scores like the ACT and SAT.

This study exclusively includes individuals who fall within the demographic of young Black males between ages 18 to 20 and who have recently completed their high school education in an urban community in West Tennessee. More specifically, the participants consist of first-year college freshmen who enrolled in the summer or fall semester immediately following their high school graduation. Eligibility is further defined by the requirement that all student participants self-identified as both male and Black or African American.

**Statement of the Problem**

According to Morgan (2016), utilizing high-stakes testing has been problematic in American education for the past twenty years, especially for marginalized students. Unfortunately, many public school systems do not provide equitable access to a quality education that adequately prepares students to matriculate into college or begin their careers (Thompson & Allen, 2012). This disservice is due, in part, to Black students attending schools with the lowest average quality of teaching, according to Wolniak and Engberg (2010), and the admissions priority given to high-stakes testing mandated for students. A Likert-type scale ranged from poor to excellent, assessing the quality of teaching, included four points gauging teachers’ interest, preparation, and fairness, according to Wolniak and Engberg (2010); additionally, one item on the scale measured the frequency with which students felt motivated to think independently.

The problem with college entrance exams and young Black males is complex and multifaceted. There are several challenges and concerns that have been identified in relation to this student group (Wolniak & Engberg, 2010), though individual experiences may vary, and not
all young Black males face the same difficulties. Young Black males, on average, may face disparities in educational opportunities and resources, which can contribute to an achievement gap compared to peers from other racial or ethnic backgrounds (Hines, et al., 2020), ultimately affecting their preparation for college entrance exams.

Despite receiving widespread attention, standardized tests persist in creating disparities in academic achievement along gender and race lines although there may be no direct connection between high educational standards and high-stakes standardized testing, according to Couch et al. (2021). One notable consequence of standardized test scores is the concept of dual achievement, which refers to the simultaneous academic successes brought about by excelling in these tests (Couch et al., 2021). For example, students who perform well on college entrance exams are granted opportunities like college admissions, scholarships, and can avoid remedial coursework (ACT, 2023). While remedial coursework is intended to support students in initial freshmen core classes – often students of color from low socioeconomic backgrounds and without the funding to pay for the remedial courses that do not count toward a degree – nonetheless, many remedial courses are filled with students based on their college entrance exams. In the realm of standardized testing, it is evident that not all students are created equal, and disparities exist both in terms of test scores and the advantages derived from successfully passing standardized tests (Couch et al., 2021). In fact, standardized testing seems to weaken the notion of equal opportunity, particularly for students of African descent (Couch et al., 2021).

Other key points to note involve testing biases and preparation. Some critics argue that college entrance exams may demonstrate cultural biases that disadvantage certain groups, including young Black males (Back, 2020). These biases can manifest in the content, language, and context of the exam questions, which may not align with the experiences or cultural
backgrounds of Black students, according to Couch et al. (2021). Access to test preparation resources, such as tutoring or study materials, can have a significant impact on exam performance, according to Hines et al. (2020). Young Black males from lower-income backgrounds may face financial constraints or limited access to such resources, putting them at a disadvantage compared to their more privileged peers (Couch et al., 2021).

Other issues to consider are stereotype threats, which refer to the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one’s racial or ethnic group, thus leading to anxiety and impaired performance in high-stakes testing situations. Young Black males may experience stereotype threats when taking college entrance exams, potentially impacting their scores (Hines, et al., 2020). Other problems include the narrow assessment of young Black males’ abilities and underrepresentation. College entrance exams primarily focus on cognitive abilities and academic knowledge (College Board - The SAT, 2023), which may not fully capture the diverse talents and potential of young Black males. This narrow assessment may overlook other valuable skills, such as leadership, creativity, or community involvement, which could be important factors for college admissions. Young Black males may face systemic barriers that contribute to their underrepresentation in higher education (Howard, 2013), which include limited access to quality schools, lack of mentorship opportunities, and social and economic challenges that affect their educational trajectory (Eunyoung & Hargrove, 2013).

Efforts have been made to address these concerns, including changes in exam formats, increasing access to test preparation resources, and adopting holistic admissions processes that consider a broader range of factors beyond college entrance exam scores. Nonetheless, the issue remains complex, and ongoing efforts are needed to promote equity and increase opportunities for young Black males who graduate from urban high schools to be afforded the best
postsecondary opportunities. Although standardized tests are weak indicators of academic success for minority students, colleges and universities continue using test scores for college admissions, despite the disparities in test performance between Black and White students (Palmer et al., 2014). There are longstanding disparities in educational outcomes between racial and ethnic groups, with young Black males often facing significant barriers to accessing higher education with as little as 4.3% of this demographic accounting for total enrollment at four-year postsecondary institutions in America (Palmer et al. 2014).

Palmer et al. (2014) points out that Black male students tend to have the lowest participation and success rates in Advanced Placement (AP) courses compared to their White, Latino, and Asian peers in high school. Moreover, there is an evident imbalance in how teachers and counselors guide Black male students towards lower academic ability classrooms, while many White students are directed towards AP courses that equip them for admission to competitive college institutions (Palmer et al., 2014). Despite the many barriers that young Black males face during their high school years in urban communities – from educational disparities, stereotyping and biases in schools, limited exposure to Black male role models in education, socioeconomic factors, systemic racism, and insufficient access to college readiness programs – the goal to continue their education is similarly difficult.

Achieving competitive college entrance exam scores, which allow them to enter their preferred postsecondary institution, presents an additional barrier. While research has addressed these barriers, to date, no research could be found that includes the voices of these young people and how encountering and attempting to overcome these barriers has influenced their lives. This narrative research study will highlight the voices of young Black males as they recount their experiences in the pursuit to attend the postsecondary institutions of their choice. According to
Creswell and Creswell (2018), narrative research involves merging perspectives from both the participant’s life and the researcher’s life in a joint narrative collaboration. Over two decades ago, I attended an underprivileged urban high school where I was a student with low socioeconomic status. Despite how much time has passed, my memories of college entrance exam testing as a high school student remain vivid. Therefore, urban communities were chosen as the site to best answer the research questions for this study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the experiences of young Black males from urban communities as they describe their postsecondary opportunities as a result of their college entrance exam scores. This study amplifies the voices of young Black males and understands their decision making. University admissions criteria has the potential to defeat young Black males’ postsecondary aspirations and impact their decisions to apply before any decision has been made by the university. The participants were asked to share the supports and barriers they encountered in choosing and attempting to be admitted to their preferred postsecondary college institutions.

**Research Questions**

This narrative qualitative research approach addressed two research questions that guided this study:

1. How do young Black males describe their experiences in choosing and being admitted to their preferred postsecondary college institutions as a result of their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban high schools in Tennessee?
2. What supports and barriers do young Black males encounter in choosing and being admitted to their preferred postsecondary college institutions as a result of their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban high schools in Tennessee?

**Significance of the Study**

This narrative qualitative study will add to the existing limited research by providing additional perspectives for college admissions counselors and recruiters as well as district and state policymakers in public education to consider when determining how heavily college entrance exam scores impact young Black males’ postsecondary opportunities. Findings can be utilized to advocate for policy changes that promote equity in education, such as reconsidering the weight given to standardized test scores in college admissions. Engaging with policymakers can lead to systemic improvements that benefit all students, particularly those facing college admissions barriers like young Black males. The complexities of the different testing types, such as the ACT and SAT used in college admissions criteria, become a confusing factor when comparing scores across various testing types, and fairness becomes an issue in the argument as well (Chulu & Sireci, 2011).

By studying college opportunities in relation to exam scores, this research identifies potential disparities and works towards creating more equitable educational opportunities, particularly for young Black males. Examining the relationship between their college entrance exam scores and postsecondary opportunities can help shed light on possible achievement gaps that may exist for young Black males. Understanding these gaps contributes to the literature as educators consider developing targeted interventions to support and empower students to reach their full academic potential. Educational institutions and policymakers can identify specific support services illustrated in this study that may be needed to help young Black males succeed.
academically and navigate the college admissions process, including targeted tutoring, mentorship programs, or college counseling services that address the unique challenges faced by this specific student demographic. Addressing admission barriers highlighted by entrance exam scores can contribute to a more diverse and inclusive higher education landscape, which, in turn, benefits society by fostering a workforce and leadership that reflects the diversity of the population.

This study can also add to the literature in school improvement through insights into the effectiveness of current educational programs and curricula. By addressing barriers associated with exam scores, schools can empower young Black males to pursue higher education confidently. Empowered students are more likely to actively participate in their learning and take advantage of available opportunities. Understanding the relationship between entrance exam scores and postsecondary opportunities can help educators design more engaging curricula. Relevant and relatable content can enhance student interest, making education more meaningful for young Black males. If there is a disconnect between the exam scores and college readiness, adjustments can be made to better prepare students for college-level coursework. These research findings can contribute to discussions around postsecondary admissions policies and potentially lead to changes that promote a more holistic approach to evaluating applicants. Standardized tests, like the ACT, SAT, and other college entrance exams, have often been criticized for their potential bias against certain racial and socioeconomic groups, according to Palmer et al. (2014). Understanding the relationship between these exams and the postsecondary opportunities young Black males have can contribute to more inclusive and fair admission practices.

Young Black male students will primarily benefit from this study as the results of the findings may inform them about how their access to their preferred postsecondary institutions is
Urban high school teachers will benefit from this study because it will aid in prioritizing the curriculum and instructional strategies utilized in the classroom while focusing on what is best for their young Black male students in life beyond high school. School and district administrators will also benefit from this study with the intent to provide more support and resources for young Black male students who seek postsecondary educational opportunities. Lastly, college admissions committees will benefit from this study when making informed acceptance decisions for all applicants, namely young Black male students.

However, the greatest contribution of this study will come from the voices of the young Black men who have experienced the barriers and supports highlighted in the study. By centering the findings around the experiences of these young Black men, this study may lead to societal changes and renewed assistance for Black males as they work to empower themselves through a quality education.

**Definition of Terms**

Several terms have been used throughout this study that may be unfamiliar to some readers. While the definitions of many of these terms have been provided throughout the study, the following glossary may prove itself beneficial in understanding the research conducted:

- **ACT**: A national standardized test that students complete primarily for college admissions purposes and is made up of four multiple-choice assessment areas, including English, mathematics, reading, and science, and there is an optional writing assessment (ACT, 2023).

- **AP Course**: Advanced Placement courses that high school students can take to earn college credits before enrolling at a postsecondary institution, depending on their overall end-of-course exam score (College Board, 2023).
• **Black (or African American):** A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (United State Census Bureau, 2022).

• **Male:** Generally, there is often confusion between the concepts of gender and sex, leading to the use of these terms interchangeably. However, it is important to recognize that these concepts have distinct meanings. Sex is primarily based on the biological characteristics of individuals, such as chromosomes, anatomy, and hormones, distinguishing males and females. Gender is a social construct that involves the assignment of certain characteristics or behaviors, typically labeled as masculine or feminine, by a society or culture. These assignments can vary across cultures, among individuals within a culture and even over time. Gender may or may not align directly with an individual’s biological sex, depending on the specific society, culture, or historical period. For instance, individuals may identify themselves with femininity according to the cultural norms despite being biologically male. The U.S. Census Bureau relates male and female specifically to an individual’s biological sex, not their gender (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

• **SAT:** A national standardized test that students complete primarily for college admissions purposes with three different testing components, including the reading test, the writing and language test, and the math test (College Board - The SAT, 2023).

• **Urban (or Urbanized) Areas:** Populations of 50,000 or more people (Ratcliffe, 2022).

• **Urban (or Urbanized) Clusters:** Populations of at least 2,500 people but less than 50,000 people (Ratcliffe, 2022).
Delimitations

For this narrative qualitative study, participants were limited to young Black males, between the ages of 18 and 20, who just recently graduated from an urban high school in Tennessee. First-year college freshmen who matriculated the summer or fall semester immediately after their high school graduation participated in the study. All of the student participants self-identified as male and Black or African American.

Although high-stakes testing is prevalent in elementary and middle schools as well, those age groups are not represented in this study, as this research focuses specifically on college entrance exams that urban high school students typically take. Additionally, this study represents findings based on the young Black male students’ perspectives.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One has provided an overall introduction to this narrative qualitative study by discussing the problems, purpose, questions, and delimitations that guide this research. Chapter Two will provide a review of the literature related to the postsecondary opportunities young black males have as a result of their college entrance exam scores before they graduate from urban public high schools in Tennessee. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology, research design, and procedures used to conduct this study, including the rationale, participants, and samples. Chapter Four will focus on the qualitative analysis of the data collected during this study. Chapter Five will conclude this study by discussing the implications and recommendations to be considered for future research.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

High-stakes testing, specifically college entrance exams, impacts the postsecondary academic opportunities young Black males have as a result of their test scores. With new academic challenges, such as virtual learning for all age groups during the COVID-19 global pandemic, young Black males and other marginalized student groups are faced with increased difficulties to meet competitive benchmarks that ultimately determine their trajectories beyond high school. College entrance exam scores are critical qualifications for high school graduation, scholarship opportunities, postsecondary college admissions, and high-paying careers beyond high school. Education policymakers, college admissions recruiters, and urban high school teachers must strive to ensure that students’ college entrance exam scores do not paint the final “portraits” of their actual competency levels, particularly young Black males, if their scores are not deemed high enough or competitive.

This literature review unveils the postsecondary college opportunities young Black males have as a result of their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban public high schools in Tennessee. The research questions that guide this literature review are:

1. How do young Black males describe their experiences in choosing and being admitted to their preferred postsecondary college institutions as a result of their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban high schools in Tennessee?

2. What supports and barriers do young Black males encounter in choosing and being admitted to their preferred postsecondary college institutions as a result of their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban high schools in Tennessee?
The way young Black males are evaluated in comparison to their peers should be as fluid as the instructional strategies implemented by teachers to meet the needs of any diverse group of learners each year (Tanner, 2013). When the stakes are high, such as utilizing test scores to determine college acceptances and scholarship awards, young Black male students should have adequate support to perform well on the college entrance exams that ultimately shape their academic futures beyond their secondary education.

**Search Process**

Researching postsecondary opportunities for young Black males based on their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban public high schools required a comprehensive and systematic search process. To conduct an effective search, research objectives were defined, and the specific goals of the study were clearly outlined to identify what information was needed, the scope of the research, and the key questions to be answered regarding postsecondary opportunities for young Black males based on their college entrance exam scores. Academic databases, educational journals, and research repositories that focus on educational equity, college access, and minority student success were identified, including the University of Tennessee online library, ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) databases.

A list of relevant keywords and phrases related to the topic was developed, such as “postsecondary opportunities for Black males,” “college entrance exam scores,” “urban public high schools,” “college access,” “young Black males,” and “minority student success.” These keywords were utilized in the search to find relevant studies and literature. Searches were refined using a combination of filters, date ranges, and other criteria to focus on recent and peer-reviewed sources to ensure the most up-to-date information. Academic journals and publications
were accessed with the intent to review scholarly articles and publications that explored the intersection of race, standardized testing, and college opportunities for Black males while paying close attention to the research methodologies used, data sources, and key findings.

The search process also entailed looking for reports and studies from well-known educational institutions and government agencies that addressed educational equity and college access for underrepresented students, such as young Black males. Educational policy documents and guidelines that influence college admissions practices or affect postsecondary opportunities for young Black males were searched. Statistical data was analyzed, including reports that provided insights into college entrance exam scores and college acceptance rates for young Black males in urban public high schools in Tennessee. After gathering relevant information, the findings to identify patterns, trends, and potential disparities in postsecondary opportunities for young Black males based on their college entrance exam scores were synthesized and conclusions were drawn from these findings.

**ACT and SAT Testing Content and the Impact on College Admissions**

The American College Testing (ACT) is a national standardized test that students complete primarily for college admissions purposes. The ACT is made up of four assessment areas, including English, mathematics, reading, and science, with each assessment being a multiple-choice test (ACT, 2023). The ACT also has an optional writing exam that does not impact the composite score of the four multiple-choice assessment scores (ACT, 2023). According to the ACT official website, the ACT increases students’ chances of earning scholarships and helps to ensure students are placed in appropriate college courses at the right levels. Depending on the postsecondary institution, certain test score benchmarks can prevent students from taking remedial courses as well.
The ACT test is designed so that students are more likely to have covered the related materials that will be reflected in the test questions and taken the appropriate coursework by the end of their junior year of high school. The four-part ACT is 175 minutes long and 215 minutes long, including the optional writing component. On the ACT, students are allotted 75 minutes for English, 60 minutes for math, 40 minutes for reading, and 40 minutes for science. The optional writing component consists of composing an essay in 40 minutes. Per ACT (2023), each ACT assessment area evaluates the following skills:

- The English assessment evaluates students’ capacity to modify and correct brief texts and essays across various genres. This testing component evaluates the revision and editing skills of examinees as they assume the role of a writer. This component also includes short texts and essays from various genres, presenting different rhetorical situations. The passages are carefully chosen to assess writing and language abilities while reflecting the students’ interests and experiences (ACT, 2023).

- The mathematics assessment gauges students’ mathematical proficiency typically acquired through their junior and senior year of high school. This component also emphasizes the key content areas necessary for success in entry-level college mathematics courses. While basic formulas and computational skills are assumed as foundational knowledge, complex formulas and extensive calculations are not required (ACT, 2023).

- The reading assessment evaluates students’ capability to closely read, logically analyze texts using evidence, and incorporate information from various sources. The test questions focus on the essential skills that readers must employ when studying written materials across various subjects. These skills include determining main ideas,
interpreting significant details, understanding sequences of events, making comparisons, comprehending cause-effect relationships, discerning the meaning of context-dependent words and phrases, drawing generalizations, analyzing the author’s or narrator’s voice and method, evaluating claims and evidence in arguments, and integrating information from multiple texts (ACT, 2023).

- The science assessment evaluates skills in interpreting, analyzing, evaluating, reasoning, and problem-solving, specifically in the fields of biology, chemistry, Earth/space sciences, and physics. This testing component presents authentic scientific scenarios, followed by multiple-choice questions. The questions require recognition and understanding of basic features and concepts related to the provided information, critical examination of the relationship between the information and the drawn conclusions or developed hypotheses, and the ability to generalize from given information to gain new insights, draw conclusions, or make predictions (ACT, 2023).

- The optional writing section of the ACT measures students’ aptitude in English skills taught in high school and introductory college composition courses. This testing component consists of a single writing prompt presenting a complex issue with three different perspectives. Examinees must read the prompt and write an essay developing their own perspective on the issue. The essay should analyze the relationship between their own perspective and one or more of the given perspectives. Examinees can adopt one of the prompt’s perspectives as their own or introduce a completely different perspective (ACT, 2023).

To earn competitive scores, the ACT test developers recommend students to take four years of English courses; three years of math courses, including algebra I, geometry, and algebra
II; three years of science courses, including biology, chemistry, and physics; and three years of social studies courses (ACT, 2023).

The Benchmarks are scores on the ACT subject-area tests that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses. These college courses include English composition, college algebra, introductory social science courses, and biology. Based on a sample of 214 institutions and more than 230,000 students from across the United States, the Benchmarks are median course placement values for these institutions and as such represent a typical set of expectations. (ACT, 2023)

College Board is a non-profit organization driven by a mission to facilitate students’ path to college achievement and opportunity (College Board, 2023). Established in 1900, College Board’s was founded to broaden access to higher education, and it currently consists of over 6,000 educational institutions worldwide, working together as a membership association to promote educational excellence and fairness (College Board, 2023). College Board supports more than seven million students in preparing for a successful transition to college through various programs and services focused on college readiness and success each year. These initiatives include the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the Advanced Placement (AP) Program, and BigFuture. Additionally, the organization contributes to the education community by conducting research and advocating for the benefit of students, educators, and schools (College Board, 2023).

The SAT is also a national standardized test that students complete primarily for college admissions purposes with three different testing components, including the reading test, the
writing and language test, and the math test. The ACT, on the other hand, has four multiple-choice testing components—English, math, reading, and science—plus an optional writing test. According to the SAT official website, the SAT provides students with 43% more time per question than the ACT. Most of the questions on the SAT are multiple choice, although the math component does include fill-in-the-blank questions. The SAT does not penalize students for guessing, which is recommended as opposed to leaving a question unanswered. The three-part SAT test is 180 minutes long. Students are allotted 65 minutes for reading, 35 minutes for writing and language, and 80 minutes for math on the SAT (College Board - The SAT, 2023).

College Board recently changed the SAT with the mission to ensure the test is relevant to students’ success while measuring what students learn in high school and what they will need to know in order to be successful in college (College Board - The SAT, 2023). College Board also manages the Advanced Placement (AP) courses and exams that high school students take. High school students who take AP courses could likely earn college credits early before they even enroll at a postsecondary institution, depending on their exam scores (The SAT - College Board, 2020). This advantage allows high school graduates to avoid lower-level college classes, save money, save time, and potentially graduate from college early (The SAT - College Board, 2020).

The utilization of high-stakes testing creates a framework in which students and schools are labeled as “failures” based on their test scores, consequently reinforcing neoliberal notions of an individual student’s educational accomplishment, according to Au (2016). The denial of fundamental disparities, and, consequently, what policies and practices are to be sanctioned for those students and schools identified by the test scores as “failures” are critical issues (Au, 2016). Teachers may contribute to the social persuasions and mastery experiences through their attitudes and make judgments about their students’ competence and efficacy although their
opinions may not always match their students’ self-efficacy, according to Harvey et al. (2016). If a student starts a new school year with high self-efficacy but consistently receives poor grades and exam scores and negative or corrective feedback from a teacher, the student’s self-efficacy is very likely to decline over time per Harvey et al. (2016).

**College Readiness and Career Aspirations versus Parental Education and Support**

Blankenberger et al. (2017) found that African American students were significantly less likely to complete an undergraduate degree within seven years of graduating from high school in comparison to their White peers in Illinois. Additionally, Blankenberger et al. (2017) noted several factors connected to increased chances of earning an undergraduate degree were identified, including high school composite ACT scores, completing dual credit and advanced placement (AP) courses, English and mathematics sub-scores on the ACT, and completing the ACT core curriculum. Bromberg and Theokas (2016) discovered that many students are wandering aimlessly toward graduation. New findings suggest that a limited number of students graduate from high school equipped for postsecondary education and the demands of the workforce (Martin, 2015). Instead of making sure high school students have access to a curriculum that aligns with their coursework and life goals, Bromberg and Theokas (2016) found that high schools focus more on students accruing credits that treat graduation as the end goal. Regarding college and career readiness, many of the nation’s students end up not being prepared for either, according to Bromberg and Theokas (2016).

Eunyoung and Hargrove (2013) documented a study conducted by Wilson-Sadberry that examined how various factors, including education, counselors, family, and peers, impacted the ability of Black male students to attain a college education. Eunyoung and Hargrove (2013) found that socioeconomic status, familial and peer influence, educational preparation, and
postsecondary plans positively influenced resilience. Educational plans and fatherly influence were strong predictors of resilience, with more than 75% of Black male college students attributing their decision to obtain a degree to their fathers, according to Eunyoung and Hargrove (2013).

According to Martin (2015), merely one out of every four students successfully completes high school while fulfilling the requirements of all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, which serves as a gauge for readiness to undertake university and community college courses for credit. Geiser (2020) noted that ACT and SAT scores are much more related to student demographics, such as a student’s race or ethnicity, family income, and parental education, in comparison to high school grades. Jackson (2012) reported that Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian American students should have equal access to postsecondary education and that providing greater access to postsecondary education for minorities is one of the best ways to move the United States closer to the ideal of equal opportunities. To achieve this goal, Jackson (2012) suggested four objectives that must be met: 1) College admission counselors must improve their communication with high school students, parents, counselors, and teachers; 2) College admission standards must be broadened; 3) Testing is only used in a diagnostic and prescriptive fashion to enhance minority student performance to help and not hinder minority students; 4) Minority communities must be held accountable for making sure more students are taught the discipline and altruism that is vital in achieving personal success.

Kurlaender et al. (2018) discovered that minority students are more likely to be placed in remedial courses at community colleges in California due to their test scores. This focus on testing and scores began the “accountability” era, according to Luppescu et al. (2011). The number of jobs requiring postsecondary education was predicted to reach 65% by 2020,
according to Martin (2015), and, in a lifetime, workers with a college degree earn over $100 million more than people with only a high school diploma on average. These achievement gaps and inequities occur across race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability. Although SAT scores in Wake County Public Schools in North Carolina ranked much higher than the state and national averages, minority Hispanic and Black students still averaged lower test scores than their White peers in 1996-2013, according to Muli et al. (2014).

**Testing Disparities, Educational Inequalities, and Reform Efforts**

Au (2016) documented that standardized tests were initially used to establish racial disparities by providing “scientific” evidence to support the idea of Black people, certain ethnic groups, and low-income individuals’ inherent inferiority more than a century ago. High-stakes testing has been a part of the Texas educational system for a long time, even though decades of research have indicated testing to be a deeply flawed practice that continues to worsen educational inequalities and disadvantages among minority students, according to Back (2020). Back also reported many schools have historically provided inequitable educational opportunities that pose disadvantages for low-income students and students of color who are increasingly segregated in under-funded schools. Bromberg and Theokas’ study noted that “grades are also a reflection of course expectations and student behaviors, but research has shown grade point averages (GPAs) to be predictive of college success — far more, actually, than test performance” (p. 2).

Geiser (2020) reported that one of the biggest claims made by the University of California’s standardized testing task force is that SAT and ACT scores are more important than a student’s high school grades when predicting how they will perform at the University of California. Geiser proceeded to report that SAT and ACT scores are much more strongly
correlated with student demographics, such as family income, parental education, and race/ethnicity, in comparison to a student’s high school grades. Heilig (2011) conducted a study that tracked individuals in a longitudinal dataset of over 45,000 high school students in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and discovered evidence that the majority of high school students in Houston failed to advance to graduation due to high-stakes testing and accountability policies, resulting in the minority, limited English proficient (LEP), and economically disadvantaged students being disproportionately affected.

Modern standardized testing, including college entrance exams, should provide outcomes that offer students, teachers, and parents a strong understanding of a student’s college and career paths, and these assessments should also set significant performance thresholds, aligned with national and global standards, to determine students’ proficiency levels (Martin, 2015). Assessment systems geared towards college and career readiness, such as the ACT and SAT, should encompass a diverse array of question types, encompassing tasks that mandate students to produce genuine, real-world responses and tasks, according to Martin (2015).

**Graduation Requirements and College Readiness Metrics in Tennessee Schools**

High school students are required to take the ACT or SAT by or during their junior year to graduate with a regular diploma in Tennessee even if they have no intention to matriculate into a college or university. According to the Tennessee State Board of Education’s high school policy 2.103, to earn a traditional high school diploma, students shall “participate in the ACT or SAT, or other eleventh (11th) grade postsecondary assessment as determined by the Commissioner of Education unless the student qualifies for a medical exemption as defined by the Department (Tennessee Department of Education, 2023).” Students must earn college-
reportable ACT or SAT scores for them to count toward their graduation requirement, according to the policy.

In Tennessee, the Ready Graduate indicator is the accountability metric as a part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan. A Ready Graduate is identified as a student who has completed certain aspects of the state’s ESSA plan with evidence of certain benchmarks (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022). For example, a Ready Graduate must earn a composite score of 21 or higher on the ACT if the student elected to take that exam, and if students choose to complete the SAT, they must earn a composite score of 1060 or higher on that exam (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022). “Considering Tennessee offers opportunities for high school juniors and seniors to take the ACT at no cost, nearly all students who become Ready Graduates through ACT or SAT test scores do so through the ACT” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2022).

Each year, the Tennessee Department of Education produces a state report card for the state, each school district within the state, and every public school within each school district. The data reported in these annual report cards are public records and published online. For example, according to the 2021-22 state report card for Red County Schools, the average ACT composite score for students in that district was 16.6, while the state composite score average was 19.1. According to the state report card, 92% of the 2021 graduating cohort in Red County Schools earned a valid ACT or SAT score. In comparison, the average ACT composite score for students in White County Schools was 24.9. The statewide participation average is 96% for that same graduation year.

According to the 2021-22 state report card and as indicated in Table 2.1, 75% of the 102,221 students in Red County Schools were Black or African American, and 18% were
Hispanic. Additionally, 57% of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged. Only 23% of the students in Red County Schools were considered a Ready Graduate compared to the statewide rate of 39.7%. More specifically, Pearl High School, with a student population of 1,481, had a Ready Graduate rate of 24.7% of the graduating students, which was 1.7% higher than the district rate and 15% lower than the statewide rate. The average ACT composite score in the district was 16.6, and it was 16.3 at Pearl High School. More than 95% of Pearl’s students were Black or African American, and the school’s Ready Graduate score was 2.1.

According to the 2021-22 state report card and as indicated in Table 2.1, 78% of the 41,251 students in White County Schools were White, and 9% were Asian. Additionally, 3% of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged. Notably, 75.3% of the students in White County Schools were considered a Ready Graduate compared to the statewide rate of 39.7%. More specifically, Diamond High School, with a student population of 1,746, had a Ready Graduate rate of 79.8% of the graduating students, which was 4.5% higher than the district rate and 40.1% higher than the statewide rate. The average ACT composite score in the district was 24.9, and it was 26.0 at Diamond High School. Eighty-three percent of Diamond’s students were White, and the school’s Ready Graduate score was 4.0.

According to the 2021-22 state report card and as indicated in Table 2.1, 39% of the 77,479 students in Blue County Schools were Black or African American, 31% were Hispanic, and 25% were White. Additionally, 35% of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged. Only 30.8% of the students in Blue County Schools were considered a Ready Graduate compared to the statewide rate of 39.7%. More specifically, Platinum High School, with a student population of 1,975, had a Ready Graduate rate of 31% of the graduating students, which was 0.2% higher than the district rate and 8.7% lower than the statewide rate. The average
ACT composite score in the district was 17.7, and it was 17.2 at Platinum High School. Forty-eight percent of Platinum’s students were Hispanic, and the school’s *Ready Graduate* score was 2.6.

The largest Tennessee university – Titans College – requires all first-year applicants to take the ACT or SAT for undergraduate admission consideration per the institution’s test score policy (Titans College, 2023). At Titans College, the admissions staff employs a “superscoring” technique where they consider the highest section scores from multiple test attempts to calculate a revised composite score during the application review process (Titans College, 2023). This method often results in higher composite scores, enhancing the competitiveness of students’ applications (Titans College, 2023).

Once admitted to Titans College, students are required to submit their official ACT or SAT scores directly from the testing agency or as part of their official high school transcript before enrolling (Titans College, 2023). To be eligible for institutional scholarships, students must ensure that their test scores are received by the university no later than July 1 of their high school senior year per Titans College (2023).

Stevens University had a test-optional policy for students applying for fall 2024 admittance (Stevens University, 2023). Applicants could choose whether or not to submit their scores from the ACT or SAT exams, and the choice to submit or not submit scores did not affect the application review process (Stevens University, 2023). Instead, the university considered other factors, such as the applicant’s academic record, rigor of coursework, personal essay, letters of recommendation, extracurricular activities, and other items submitted about the student’s background (Stevens University, 2023).
### Table 2.1 ‘Ready Graduate’ Comparison Chart for 2020-21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/District/School</th>
<th>Total # of Students</th>
<th>Average ACT Composite Score</th>
<th>Ready Graduate Percentage</th>
<th>Ready Graduate School Score</th>
<th>Participation with Valid ACT Scores</th>
<th>Black/African American Students</th>
<th>White Students</th>
<th>Hispanic Students</th>
<th>Asian Students</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>967,356</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red County Schools</td>
<td>102,221</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl High School</td>
<td>1,481</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
<td>&lt;5%</td>
<td>&lt;5%</td>
<td>&lt;5%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White County Schools</td>
<td>41,251</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond High School</td>
<td>1,746</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>79.8%</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>&lt;5%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>&lt;5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue County Schools</td>
<td>77,479</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platinum High School</td>
<td>1,975</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data retrieved from the following Tennessee Department of Education website: [https://depublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/](https://depublicschools.ondemand.sas.com/)
Students have the option to self-report their ACT or SAT scores on their admission applications, but official score reports will be required for all enrolling students, according to (Stevens University, 2023). The writing section of the ACT and the essay section of the SAT are not required if test scores are submitted. Stevens practices superscoring for both the ACT and SAT, similar to Titans College. Students are encouraged to submit all scores if they choose to submit testing; however, only the highest section scores for either the ACT or the SAT will be considered for admissions review. If both ACT and SAT scores are submitted, Stevens will consider the highest superscore from either test, whichever is most favorable for the student (Stevens University, 2023).

Mitchell State University requires all students to provide standardized exam results, usually ACT and/or SAT, as part of their admission application (Mitchell State University, 2023). The exam results must be completed within five years of the intended enrollment term to be considered valid. The university also uses ACT or SAT sub-scores for determining placement levels in specific subjects. Students must submit all standardized exam results with their applications, but it is important to note that admission is not solely based on test scores, as there is no specific score that guarantees admission to the university (Mitchell State University, 2023).

**Theoretical Framework**

To guide the narrative qualitative research for this study, Kristof-Brown’s person-environment fit theory is the theoretical framework used to organize and structure this doctoral applied research (DAR) project. Person-environment fit theory is an “attempt to understand and predict employees’ attitudes and behavior by comparing internal aspects of the person (e.g., values, personality, goals, abilities) to commensurate, or at least conceptually relevant, elements
of the external environment (e.g., values, culture, climate, goals, demands),” according to (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013, p. 2)

Person factors encompass an individual’s characteristics, such as skills, abilities, interests, and values (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). In the context of young Black males, these factors include their academic aptitude, motivation and aspirations, and sociocultural background. Analyzing the college entrance exam scores of young Black males serves as an essential component of person factors. This research investigates how these scores reflect their readiness for postsecondary education. Examining the educational goals and aspirations of the participating young Black males in this study, as well as their motivations for pursuing postsecondary education, provides insight into their person factors. Considering the cultural, familial, and socioeconomic factors that influence these young males can help contextualize their academic experiences beyond high school.

Environment factors refer to the characteristics of the setting or context in which young Black males operate (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). The environment can be seen as having distinctive attributes of its own or as the combined characteristics of its members, according to Kristof-Brown et al. (2005). In this case, the environment includes urban public high schools, college admission processes themselves, and the postsecondary institutions. This research explores the educational settings in which these students are prepared for college, including the quality of preparatory resources, teacher support, and curriculum offerings before they graduated from an urban high school in Tennessee. This study investigates the admission criteria and practices of higher education institutions preferred by young Black male participants and how they consider their college entrance exam scores and other factors in their enrollment decisions. This research examines the characteristics of colleges and universities where young Black males
have sought admission, which involves assessing the resources, support services, and diversity initiatives available at these postsecondary institutions.

The concept of person-environment fit emphasizes the match or alignment between young Black males’ person factors and the demands and resources of their environments. The fit can be categorized into different types, such as person-job fit, person-organization fit, or person-school fit. For the purpose of this study, person-school fit is the focus of the findings.

**Conclusion**

In this literature review, a comprehensive exploration of standardized testing, particularly the ACT and SAT, has been conducted, shedding light on their influence on college admissions and educational opportunities for young Black males. These college entrance exams, characterized by distinct formats and assessment areas, serve as crucial gatekeepers for scholarships, course placements, and college readiness. However, they also raise concerns about high-stakes testing, its impact on educational practices, and its potential role in reinforcing socioeconomic disparities and neoliberal notions of success.

The examination of standardized testing in education reveals a multifaceted landscape where these assessments, initially intended for teacher performance evaluation, have evolved into a system that heavily ranks and evaluates students. The resulting pressure to achieve high test scores has led to shifts in teaching practices, potentially compromising the quality and relevance of the curriculum. This practice has particularly affected marginalized students, exacerbating disparities in outcomes attributed to factors like race. Additionally, the interaction between standardized testing and educational policies, such as Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind, raises questions about their true impact on student achievement and the validity of value-added measures.
Furthermore, the exploration of college readiness, career aspirations, and the influence of parental education underscores the complex web of factors that affect educational outcomes, especially among minority students. Disparities in degree completion rates persist, with ACT scores, access to advanced coursework, and alignment of curriculum playing pivotal roles in determining success. The influence of socioeconomic status, familial support, and educational preparation highlights the importance of a comprehensive support network. Despite these challenges, addressing them requires a multifaceted approach encompassing improved communication, broader admission standards, and the constructive use of testing to enhance minority student performance.

Lastly, the examination of graduation requirements and college readiness metrics in Tennessee schools reveals the significance of standardized testing in students' educational paths and access to higher education. The state’s mandate for ACT or SAT testing for all high school students, regardless of college intentions, emphasizes the importance of these assessments. However, concerns arise regarding students with individualized educational plans (IEPs) and potential effects on their graduation eligibility. The disparities in testing outcomes and graduation rates among different school districts underscore ongoing educational inequalities. The policies of universities in Tennessee, such as Titans College, Stevens University, and Mitchell State University, reflect the intricate role of standardized testing in college admissions.

In conclusion, standardized testing, particularly the ACT and SAT, plays a pivotal role in college admissions and educational outcomes but raises complex questions about equity, high-stakes testing, and the broader educational landscape. These assessments have evolved from their initial purposes and now significantly influence teaching practices, curriculum, and student rankings. Disparities persist among marginalized students, emphasizing the need for equitable
access to resources and support. Additionally, the interplay between standardized testing and educational policies adds complexity to the educational landscape. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes equitable access and constructive testing practices while considering the broader implications for students, educators, and educational systems.

In Chapter Three, I will present the methodology used in this narrative qualitative study and will outline the study’s research design to explain the rationale, participants, and sample for the study. The chapter will conclude with a description of the data analysis procedures and ethical safeguards used for this narrative qualitative study.
Chapter 3

METHODS

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the experiences of young Black males as they describe their postsecondary opportunities as a result of their college entrance exam scores. This research study examined the insights into young Black males’ unique challenges, perspectives, and the intricacies of how college entrance exam scores impacted their postsecondary opportunities, including their personal stories, struggles, and triumphs. This study also examined the broader sociocultural, economic, and educational factors that intersect with college entrance exam scores for young Black males while uncovering how systemic inequalities, discrimination, and socioeconomic disparities may influence their postsecondary opportunities. Moreover, this research investigated the specific needs and challenges faced by young Black males in relation to college entrance exams to help educators, policymakers, and postsecondary institutions design interventions and support systems that are better tailored to this demographic of students when seeking enrollment at their preferred postsecondary institutions. In Chapter Three, I explained my research methods, including the research design and rationale, site and participant selection, data collection, data analysis, ethical safeguards, methods of verification, and positionality.

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted a narrative qualitative study on the postsecondary opportunities young Black males have based on their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban public high schools in Tennessee. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative research provides a better understanding about people’s interpretation of their experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explain qualitative
research approaches – from a transformative worldview perspective – seek to examine an issue related to oppressed people by collecting their stories using a narrative approach through extensive interviews.

This project used a narrative research approach that focused on collecting and analyzing individuals’ stories, experiences, and perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of their postsecondary opportunities as a result of their college entrance exam scores (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It allowed me to explore the unique narratives and lived experiences of the participants, using interviews, personal narratives, and other storytelling methods. This study emphasizes the transformative worldview, which asserts that this research should be connected with politics and a political change agenda to address social oppression involving young Black males (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Transformative worldview research, as described by Creswell and Creswell (2018), provides a voice for marginalized or disenfranchised groups in society. In the case of this DAR project, it gives a voice to young Black males and their experiences with the education system, potentially raising their consciousness and advocating for change to improve future young Black males’ lives after high school in urban communities. This narrative qualitative research study is designed to reveal how young Black males interpret their experiences when seeking admission to postsecondary institutions, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences with the intent to better understand how they make sense of their lives and those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This project is actively seeking to confront and address social oppression in the context of postsecondary opportunities for young Black males based on their college entrance exam scores. This research proposes a call to action for reform in how college entrance exams are used to
admit or reject young Black male students seeking enrollment at their preferred postsecondary institutions. This study aims to advocate for positive changes in the lives of the young Black males from urban public high schools. The intent of this research is not to further marginalize young Black males, but rather to give a voice to the participants and ensure that their perspectives are considered. When combined with a transformative worldview, this narrative qualitative research can be a powerful tool for exploring educational issues related to equity and social justice for young Black males pursuing higher education beyond high school.

The research questions in this study seek to explore the personal experiences, perceptions, and feelings of young Black males as they navigated the college admissions process. Qualitative research allows participants to share their stories in their own words and explore the nuances of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It provides a platform for participants to express the multifaceted nature of their experiences, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative data given the complexity of their experiences. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, facilitate more in-depth exploration (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which allowed me to probe deeper into the motivations, emotions, and contexts behind the choices made by the young Black male participants in their pursuit of postsecondary education.

In conducting a narrative qualitative study, the research provided space for me to be more sensitive to the cultural, social, and contextual factors that may have affected these participants’ choices and experiences, allowing them to express the unique cultural perspectives and challenges they faced. Because the research questions inquire about both the supports and barriers that these young Black males encountered, a narrative qualitative approach better captures the contextual factors that contributed to these supports and barriers, such as their
family dynamics, socioeconomic status, community influences, and personal motivations. Given the potential for systemic inequities in the educational system, a narrative qualitative approach helped me uncover structural and institutional barriers that young Black males face, which can be valuable for addressing disparities in postsecondary education. This narrative qualitative study offers descriptive data that can inform policy and interventions aimed at improving postsecondary opportunities for young Black males while sharing their real-life stories and insights that can be influential in advocacy and change-making efforts.

**Site and Participants**

**Site**

Red County Schools (RCS)\(^1\) is the largest public school district in one mid-south U.S. state and is one of the 25 largest school districts in America with over 110,000 students. Red County Schools has over 63,000 economically disadvantaged students of all ages and over 30,000 high school students in district-managed and charter schools. Over 75% of the RCS student population identifies as Black or African American, and approximately 51% of the students are males (Red County Schools, 2022). Bear High School, Tiger High School, and Warrior High School are all secondary schools within Red County Schools.

Since its founding in 1912, Mitchell State University has hosted over 21,000 students on campus each year (Mitchell State University, 2023). Of the 16,766 baccalaureate students in fall 2023, 12.6% were Black males (Mitchell State University, 2023). In fall 2023, 16.8% of the 3,078 freshmen were Black males (Mitchell State University, 2023). Stevens University was founded in a southern city over 150 years ago in 1873 (Stevens University, 2023). In the 2022-

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\(^1\) To protect the confidentiality of the site and participants, a pseudonym has been used. The website address will not be disclosed. All further names and locations have been given pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality.
2023 academic year, Stevens had 7,151 undergraduate students with 48% of the students identified as males and 10% of the students identified as Black (Stevens University, 2023).

Beginning in 1794 as a small college in the Southwest Territory, Titans College has grown into the state’s flagship university and premier public research institution (Titans College, 2023). In fall 2023, the average SAT combined score for new freshmen at Titans College was 1266, and the average ACT score was 27.9 (Titans College, 2023). Of the 28,883 total undergraduate students in fall 2023, 533 of the students were Black or African American males (Titans College, 2023). For the fall 2023 semester, 50,488 students applied for undergraduate admissions at Titans College, 46% of the applicants were admitted, 13% of the applicants enrolled, and 29% of the admitted enrolled (Titans College, 2023). In fall 2022, 4.5% of the undergraduate students at Titans College were Black or African American, 45.6% of the students were males, and 59.6% of the students were between the ages of 18 and 20 (Titans College, 2023).

**Participants**

Focusing on newly admitted college freshmen in this project rather than high school seniors offered several potential advantages. Freshmen have already undergone the college admissions process, allowing them to reflect on their experiences with a more concrete understanding of the outcomes. They provided insights into the challenges and successes they faced during the application process and the transition to college. By interviewing newly admitted college freshmen, I gained insights into how their actual experiences align with their expectations and aspirations during the college entrance exam phase. This approach shed light on the effectiveness of the decision-making process and the factors that influenced their choices.
Freshmen were more likely to have vivid and recent memories of their college admission journey.

This immediacy led to richer and more detailed responses, as they were still processing and reflecting on the events that had recently transpired. These students have just entered the college environment, and their narratives provided valuable information on the initial challenges they faced, including academic, social, and cultural adjustments. This information was beneficial for understanding how the college entrance exam scores influenced their early experiences in higher education. College freshmen provided nuanced perspectives on the supports and barriers they encountered during their transition from high school to college. This information informs not only the admissions process but also ongoing support structures within college institutions. Also, newly admitted freshmen have had some time to reflect on their experiences and were better able to articulate the nuances of their journey, offering a deeper understanding of how various factors influenced their postsecondary admissions decision-making and outcomes.

While focusing on high school seniors might have provided insights into their expectations and initial intentions, the post-admission phase captures a critical juncture in the lives of these young Black males, allowing me to explore the real-world implications of their college entrance exam scores on their postsecondary opportunities. Identifying and engaging with as many eligible study participants as possible before narrowing down the pool to three individuals was a crucial and strategic approach in the research for several reasons. A larger potential participant pool allowed for a more diverse range of perspectives and experiences to be represented in the study. This diversity enhanced the richness of the data and ensured that a broader spectrum of viewpoints was considered during the analysis phase. By casting a wide net and considering potential participants from various sources, I increased the likelihood of
capturing a comprehensive understanding of the problem under investigation. Different contexts, backgrounds, and life experiences contributed to a more holistic portrayal of these young men’s stories to be captured.

Initially engaging with potential participants from multiple sources allowed me to draw more robust conclusions that may be applicable to a broader population once I narrowed the actual participants down to three young Black males. Attracting and vetting a larger pool of potential participants provided flexibility in the final selection process. It allowed me to consider factors, such as willingness to participate, availability, commitment to this study, and the depth of insights shared during initial interactions. In the process of selecting participants for the study, a pre-screening stage was conducted to ensure a balanced and representative sample of young Black males. Initially, eight potential participants were identified through recruitment and referral methods. However, during the pre-screening process, it became evident that not all candidates fully met the specific requirements outlined for the study. First, it is important to note that the goal was to include participants who could offer diverse perspectives and experiences while still aligning with the research focus. As such, candidates who did not meet the criteria regarding their academic background or current educational status were excluded. This decision was made to ensure that the insights gathered from the study would be relevant to the specific context being investigated.

Additionally, geographic location played a crucial role in the selection process. Given the focus on urban communities in Tennessee, candidates who did not reside in these areas were not included in the final pool of participants. This decision was made to maintain consistency and relevance to the research context. Furthermore, additional eliminations were also made with regard to the specific enrollment status and academic classification of each potential participant.
While all participants were young Black males, efforts were made to include individuals from a similar range in socioeconomic background to capture a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences being studied. Candidates who did not fit within this spectrum were therefore not selected for participation. While the other candidates may have possessed valuable insights, their exclusion was necessary to maintain the integrity and focus of the research and ensure a balanced and representative participant pool that could effectively contribute to this study’s objectives.

The initial step of identifying as many eligible study participants as possible was essential for building a robust foundation for this doctoral applied research project. It allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research topic and ensured that my study captured the complexity of the problem being researched. After this broad engagement, the subsequent step of narrowing down the pool to three participants was a strategic choice aimed at achieving depth and specificity in my data analysis.

The first step in identifying participants was to approach school administrators, counselors, and teachers in three high schools within Red County Schools. These individuals were contacted through email and phone calls to initiate the conversation about my research project. During these interactions, I presented a clear and concise explanation of the purpose and significance of the research. I emphasized that the study aimed to shed light on the experiences of Red County Schools’ recent graduates as they transitioned into higher education, which would ultimately benefit the school system by identifying areas for improvement. To garner support, I highlighted the potential benefits of the study, such as helping schools tailor their college admissions counseling and readiness programs to the specific needs of their students, increasing retention rates, and fostering a deeper understanding of the college admissions process for future
young Black male students. I also underscored that the findings would contribute to the academic community’s understanding of college matriculation experiences for young Black males.

With the support of school personnel, I was granted access to eligible graduate names and graduation data. This access allowed me to identify recent graduates who met the criteria of matriculating to Mitchell State University, Stevens University, or Titans College. Once potential participants were identified, I directly reached out to these recent graduates through phone calls, emails, and private messages on social media. I explained the research project and its objectives, and I requested their participation.

To tap into social media platforms, I utilized LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram, which are frequented by young adults in this specific target demographic. I created informative posts and advertisements to promote the research study. In all online promotional materials, I included clear and easily accessible contact information for potential participants. Interested individuals were encouraged to reach out to me via email or direct message for more information and to express their interest in participating in the study.

After I collected all of the potential participant names, as illustrated in Table 3.1, I chose one student from each of the three postsecondary institutions – Mitchell State University, Stevens University, and Titans College – to evenly balance the participant pool from each site and proceeded with the study. This comprehensive approach ensured that I could successfully identify and recruit three participants for my research study on the postsecondary opportunities young Black males, who recently graduated from Red County Schools, experience as a result of their college entrance exam scores. The collaboration with school personnel and the use of social media platforms facilitated the participant recruitment process, ultimately contributing to the success of the study.
Data Collection

Instrumentation

I created an interview protocol based on my research questions to learn more about three young Black males’ postsecondary experiences and opportunities as a result of their recent college entrance exam testing experiences. The research questions that guided this study were developed to best understand the participants’ college exam experiences while they were urban high school students that led them to their postsecondary institutions as current college students. As a former classroom teacher at a predominantly Black urban high school, I used Kristof-Brown’s person-environment fit theory to help guide this study because I can recall numerous young Black male students who struggled with college entrance exams even under my instruction.

At the beginning of each interview, I assured the participants that their identities would remain confidential and that they were free to share their truths about their college entrance exam testing experiences while attending an urban high school and the impacts that were made on their lives after high school. I faced validity by seeking feedback from my research design and academic writing professor who vetted the questions used during the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After receiving my professor’s feedback and consulting with fellow researchers in my doctoral cohort, I made some minor edits to a few questions for clarity.
Table 3.1 *Interview Participants and Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Matriculation Semester</th>
<th>Matriculation Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Henry Lewis</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Tiger High School</td>
<td>Titans College</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Johnson</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Warrior High School</td>
<td>Stevens University</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry Wilson</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bear High School</td>
<td>Mitchell State University</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>2023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Please note that these participant names, school names, and ages are fictitious and have been used for the purpose of this table.*
Data Collection

“Qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also note that data are most commonly collected through analyzing documents, observations, and interviews. For this study, in-depth, one-on-one interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on the personal experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by each of the three participants. Additionally, information about the participants’ college entrance exam scores, socioeconomic background, and current postsecondary institution enrollment experiences was collected to explore broader contextual factors.

The Red County Schools website lists the total number of schools in the district, by grade level, so it is a matter of public record. I contacted administrators at three different Red County Schools to provide detailed information about this research study, its purpose, and the benefits. I emphasized confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation before asking them to provide the names of recent young Black male graduates between the ages of 18 and 20 who attend either Mitchell State University, Stevens University, or Titans College.

Once I found three participants with similar backgrounds, I reached out to each of them to confirm their availability to participate in the study. My goal was to interview three young Black males who had things in common and would be open to discussing their life experiences. All three participants identified as young Black males, indicating a shared ethnic identity. They all also came from urban communities primarily populated with other Black people, suggesting a common cultural background shaped by their environments. All three participants attended predominantly Black high schools, indicating similarity in their educational experiences. These
high schools likely had fewer resources and support services compared to schools in more affluent areas, impacting their academic preparation and access to opportunities. Additionally, all three participants faced challenges with standardized testing, which is a common experience among many students from underrepresented backgrounds. This shared struggle suggests a similarity in the obstacles they encountered during the college admissions process. To better connect with the young participants, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured/informal manner using a conversational flow while asking open-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All of the interviews were conducted online using ZOOM over the course of a two-week period, and each interview was recorded for transcribing and coding purposes once all interviews were concluded.

Data Analysis

Each recorded interview was transcribed, converting the spoken words into written text. In analyzing the data, I employed a coding process to systematically identify and categorize the themes, patterns, and other meaningful information found within the interview transcripts. This process involved breaking down the data into smaller components for easier analysis. I conducted a thematic analysis to identify any recurrences or patterns across the three interviews. I looked for commonalities and variations in how the participants interpreted their experiences and deeper insight to their postsecondary opportunities as a result of their college entrance exams.

I examined each participant’s responses within the broader context of the study, including the influence of college entrance exam scores, socioeconomic background, and the postsecondary institution attended to understand how these factors intersected with their personal experiences and perspectives. I compared and contrasted the experiences, challenges, and
perspectives of the three participants to identify similarities and differences among their narratives in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the overall trends within the data. Unique insights provided by each participant helped me explore their individual stories, struggles, and triumphs when undergoing the college admissions process.

**Ethical Safeguards**

For this study, credibility was established using member checking and reflexive writing. I used an interview protocol with open-ended questions in a casual, friendly conversational format for each participant (Seidman, 2019). Each interview was recorded using the ZOOM online meetings platform. After each interview, I transcribed the conversations verbatim with the assistance of the ZOOM transcription feature. Each participant was provided an informed consent form before every interview began.

**Methods of Verification**

For this study, credibility was established using member checking and reflexive writing. During this research journey, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process. I documented my thoughts, emotions, and reflections throughout the journey and regularly revisited and updated my reflexive journal to capture any evolving insights that I developed. I reflected on my interactions with the participants during the data collection and included excerpts from my reflexive journal to illustrate moments of self-awareness to enhance the credibility of the research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), this method allowed me to follow up with the participants about any of their responses that I may have misinterpreted, ruling out those misinterpretations, and identifying any misunderstandings or biases of my own. I used an interview questionnaire with open-ended questions, combined with a few close-ended questions, in a casual, friendly conversational format for each participant (Seidman, 2019). Each
interview was recorded using the ZOOM online meetings platform. After each interview, I transcribed the conversations verbatim with the assistance of the ZOOM transcription feature. Each participant was provided an informed consent form before every interview began.

**Role of the Researcher (Positionality)**

This research was conducted on the postsecondary opportunities for young Black males based on their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban public high schools in Tennessee. I have several strong opinions about the stress high-stakes testing causes on marginalized students, particularly young Black males, who are competing for postsecondary opportunities against students who come from more affluent households and schools. As an adult Black male, I was once a high school student with low socioeconomic status in an underprivileged urban high school over 20 years ago; however, I still have vivid memories of my experiences with college entrance exam testing as a student.

My experiences could reveal bias in my analysis of the interviews and focus groups conducted by positively reflecting on the interviews and focus groups that agree with my personal beliefs. Many of the college entrance exams that high school students undergo in high schools today were mandated for matriculation during my era as an urban high school student. However, several postsecondary institutions have recently adopted other admissions criteria, even removing the requirement for college entrance exam scores, for applicants to be considered for enrollment. As a result, this narrative qualitative study provides more than one data source, and transcripts were provided to the participants of the interviews to ensure no bias is found. To counteract my bias, I practiced reflexive writing while analyzing the data and writing the findings. As an added measure, transcripts of all interviews were recorded and documented to minimize any possible bias.
Conclusion

This narrative qualitative study examines the experiences of young Black males from three urban public high schools in a large school district in West Tennessee, examining the impact of college entrance exam scores on their postsecondary opportunities. The research, framed within a transformative worldview, aims to uncover systemic inequalities and advocate for positive changes in the lives of these students. The study adopts a narrative research approach, allowing participants to share their stories, struggles, and triumphs through in-depth interviews.

The research design and rationale justify the choice of qualitative methods, emphasizing the importance of understanding the participants’ interpretations of their experiences. The transformative worldview guiding the study seeks to address social oppression by giving a voice to marginalized groups, particularly young Black males. The exploration of sociocultural, economic, and educational factors sheds light on the broader context in which college entrance exam scores intersect with the postsecondary opportunities of young Black males.

The careful selection of participants through collaboration with schools, community organizations, and social media ensures a diverse and representative sample. The instrumentation section outlines the development of an interview questionnaire based on the research questions, guided by Kristof-Brown’s person-environment fit theory. The assurance of confidentiality and validation of the questionnaire enhance the study’s reliability and credibility. The detailed description of the data collection process, including participant recruitment and interview techniques, demonstrates a comprehensive and systematic approach.

My positionality, as a Black male with personal experiences related to college entrance exams, was acknowledged, and measures were taken to mitigate potential bias. In essence, this
narrative qualitative study contributes valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities young Black males face in their pursuit of postsecondary education, advocating for policy changes and interventions to address systemic inequities. The findings provide a platform for these individuals to have their voices heard and contribute to ongoing discussions about equity and social justice in secondary and postsecondary education.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

In Chapter One, an introductory overview of this narrative qualitative study was presented, which included discussions on the research problems, purpose, questions, and delimitations guiding the research. Chapter Two comprehensively explored standardized testing, particularly the ACT and SAT, and their influence on college admissions and educational opportunities for young Black males. It examined college entrance exams’ roles as gatekeepers for scholarships, course placements, and college readiness, while also discussing concerns about high-stakes testing and its impact on educational practices and socioeconomic disparities. Chapter Three outlined the methodology of this narrative qualitative study, including the research design, rationale, participant selection, data analysis procedures, and ethical safeguards used to explore the experiences the young Black male participants have had when recently pursuing postsecondary education. This study focuses on the experiences of young Black males from urban public high schools in West Tennessee, examining the impact of college entrance exam scores on their postsecondary opportunities within a transformative worldview framework.

Moving forward, Chapter Four will concentrate on the qualitative analysis of the collected data, addressing the following research questions:

1. How do young Black males describe their experiences in choosing and being admitted to their preferred postsecondary college institutions as a result of their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban high schools in Tennessee?

2. What supports and barriers do young Black males encounter in choosing and being admitted to their preferred postsecondary college institutions as a result of their college entrance exam scores before graduating from urban high schools in Tennessee?
In this chapter, the analysis will delve into the narratives provided by the participants, exploring their perspectives on college choice and admission processes, as influenced by their college entrance exam scores. Additionally, it will identify the various supports and barriers encountered by these individuals in their pursuit of postsecondary education. This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis from interviews with three participants. Through a thematic analysis, common themes emerged across their experiences in navigating the college admissions process. This chapter provides a comprehensive examination of four main themes, exploring the perspectives and insights shared by each participant.

**Challenges with Standardized Testing**

All three participants discussed encountering challenges with standardized testing, particularly the ACT exam. Larry Wilson expressed frustration with the pressure associated with achieving a high score, stating, “I felt like I had to prove myself on a single test.” This sentiment was echoed by James Johnson, who described feeling discouraged despite extensive preparation, stating, “I found out that even studying and putting in a lot of hours... I still wasn’t able to accomplish an ACT score that would grant me access to the school that I wanted to go to.” Similarly, Henry Lewis recounted the difficulties of transitioning from homeschooling to traditional schooling and facing the standardized testing requirements, stating, “I had to adapt to a different style of learning and testing.”

One significant challenge highlighted by the participants was the lack of proper preparatory resources available to them in their high schools. Larry and Henry described having limited access to ACT preparation materials, such as practice tests, study guides, and tutoring services. This shortage of resources hindered their ability to adequately prepare for the exam and familiarize themselves with its format and content. Without sufficient support and guidance, they
felt ill-equipped to perform to the best of their abilities on test day each time they tested. Larry said, “It was frustrating because no matter how hard I studied, I still felt like I was behind because I didn’t have access to the same study materials as other students.” Henry shared, “I already struggle with test anxiety, especially knowing that my score would play a significant role in determining my future and what college I could attend. The pressure was overwhelming, and I still believe it affected my performance each time I tested.”

Moreover, Henry and James faced time constraints that impeded their ability to dedicate sufficient study time to ACT preparation, due to juggling part-time jobs and sports commitments, alongside their academic responsibilities, leaving little room in their schedules for dedicated studying for the exam. Balancing these competing demands posed a significant challenge, as they struggled to find the time and energy to devote to proper test preparation amidst their already packed schedules and family responsibilities. James said:

I had to dedicate so much time and energy to football practices and games that I felt like I just didn’t have enough time to study effectively. It was really tough trying to find a balance between my athletic commitments and academic responsibilities when I was in high school, and it still is today now that I’m in college.

Furthermore, all three participants expressed frustration with the timed nature of the ACT, which added an additional layer of stress and pressure to their testing experiences. The strict time limits imposed on each section of the exam exacerbated feelings of anxiety and unease, particularly for the participants who struggled with time management or high-stakes testing under so much pressure. The time constraints often left them feeling rushed and unable to fully comprehend and answer all questions, compromising their overall performance on the exam. Henry expressed, “The ACT being timed was really challenging for me. I felt like I was
constantly racing against the clock, which made it difficult to focus and perform my best. I kept finding myself feeling rushed, especially in the math and science sections.” James said, “The time pressure on the ACT was pretty intense. It felt like I barely had enough time to read and answer all the questions, let alone double-check my work. It definitely impacted my performance and made the whole experience even more stressful.” Larry also shared, “The time limits on the ACT were tough. I was always running out of time before I could even finish, which made me second-guess myself and affected my confidence during the test.”

Additionally, Larry and James highlighted the presence of culturally biased questions on the ACT that did not necessarily align with the content they had been taught in class. They described encountering questions that seemed unfamiliar or irrelevant to their academic and life experiences in the classroom, reflecting a disconnect between the test content and their actual educational backgrounds. Larry shared, “Some of the questions on the ACT didn’t really relate to what I learned in class. It was frustrating because it felt like I was being tested on things that I hadn’t even been exposed to, which I think put me at a disadvantage compared to other students.” James said, “There were definitely questions on the ACT that seemed out of place and irrelevant to what I had learned in school. It made me question what the test was really trying to learn about me.” These discrepancies highlighted the need for standardized tests, such as the ACT, to be more culturally responsive and inclusive of diverse perspectives and knowledge bases. All of these narratives, as illustrated in Figure 4.1, emphasize the impact of standardized testing on the college admissions process and highlight the challenges faced by young Black male students in achieving desired scores. Despite their efforts, the participants encountered obstacles that necessitated alternative pathways to admission, such as conditional acceptance.
Challenges with Standardized Testing

- Culturally Biased Questions
- Timed Exams Causing Stress & Anxiety
- Limited Availability to Prep Due to Work & Sports
- Pressure to Achieve High Scores
- Lack of Preparatory Resources

Figure 4.1 Challenges with Standardized Testing
Conditional Admission

Conditional admission emerged as a prominent aspect of the participants’ experiences with the college admissions process. Larry described receiving conditional acceptance to his chosen institution, reflecting on the significance of this opportunity by stating, “I was grateful for the chance to prove myself beyond just test scores.” James similarly recounted the process of seeking admission through alternative means, stating, “I had to write a letter... almost pleading my case.”

All three participants shared common experiences of being negatively impacted by conditional admission to their preferred institutions, a circumstance that has had significant repercussions for their academic trajectories and overall college experiences. This shared challenge manifested in several interconnected ways, each contributing to a sense of frustration, financial strain, and uncertainty about their future prospective graduations. First, conditional admission entailed the requirement for each of them to enroll in remedial courses, which are not counted toward their major or graduation credits. For all three participants, this sacrifice means investing time and resources in coursework that do not directly contribute to their academic progress or degree requirements. Instead of advancing in their chosen fields of study, they have found themselves compelled to address perceived deficiencies in their academic preparation, hindering their ability to pursue their intended majors and graduate on time within four years. Larry said, “Taking remedial courses has been tough because it feels like I’m starting behind everyone else. It’s a little embarrassing, you know, to realize that my ACT score determined what classes I’m taking, regardless of my actual abilities.” Henry shared, “Having to take remedial courses because of my ACT score is a little discouraging. It makes me feel like I’m not really prepared for college, even though I worked so hard in high school and earned good
grades.” James said, “It's hard having to take these extra courses just because of my ACT score. I feel like I’m being held back, especially when I see other students moving ahead without needing to take these classes. I’ll probably try to go to summer school to catch up, but I know that’ll cost more money. I’ll figure it out.”

Moreover, the additional tuition fees associated with remedial courses posed a significant financial burden for the participants, who already hailed from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Larry and James were both acutely aware of the financial constraints facing their families and sought to minimize the financial strain associated with their college education. However, the unexpected expense of remedial courses further stretched their limited resources, forcing them to make difficult choices about their educational priorities and financial responsibilities. James said, “Knowing I have to pay these extra tuition fees for these low-level classes seems a little unfair to me. I’m trying to figure out how to cover the additional costs of these remedial courses while also trying to manage my other expenses since my scholarship only covers so much for so long.” Larry expressed his concern about the additional tuition costs required, saying, “Taking remedial courses means paying extra tuition fees, which is tough because I’m already struggling financially. It does add to the stress of trying to make ends meet while pursuing my education.” Henry shared a similar sentiment, saying, “Having to pay for remedial courses on top of regular tuition is crazy to me. It makes me worry about how I will be able to afford my other expenses, like my textbooks and living expenses, while I’m here. I’m sure something will work out though.”

Furthermore, conditional admission has potentially resulted in a delayed graduation date beyond the projected four years for all three participants. By diverting their time and energy toward remedial coursework, all three participants are at risk of falling behind their peers and
extending their time to degree completion. This outlook was particularly concerning given the participants’ aspirations for academic and professional success, as delays in graduation could hinder their ability to enter the workforce or pursue advanced degrees in a more timely manner as compared to their peers who were not admitted conditionally. Larry expressed his concern, saying, “I think taking these remedial courses might delay my graduation. It’s a little frustrating because I really want to graduate on time and start my career, but my advisor said these remedial classes are required to catch up, unless I can find the money to go to summer school.” Henry said, “I really don't want to fall behind and spend more time and money on school than I have to, but I need these courses to advance in my major. So, I’m just doing what it takes to graduate, even if it means taking a little longer than expected.” James said, “I'm trying to stay optimistic, but there’s always that little fear of not graduating on time, whatever that means. It’s tough knowing that some of my friends will finish in four years while I might need more time because of these remedial courses. I’m still determined to get it done though.”

The narratives of conditional admission demonstrate the importance of holistic review processes in evaluating applicants beyond standardized test scores. The participants’ experiences highlight the significance of perseverance and advocacy in overcoming initial setbacks and gaining admission to their desired institutions even with unfortunate sacrifices, such as taking remedial courses, increased tuition fees, and potentially delayed graduations.

**Family and Community Support Combined with Personal Growth and Resilience**

All three participants in the study faced formidable challenges during their postsecondary admission processes, including struggles with standardized testing and conditional admission. However, each participant demonstrated resilience and determination, drawing upon a combination of family and community support, as well as their own personal growth and
strengths, to overcome these obstacles and secure admission to their preferred institutions. Each participant emphasized the role of family and community support in their journey towards higher education. Henry credited his family for providing encouragement and guidance, stating, “My parents played a significant role in supporting my decision to pursue college.” James shared this same sentiment, acknowledging the influence of his mentors and counselors by stating, “Just having those people by my side made it worthwhile to go through those obstacles.”

Family and community support played a pivotal role in all three participants’ journeys toward postsecondary education. All of them emphasized the instrumental role that their families and communities played in providing encouragement, guidance, and practical assistance throughout the college application process. Whether it was parents, guardians, mentors, or community leaders, the participants benefited from a network of individuals who believed in their potential and offered unwavering support during challenging times. Their support systems provided the participants with emotional resilience, motivation, and a sense of belonging, empowering them to navigate the complexities of the college admissions landscape with confidence and determination. “Having mentors and role models from my community who I knew had already gone through the college admissions process actually inspired me to believe in myself and my own abilities. They showed me that it’s possible to overcome challenges and achieve my goals, regardless of how I did on a test,” Henry said.

In addition to external support, the participants also leveraged their own personal growth and strengths to overcome admission challenges. Each participant demonstrated a diverse skill set and a well-rounded profile that extended beyond their college entrance exam scores. Larry showcased his strong work ethic and time management skills through his part-time job, which not only provides financial support, but it also demonstrates his ability to balance multiple
responsibilities effectively. “My family and community have really supported me and lifted me up when I needed it most because it has been hard. Their belief in me motivates me to keep going and to do whatever is necessary to finish my degree,” Henry said. Henry even highlighted his athletic prowess in basketball, underscoring his commitment to excellence, teamwork, and leadership both on and off the court. Similarly, James excels in football, leveraging his athletic achievements to showcase his discipline, determination, and ability to perform under pressure.

Moreover, all three participants emphasized their above-average grades as a testament to their academic aptitude and commitment to excellence. Despite facing challenges with standardized testing, the participants demonstrated their academic capabilities through consistent academic performance and a strong academic record. By emphasizing their grades and academic achievements, the participants were able to present a more comprehensive and compelling narrative of their abilities and potential to college admissions committees.

The participants exhibited resilience by refusing to let their ACT scores define their worth or limit their postsecondary aspirations. Despite facing challenges with the ACT, they persevered and continued to pursue their goals with determination and tenacity. Rather than allowing their lower scores to discourage them, they used these setbacks as opportunities for growth and self-improvement. This resilience enabled them to navigate the college admissions process with confidence and persistence, even in the face of adversity.

Additionally, Larry and James demonstrated personal growth by recognizing the importance of seeking alternative pathways to achieve their educational goals. Instead of being deterred by their conditional admissions, they approached the situation with practicality and resourcefulness, actively seeking out opportunities to address their academic deficiencies and enhance their college readiness. James used his athletic abilities to earn a scholarship to play on
his university’s football team. His willingness to adapt and learn from his experiences reflects a significant level of personal growth and maturity, as he recognized the need to take ownership of his postsecondary academic journey and actively pursue other strategies for admission success. Henry said, “I’ve already faced some setbacks along the way, but I refuse to let them define me. I’m using them as learning opportunities to become more disciplined so that I can finish and make my family proud.”

Furthermore, all three participants displayed resilience in the face of systemic inequities within the college admissions process. Despite attending high schools with fewer resources and support services compared to their more affluent peers, they refused to be defined by their circumstances or limited by the constraints of their environment. Instead, they leveraged their strengths, sought out support networks, and advocated for themselves in order to overcome barriers and pursue their postsecondary educational aspirations. This resilience highlights their ability to navigate complex systems and advocate for their own interests, despite facing structural barriers and systemic inequalities.

Throughout their narratives, as highlighted in Figure 4.2, all three participants demonstrated resilience and personal growth in the face of adversity. Larry reflected on his journey, stating, “I’ve learned to persevere and advocate for myself in challenging situations.” Similarly, James highlighted the transformative nature of his college admissions experience, saying, “It was challenging, but it’s also making me a better person every day.” These narratives also underscore the importance of a strong support network in navigating the college admissions process. The participants relied on the encouragement and guidance of their communities to overcome challenges and pursue their educational aspirations. These narratives also highlight the transformative potential of higher education in fostering resilience and personal development.
Despite encountering obstacles, this research study’s participants embraced the challenges of the college experience, emerging stronger and more resilient individuals.

**Cultural and Social Transitions**

All three participants faced significant cultural and social transitions as they sought admission into predominantly White institutions (PWIs) located in more affluent areas after coming from urban communities primarily populated with other Black people and attending predominantly Black high schools. These transitions required them to navigate unfamiliar environments, interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds, and adapt to new academic and social norms. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated resilience and determination in their efforts to succeed, leveraging their strengths and seeking out support networks to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals.

Larry and James shared experiences of cultural and social transitions as they navigated PWIs. Larry described the cultural shock of transitioning from his urban community to a PWI, stating, “It was a culture shock. I didn’t know how to approach people who didn’t look like me.” Larry went on to say, “Coming from a predominantly Black high school to a PWI was a big adjustment for me. All of a sudden, I was in classes where I was one of the few Black students, and it was just a different environment altogether.” This shift in demographic composition presented social and cultural challenges for Larry as he adjusted to a new academic and social environment. Larry’s challenges with the ACT compounded his sense of social transition. The stress and pressure associated with preparing for and taking the exam may have weakened his ability to fully engage in social activities and integrate into the new academic environment. Since Larry’s test scores were lower than desired, it further affected his confidence and sense of belonging, exacerbating the difficulties of his social transition.
Figure 4.2 Support, Personal Growth, and Resilience
James similarly reflected on the challenges of adapting to a new social environment, stating, “It was nerve-wracking... not being around people who looked like me.” James went on to say, “It was definitely a culture shock for me when I first got here. I went from a tight-knit community where everyone knew each other to a big university where I felt like just another face in the crowd.” James experienced a sense of disorientation and isolation upon transitioning to a larger university setting. This shift in social environment required James to develop new social skills and strategies to navigate the complexities of college life. James’ encounter with college entrance exams may have influenced his social transition by affecting his initial sense of confidence and belonging in the new environment. Because James faced challenges with his college entrance exam, such as feeling unprepared and encountering culturally biased questions, it contributed to feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome upon entering college. Furthermore, since James’ test scores did not meet the expectations of his current institution, it influenced his social interactions and perceptions of acceptance within the academic community.

Henry shared, “Being at a PWI was like stepping into a whole new world. I had to navigate social dynamics that I just wasn’t used to, and sometimes it felt like I didn’t fit in.” Henry’s experience of feeling like an outsider in the social dynamics of a PWI suggests that he had to adapt to unfamiliar social norms and interactions, contributing to the challenges of his social transition. For Henry, his experiences with college entrance exams influenced his social navigation by shaping his perception of academic preparedness and competence. Because Henry struggled with his college entrance exam, he entered college with doubts about his academic abilities, which impacted his interactions with peers and faculty. Moreover, since Henry’s ACT scores were not competitive, they limited his access to certain academic programs or resources, further complicating his social transition.
These narratives highlight the importance of diversity and inclusivity in higher education and highlight the challenges faced by students from underrepresented backgrounds in navigating predominantly White institutions. One of the key cultural and social adjustments these participants needed to make was adapting to the academic rigor and expectations of their new environments. Coming from predominantly Black high schools with fewer resources and support services, they faced challenges in acclimating to the academic demands of PWIs, which often had different standards of excellence and more rigorous curricula. Additionally, they had to navigate cultural differences in teaching styles, classroom dynamics, and academic norms, which required them to develop new strategies for learning and academic success. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated resilience by seeking out academic support services, forming study groups, and leveraging their personal strengths to excel in their coursework.

Furthermore, all three participants had to navigate social transitions as they adjusted to life in predominantly White environments. This adjustment involved navigating cultural differences, building relationships with peers from different backgrounds, and negotiating their identities within new social contexts. They faced challenges, such as feeling like outsiders or experiencing microaggressions based on their race, which required them to develop coping strategies and resilience in order to thrive in their new environments. Henry said, “It was challenging to connect with my classmates initially, especially since I felt like I didn’t have much in common with them. But, over time, I learned to appreciate our differences and found ways to build relationships with people.” James said, “At first, it was intimidating to be in such a diverse environment at first, but I quickly realized that there was so much I could learn from my peers. We may have come from different backgrounds, but we are all here for the same reason – to get an education.” Larry said, “I remember feeling a bit out of place at first, especially in
social settings where I was one of the few Black students. It was like I had to navigate between two worlds – my home community and this new school environment.” Despite these obstacles, they demonstrated resilience by actively engaging in campus activities, forming connections with peers and mentors, and advocating for their needs within their new communities.

Additionally, these participants had to navigate financial challenges, including limited resources and financial aid opportunities, which further compounded their social and cultural transitions. They faced barriers such as the high cost of tuition, textbook expenses, and living costs, which required them to make sacrifices and seek out additional sources of support in order to afford their education. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated resilience by seeking out scholarships, grants, and part-time employment opportunities, as well as forming networks of support with family, friends, and community members to help alleviate financial burdens and ensure their continued success. James said, “I knew that having enough money would be a challenge, so I’ve been making it a priority to apply for as many scholarships and grants as possible. It takes a lot of time and effort, but I am determined to find ways to help pay for my education in addition to football.” Larry said, “My family and church have pitched in to help cover some of my expenses. I’ve looked for additional scholarships and grants wherever I can. It’s been a lot of work, but I can’t let money stand in the way of my education.” Henry said, “I’ve been looking for other part-time jobs in the community as well as work study on campus. It isn’t easy, but I know that any extra money will help ease the financial burden on my family.”

Conclusion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the experiences of young Black male students in navigating the college admissions process. Themes of standardized testing challenges, conditional admission, community support, family and community support combined
with personal growth and resilience, and cultural and social transitions emerge as central aspects of each participant’s journey. These findings emphasize the complexities and nuances of the college admissions process and highlight the importance of holistic support mechanisms in facilitating access to higher education for young Black males, particularly from urban communities in Tennessee.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

This chapter serves as the culmination of an in-depth exploration into the experiences of young Black males from urban communities in Tennessee regarding their postsecondary opportunities shaped by college entrance exam scores. Throughout this research study, I have delved into the complexities of standardized testing, the challenges of navigating the college admissions process, and the resilience demonstrated by participants in the face of systemic barriers. Building upon the findings presented in Chapter Four, Chapter Five aims to synthesize these insights and draw meaningful conclusions that contribute to ongoing discussions on equity and social justice in education. Through an analysis of the themes and narratives uncovered in this narrative qualitative study, this chapter seeks to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to address systemic inequities and promote equitable access to higher education for young Black males. By highlighting the voices and experiences of a marginalized population, this research study advocates for transformative changes in educational policies and practices, ultimately striving to create a more inclusive and equitable postsecondary educational landscape for all students, especially young Black males.

The person factors that align with Kristof-Brown’s person-environment fit theoretical framework include the academic aptitude, motivation, aspirations, and sociocultural background of the young Black males participating in the study. Standardized testing, such as college entrance exams like the ACT or SAT, serves as a crucial component of assessing their academic readiness for postsecondary education. However, as evidenced by the experiences of the participants, standardized testing presents significant challenges for many young Black males.
Factors such as test anxiety, limited access to test preparation resources, and cultural biases inherent in the exams can impact their performance. These challenges highlight the individual characteristics and experiences of the participants within the context of standardized testing.

The environment factors encompass the characteristics of the educational settings in which the young Black males are trying to gain entry, such as the postsecondary institutions of their choice. The participants’ experiences shed light on the quality of preparatory resources, teacher support, and curriculum offerings within their high school environments. Additionally, the admission criteria and practices of higher education institutions play a significant role in shaping their postsecondary experiences. The demands of standardized testing as part of the admission process, alongside other factors, such as GPA and extracurricular activities, contribute to the overall environment in which these young men navigate their educational pathways.

By examining the challenges with college entrance exams, through the lens of person-environment fit theory, we gain a deeper understanding of how individual characteristics interact with the educational contexts in which young Black males are situated. This perspective highlights the importance of creating environments that foster academic success and support the diverse needs of all students, regardless of their background or circumstances. The concept of person-environment fit, according to Kristof-Brown (2013), emphasizes the alignment between individual characteristics and environmental demands and resources. In the context of this study, the misalignment between the test-taking abilities of young Black males and the demand of standardized testing reflects a lack of person-environment fit. This misfit can lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and disengagement from the educational process. Moreover, it highlights the need for educational environments to be more inclusive, supportive, and culturally responsive to the diverse needs of young Black males.
The findings highlight the inadequacy of preparatory resources in urban high schools, which often lack the funding and support necessary to provide comprehensive test preparation programs, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. This lack of resources puts these students at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in more affluent areas who may have access to private tutoring or well-funded test preparation courses. The findings also reveal the time constraints faced by young Black males due to their obligations outside of academics, such as part-time jobs and involvement in sports. These extracurricular activities limit the amount of time these students can dedicate to studying for standardized tests, further exacerbating the disparities in test scores. The findings underscore the cultural bias inherent in standardized tests like the ACT, which may present questions or scenarios unfamiliar to students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This cultural bias can unfairly penalize young Black males, influencing their test scores and consequently their opportunities for postsecondary education.

College entrance exams can inadvertently contain culturally biased questions due to the inherent biases of the test creators or the cultural context in which the test is developed. Questions that rely heavily on vocabulary or language structures that are more common in certain cultural or socioeconomic groups can disadvantage students from different backgrounds. For example, a question that uses idiomatic expressions or colloquialisms specific to a particular region or social group may confuse students who are not familiar with those expressions. Questions that reference specific cultural events, historical figures, or literary works that are more familiar to certain groups can disadvantage students from other cultural backgrounds. For instance, a question that assumes familiarity with a particular historical event or literary text without providing adequate context may be more difficult for students who have not been exposed to that cultural reference.
Furthermore, questions that assume a certain level of exposure to resources or experiences that are more common among students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds can disadvantage students from lower-income backgrounds. For example, a question that references a leisure activity or hobby that requires financial resources, such as vacationing or fine dining, may be easier for students who can afford those activities. Questions that reflect the norms, values, or perspectives of a dominant culture may be unfamiliar or even contradictory to students from different cultural backgrounds. For example, a question that presents a scenario based on Western cultural norms of individualism may not resonate with students from cultures that prioritize collectivism. To mitigate these biases, test creators should strive to develop exams that are culturally fair and inclusive by carefully reviewing questions for potential biases, diversifying the content to reflect a range of cultural perspectives, providing adequate context for cultural references, and considering the experiences and backgrounds of all test takers during the test development process.

The “Conditional Admission” theme aligns closely with Kristof-Brown’s person-environment fit theory. According to Kristof-Brown (2013), person-environment fit theory seeks to understand and predict individuals’ attitudes and behavior by comparing internal aspects of the person to relevant elements of the external environment. In the context of conditional admission experienced by the participants, person factors, such as their academic aptitude, motivation, aspirations, and sociocultural background, play a crucial role, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. These factors include their performance on college entrance exams like the ACT, their high school grades, and their extracurricular involvements. The participants’ experiences with conditional admission reflect how their personal characteristics intersect with the demands and resources of the college environment. Additionally, environmental factors encompass the
characteristics of the setting or context in which the participants operate. This alignment includes the college admission processes, the policies of higher education institutions, and the availability of support services. The participants’ encounters with conditional admission shed light on how these environmental factors shape their postsecondary opportunities.

The concept of person-environment fit emphasizes the alignment between individuals’ person factors and the demands and resources of their environments. In the case of conditional admission, the fit between the participants’ academic abilities, aspirations, and the admission criteria of colleges determines their likelihood of success. Conditional admission represents a mismatch between the participants’ person factors and the expectations of the college environment, highlighting the importance of achieving a better fit to enhance their academic outcomes. The examination of conditional admission through the lens of the person-environment fit theory provides valuable insights into the interactions between individuals and their educational contexts. By analyzing how personal characteristics interact with institutional demands and resources, this framework helps elucidate the challenges faced by young Black males in accessing and succeeding in postsecondary education.

The “Family and Community Support Combined with Personal Growth and Resilience” theme also aligns closely with Kristof-Brown’s person-environment fit theory. In the context of family and community support, the participants’ person factors, such as their upbringing, values, and relationships, have a major impact on their postsecondary opportunities, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. These factors encompass the support they receive from family members, mentors, and community leaders, as well as their own ability to adapt and grow in response to challenges. The participants’ experiences with navigating the college admissions process demonstrate how their personal characteristics interact with the social environment in which they operate.
Additionally, environmental factors encompass the characteristics of the setting or context in which the participants operate, including the availability of support systems and resources within their communities. This alignment includes the role of schools, community organizations, and other social networks in providing guidance and assistance to the participants. The participants’ encounters with family and community support illustrate how these environmental factors contribute to their personal growth and resilience.

The concept of person-environment fit emphasizes the alignment between individuals’ person factors and the demands and resources of their environments. In the case of family and community support, the fit between the participants’ personal characteristics and the supportive networks available to them determines their ability to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. The presence of strong support systems enhances the participants’ capacity to navigate the challenges of the college admissions process and pursue postsecondary opportunities.

Overall, the examination of family and community support combined with personal growth and resilience through the lens of person-environment fit theory provides valuable insights into the interactions between individuals and their social contexts. By analyzing how personal characteristics interact with supportive environments, this framework helps explain the role of social support in facilitating access to higher education and fostering academic success among young Black males.

The “Cultural and Social Transitions” theme closely aligns with Kristof-Brown’s person-environment fit theory as well. In the context of cultural and social transitions, the participants’ personal factors, such as their cultural background, values, and social identities, play a crucial role. These factors encompass the cultural norms, traditions, and social networks that shape the participants’ identities and experiences. The participants’ encounters with cultural and social
transitions illustrate how their personal characteristics interact with the cultural and social environments in which they operate. Additionally, environmental factors encompass the characteristics of the setting or context in which the participants operate, including the cultural and social dynamics of their new environments, as illustrated in Figure 5.1. This includes the cultural climate, social norms, and demographic composition of the communities and institutions the participants transition into. The participants’ experiences with cultural and social transitions highlight how these environmental factors influence their sense of belonging and adaptation.

The concept of person-environment fit emphasizes the alignment between individuals’ person factors and the demands and resources of their environments. In the case of cultural and social transitions, the fit between the participants’ personal characteristics and the cultural and social environments they encounter determines their ability to navigate and adapt to new circumstances. The presence of supportive cultural and social contexts enhances the participants’ capacity to overcome cultural barriers and integrate into their new environments.

Overall, the examination of cultural and social transitions through the lens of person-environment fit theory provides valuable insights into the interactions between individuals and their cultural and social contexts. By analyzing how personal characteristics interact with cultural and social environments, this framework helps expound on the role of cultural adaptation and social integration in facilitating successful transitions and promoting academic success among young Black males.
Figure 5.1 *Person-Environment Fit Theory’s Link to the Findings*
This study’s “Challenges with Standardized Testing” theme ties back to the “ACT and SAT Testing Content and the Impact on College Admissions” in the literature review. This study shows how young Black males faced difficulties with standardized tests like the ACT, which the literature review already implied could impact their chances of getting into college. The “Conditional Admission” theme of this study connects to the theme of “Testing Disparities, Educational Inequalities, and Reform Efforts” from the literature review. This study reveals how conditional admission has affected these young men’s academic paths, which aligns with the literature review’s discussion on testing disparities and educational inequalities, suggesting that reform efforts might be needed to address these issues.

The “Family and Community Support Combined with Personal Growth and Resilience” theme of this study relates to the theme of “College Readiness and Career Aspirations versus Parental Education and Support” in the literature review. This study’s findings illustrate how family and community support played a crucial role in these young men’s journeys to higher education, which echoes the literature review’s emphasis on parental education and support as factors influencing the young men’s college readiness and career aspirations. The “Cultural and Social Transitions” theme from this study’s findings can be linked to the theme of “Graduation Requirements and College Readiness Metrics in Tennessee Schools” from the literature review. This study highlights how transitioning to predominantly White institutions posed challenges for the participating young Black males, which aligns with the literature review’s discussion on college readiness metrics and suggests that more attention should be paid to preparing students for such cultural and social transitions.
Limitations

Several limitations were present in this study. First, this study focused solely on the experiences of three participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from the participants, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias, potentially affecting the accuracy of the information provided. Moreover, the study exclusively explored the perspectives of young Black males, overlooking the experiences of other demographic groups who may also face challenges with college entrance exams and the college admissions process. Furthermore, the study did not investigate the perspectives of college admissions officers or educators, which could provide valuable insights into institutional practices and policies. Lastly, the study was conducted within a specific geographic location, potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to other regions with different educational contexts and demographics.

Implications

The findings of this study carry several implications for both research and practice in the field of higher education, particularly concerning the experiences of young Black males in the college admissions process as a result of their college entrance exam scores.

Need for Equitable Access and Support Services

This study underscores the importance of equitable access to resources and support services for students from underrepresented backgrounds. High schools and postsecondary institutions should prioritize providing adequate support for standardized testing preparation, academic advising, and financial aid to level the playing field for all applicants. This approach implies a need for targeted interventions and policies aimed at addressing systemic barriers and promoting inclusivity in higher education.
Importance of Culturally Responsive Practices

This study highlights the significance of adopting culturally responsive practices in college admissions and support services. Postsecondary institutions should recognize and address the cultural biases present in standardized testing and admission criteria, ensuring that assessment tools and processes are fair and inclusive. This thought implies a need for ongoing training and professional development for admissions officers and educators to enhance cultural competence and sensitivity.

Promotion of Resilience and Advocacy Skills

The findings underscore the resilience and advocacy skills demonstrated by young Black males in navigating the college admissions process. Postsecondary institutions should foster a supportive and empowering environment that encourages students to advocate for themselves and seek out resources to overcome obstacles. This consideration implies a need for mentoring programs, peer support networks, and leadership development initiatives that empower students to navigate challenges and pursue their educational goals with confidence.

Advocacy for Policy Reform

Finally, the findings call for advocacy efforts aimed at policy reform to promote equity and inclusion in higher education. Policymakers should evaluate existing policies related to standardized testing, admissions criteria, financial aid, and support services to identify areas for improvement and implement reforms that address systemic inequalities. This notion implies a need for community engagement, advocacy campaigns, and legislative action to provoke meaningful change at the postsecondary institutional and systemic levels.
Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this research study, several recommendations for future research can be proposed to further explore and address the challenges faced by young Black males in navigating the college admissions process and succeeding in postsecondary education. These recommendations include:

1. *Longitudinal Studies*: Conduct longitudinal studies to track the academic trajectories and outcomes of young Black males from urban communities over an extended period. By following participants from high school through college and beyond, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of conditional admission, standardized testing challenges, and cultural transitions on their academic and career success.

2. *Intersectional Analysis*: Explore the intersectionality of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identity factors in shaping the experiences of young Black males in higher education. By examining how multiple dimensions of identity intersect and influence educational opportunities and outcomes, researchers can develop more nuanced interventions and support strategies tailored to the unique needs of this population.

3. *Comparative Studies*: Conduct comparative studies to analyze the college admissions experiences of young Black males in different geographic regions, educational contexts, and institutional settings. By comparing the experiences of participants from diverse backgrounds, researchers can identify common challenges and promising practices that may inform policy and practice across various educational contexts.

4. *Intervention Studies*: Design and implement targeted interventions to address the systemic barriers and inequities identified in this research study. Interventions may include academic support programs, mentorship initiatives, culturally relevant curriculum
development, and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting equitable access to higher education for young Black males.

5. **Policy Analysis:** Analyze existing policies and practices related to college admissions, standardized testing, and financial aid to identify areas for reform and improvement. By examining the impact of current policies on the educational opportunities and outcomes of young Black males, researchers can advocate for policy changes that promote equity and inclusion in higher education.

Overall, future research should aim to build on the findings of this study and contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions, policies, and practices that support the academic success and well-being of young Black males in higher education. By addressing the systemic barriers and inequities identified in this research, scholars can work towards creating more equitable and inclusive educational environments for all students.

**Conclusion**

This narrative qualitative study has provided a comprehensive examination of the experiences of young Black males from urban communities in Tennessee concerning their postsecondary opportunities shaped by college entrance exam scores. Through an in-depth exploration of standardized testing challenges, conditional admission practices, family and community support, and cultural and social transitions, this study has shed light on the complexities and inequities inherent in the college admissions process.

The discussion in Chapter Five synthesized these insights and drew meaningful conclusions, highlighting the importance of equitable access to resources and support services, the adoption of culturally responsive practices, the promotion of resilience and advocacy skills, and the need for policy reform in higher education. By amplifying the voices and experiences of
a marginalized population, this research advocates for transformative changes in educational policies and practices, aiming to create a more inclusive and equitable postsecondary educational landscape for all students, especially young Black males.

Despite the limitations inherent in the study, such as its focus on a small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, the implications drawn from the findings offer valuable guidance for future research and practice in the field of higher education. Recommendations for longitudinal studies, intersectional analyses, comparative studies, intervention studies, and policy analyses provide a roadmap for addressing systemic barriers and promoting equity and inclusion in higher education.

In summary, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on equity and social justice in education, urging policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to take action to dismantle systemic inequities and create more equitable pathways to postsecondary success for young Black males and other underrepresented groups. By building on the insights and recommendations presented in this study, we can work towards a future where all students have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed in higher education.
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APPENDIX A

Interview Questionnaire

Questions
1. How did you make your decision about which college to attend?
2. Describe how your high school prepared you for college-level academics.
3. Tell me about your experience with college entrance exams.
4. Describe the successes or challenges that you are experiencing now that you are attending college.
5. What made you feel good about or regret your experience with your college admissions process?
6. What advice would you offer to someone from a similar cultural background as yours who is contemplating the decision to attend college?
APPENDIX B

One-Page Overview Flyer for Social Media

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**Postsecondary Opportunities for Young Black Males from Urban Communities:**
The Barriers of College Entrance Exams

**About the Researcher:**
As a proud Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) alum and the current CEO of Business Professionals of America, I am embarking on a doctoral research study at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. My focus is on the postsecondary experiences of young Black males, aiming to shed light on the challenges and decision-making processes they face, as a result of their college entrance exams.

**Purpose of the Study:**
This research seeks to contribute valuable perspectives to college admissions counselors, recruiters, and policymakers by examining the impact of college entrance exam scores on postsecondary opportunities for young Black males. By understanding their experiences, I am aiming to enhance college admissions counseling programs and foster equity in education, particularly for young Black males.

**Key Objectives:**
- Explore the decision-making processes of young Black males in pursuit of postsecondary education.
- Identify challenges faced by these individuals during their educational journey.
- Provide insights to inform policies promoting equity in education.

**Seeking Your Support:**
I am reaching out to the community to help identify recent MSCS graduates (class of 2023) who currently attend the University of Memphis, Vanderbilt University, or the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Your referrals are crucial in tailoring college admissions counseling and readiness programs to the specific needs of students, particularly young Black males.

**Participant Compensation:**
Selected participants will be compensated $30 per hour for their time (maximum two hours) in the form of an Amazon, Kroger, or Target gift card after fully completing the study.

**Deadline for Referrals:**
Please provide names and contact information by Wednesday, February 28, 2024, at 5:00 PM CT.

**How You Can Help:**
- Share this flyer with potential participants.
- Forward my contact information for direct outreach.
- Your support is key to advancing this important research!

**Contact Information:**

 Steven J. Mitchell, MS, MAEd
 Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
 Email: Steven.Mitchell@tennessee.edu
 Mobile: (613) 359-2141
 LinkedIn: StevenJMitchell
 Facebook: StevenJMitchell11
 Instagram: StevenMitchell11

 Pamela Angelie, Ph.D.
 Professor
 Director of Graduate Studies
 Higher Education Administration PhD Program Coordinator
 Higher Education Masters Program Coordinator
 Email: PAngelie@utk.edu
 Office: (865) 974-4139

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#Share #Invitation #EducationResearch #SupportOurStudents #EquityInEducation #YoungBlackMales
APPENDIX C

Sample Referral Request Email

 Subject: Request for Referrals of Recent [High School Name] Graduates for Doctoral Research Study

Hi [Principal's Name or School Counselor's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. I am a class of 2001 alumnus of Memphis-Shelby County Schools, where I graduated as the salutatorian of Trezevant High School. Since 2022, I have been serving as the CEO of Business Professionals of America, an international student organization with over 50,000 members worldwide. Prior to my current role, I worked for the Tennessee Department of Education for nearly seven years. Prior to my tenure with TDOE, I was a dedicated classroom teacher for MScS at Whitehaven High School for over five years.

Today, I am reaching out to you in my capacity as a doctoral candidate pursuing an Ed.D. in educational leadership at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. My doctoral research study focuses on the experiences of young Black males from urban communities regarding their postsecondary opportunities based on their college entrance exam scores. The purpose of this study is to explore the decision-making processes and challenges faced by young Black males during their pursuit of postsecondary education. The significance lies in providing additional perspectives for college admissions counselors, recruiters, and policymakers to consider when assessing the impact of college entrance exam scores on the postsecondary opportunities for young Black males.

[Principal's Name or School Counselor's Name], I am seeking your assistance in identifying recent class of 2023 Black male graduates from [High School Name], aged 18 to 20, who currently attend either the University of Memphis, Vanderbilt University, or the University of Tennessee Knoxville. Your referrals will play a crucial role in tailoring college admissions counseling and readiness programs to the specific needs of students, thereby increasing retention rates and fostering a deeper understanding of the college admissions process for future young Black male students. The findings from this study aim to contribute to the academic community’s understanding of college matriculation experiences for young Black males and may lead to positive changes in policies promoting equity in education.

I kindly request your support in forwarding this email and my contact information to any recent [High School Mascot] graduates who may be eligible to participate in this study and encourage them to reach out to me directly. Each of the selected participants will be paid $50 per hour of his time (Amazon, Kroger, or Target e-gift card) after fully completing the study and without having to commit more than two hours. I would appreciate receiving your referrals no later than Wednesday, February 28, 2024, at 5:00 PM CT.

Thank you for assisting me on the journey in advancing this important research.

Best regards,

Steven J Mitchell, MS, MAEd
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
Email: Steven.Mitchell@tennessee.edu
Mobile: (615) 359-2141
LinkedIn: StevenMitchell
Facebook: StevenMitchell11
Instagram: StevenMitchell

Pamela Angelle, Ph.D.
Professor
Director of Graduate Studies
Higher Education Administration PhD Program Coordinator
Higher Education Masters Program Coordinator
Email: PAngelle@utk.edu
Office: (865) 974-4139
APPENDIX D

Sample Invitation Correspondence for Prospective Participant

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Hi [Young Black Male’s Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Steven J. Mitchell, and I am a doctoral candidate pursuing an Ed.D. in educational leadership at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. I recently reached out to [Principal’s Name or School Counselor’s Name] at [High School Name], seeking their support in identifying young Black males from the class of 2023 who might be eligible to participate in my research study.

Your name was kindly provided as a potential participant in my study, which focuses on the experiences of young Black males from urban communities in relation to their postsecondary opportunities based on their college entrance exam scores.

The purpose of this study is to delve into the decision-making processes and challenges faced by young Black males during their pursuit of postsecondary education. By participating in this study, your unique insights will contribute significantly to the academic community’s understanding of college matriculation experiences, particularly for young Black males. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform college admissions counselors, recruiters, and policymakers, leading to positive changes in policies promoting equity in education, especially for young Black males like yourself.

If you are interested in being a part of this study or know someone who might be, please reach out to me directly. Participation in this study will be conducted virtually via ZOOM to ensure flexibility, convenience, and privacy for each participant. Each participant selected will be compensated with $50 per hour (Amazon, Kroger, or Target e-gift card) for his valuable time after fully completing the study, without having to commit more than two hours.

I am sincerely grateful for your consideration and support in advancing this vital research. The deadline for referrals or signing up to be a study participant is Wednesday, February 28, 2024, at 5:00 PM CT. Your involvement will undoubtedly contribute to empowering future young Black males through a quality higher education.

Thank you, and I look forward to the possibility of your participation.

Warmest regards,

Steven J. Mitchell, MS, MAEd
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
Email: Steven.Mitchell@tennessee.edu
Mobile: (615) 359-2141
LinkedIn: StevenMitchell
Facebook: StevenMitchell1
Instagram: StevenMitchell1

Pamela Angelle, Ph.D.
Professor
Director of Graduate Studies
Higher Education Administration PhD Program Coordinator
Higher Education Masters Program Coordinator
Email: PAngelle@utk.edu
Office: (865) 974-4139

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APPENDIX E

Sample Next Steps Correspondence for Selected Participant (Informed Consent and Interview Scheduling)

Subject: Follow-Up :: Informed Consent and Interview Scheduling

Hi, [Young Black Male’s Name]!

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my research study. Your perspective is highly valued, and I’m so excited to embark on this journey with you.

To move forward, please find the attached informed consent form for your immediate review. Read the document carefully, sign it, and email it back to me within the next 48 hours. If you have any questions or concerns during this period, please feel free to contact me via email or phone at any time. Your understanding and agreement to the informed consent are required for your participation in the study.

Once I receive your signed informed consent form back from you, we can proceed to schedule your interview. In the meantime, please provide three combinations of dates and times with your best uninterrupted, one-hour availability to interview with me. Then, I will send over a calendar invite with the ZOOM login credentials you’ll need for the interview soon thereafter. The sooner we can finalize the interview, the better, as I must complete all interviews no later than Friday, March 8, 2024, at 5:00 PM CT.

Thank you for your time and commitment to this research. I am genuinely excited to learn more about your unique experiences, and I look forward to hearing back from you soon!

Steven J. Mitchell, MS, MAEd
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
Email: Steven.Mitchell@tennessee.edu
Mobile: (615) 359-2141
LinkedIn: StevenJMitchell
Facebook: StevenJMitchell
Instagram: StevenJMitchelle11

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VITA

Steven J. Mitchell stands as a beacon of transformative leadership within the realm of education, fervently dedicated to shaping the futures of young minds. Appointed by the esteemed Business Professionals of America (BPA) Board of Trustees as its executive director and CEO in April 2022, Steven assumes a monumental leadership role in guiding over 50,000 members of this international Career and Technical Student Organization (CTSO) toward academic excellence and professional growth. A scholar in his own right, Steven holds a Bachelor of Arts in Communications with a minor in Marketing from the University of Tennessee at Martin, a Master of Science in Integrated Marketing Communications from Roosevelt University, and a Master of Arts in Education from Union University. Completing his Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in May 2024, Steven’s academic pursuits underscore his unwavering commitment to excellence in education. Born and raised in Memphis and currently residing in Nashville, Steven’s deep-rooted mark on the landscape of education serves as a testament to his unwavering dedication to nurturing the next generation of leaders who will leave an indelible imprint on the world.