OXFORD

The Balancing Act of Family and College: Reciprocity and Its Consequences for Black Students

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ABSTRACT

Literature indicates the ways that young adults –especially those from advantaged backgrounds—rely on parents during college and the transition to adulthood. Little research focuses on how the Black family reaches into college and Black college students' provision of support to parents and other kin. The nexus of family and higher education is a rich site for investigating inequalities in educational attainment and outcomes. Based on interviews with Black undergraduates, this paper analyzes variation in familial involvement during college. It shows the ways in which Black students maintain a balancing act to meet academic responsibilities and family obligations. These practices help sustain the families they value but also reproduce class inequalities. The social organization of colleges and families imposes greater costs on disadvantaged students and offers greater benefits for advantaged students. The structure of education and constructions of family diminish obligations to family, narrow family ties, and mystify aspects of dependence, especially for disadvantaged students. Student narratives highlight the broad character of family values that often compete with academic obligations and detract from college immersion. Different forms and patterns of assistance and connection by class and gender are tied to structural resources and cultural differences, such as the place of family, the meaning of self, assessments of who counts as family, and reliance on a norm of one-way giving.

KEYWORDS: race; the family; higher education; inequality; college students.

In the United States, higher education is often posited as the great equalizer or the foundation of meritocracy. Some studies, however, suggest that family background and relationships reproduce inequality in the college age population in a number of ways, including, for example, whether students attend college, what kind of college or university they attend, and their likelihood of graduation (Bailey and Dynarski 2011; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018). Research also suggests that race/ethnicity and social class background remain robust indicators of college completion (Belley, Frenette, and Lochner 2014; Brooms 2017; Dahl and Lochner 2012; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Stephens, Townsend, and Dittmann 2019). "Helicopter parents," who tend to be affluent and educated, remain involved during their children's college years, actively promoting their children's success in a variety of ways (Hamilton 2016; Hofer et al. 2009; Lareau and Cox 2011; Stephens, Dittmann, and Townsend 2017)—a process that helps reproduce inequality between their children and those whose parents who have less education and fewer material resources.

Because the support parents provide for their children is often the focus of discussion, far less research examines the support undergraduates contribute to their families during college. This paper

argues that the support Black students receive from and provide to their families often varies not only by social class but also by gender, and shapes the college experience through the creation of an uneven playing field. Guided by the following research questions, this study asks: 1) What support do Black students give to their families? 2) What support do Black families provide to students? and 3) How does such support – from students to families and families to students – shape the college experience, the families, and inequality? This study employs an intersectional approach, asking whether and how these processes vary by class and gender among Black undergraduates.

This work contributes to and builds new knowledge in the fields of sociology of education and family scholarship in a number of ways, expanding the theoretical lens. First, this paper broadens discussions of family involvement by moving beyond the K–12 years. This paper also contributes to the growing recognition that there is no "post-family" stage when undergraduates enter college. Students remain tied to their families, although the type or amount of involvement varies greatly for students from diverse social class backgrounds. This paper argues that an understanding of Black families means moving away from focusing on a nuclear core of mother, father, and children and emphasizing their ties above all others. Family patterns, especially for families of color, have never neatly fit into such mainstream definitions of family (Cross 2018; Cross et al. 2018; Desmond and Lopez Turley 2009; George Mwangi 2015; Gerstel and Sarkisian 2006). This study extends the view of families to include extended kin and explores variation *among* Black families.

Second, most research on familial giving is portrayed as a one-way process—from adults to children throughout the life course. The lack of literature on reciprocity rests on the premise that young adults do *not* contribute to their families. A limited amount of research on children of color and immigrant students suggests they often play contributive roles for their families (Agius Vallejo 2012; Burton 2007; Dreby 2015; Gohen 2009; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Gonzales 2016; Stack 1974). Just as the flow of remittances among immigrant families have important consequences for both senders and receivers, financial exchanges between college-going children and their families have implications for the educational outcomes—and therefore prospects for social mobility—of the children.

This study takes a closer look at patterns of family reciprocity and family obligation among Black families and young adults during college. This work investigates the financial, practical, and emotional care that family members give to young adults as well as the kinds of support young adults give in return. At the same time, this research emphasizes that while family responsibility may create burdens, making visible family reciprocity highlights the value of personal connections and ties that can play out in families. Moore and Pachon (1985) describe minority populations as prioritizing collective life, especially family well-being, over individual well-being. The give and take that this study finds among Black students and their families, especially among low-income Black students, can be understood as the mutual aid process that is often present in low-income communities.

This paper addresses two contradictory arguments—individualistic and familistic—that emerge from the literature about college students' relationships with their families and home communities. Some studies suggest that students' ability to individuate or separate themselves from family, especially parents, is a source of successful transition into college and of a sense of belonging on campus (Kalsner and Pistole 2003; Mattanah, Hancock, and Brand 2004; Rice et al. 1995). In his now classic theory of college student persistence, Tinto (1993) argues that students who integrate academically and socially into college are more likely to persist through to graduation and that the ability to make the transition successfully is, in many ways, predicated on their ability to separate themselves from prior relationships. This paper shows that Tinto's model places an over-emphasis on the individual and does not take into account the continued centrality of the family during the college years. Increasingly, colleges are creating student support services on their campuses in order to facilitate student integration; however, such services are tailored to match the campus culture and the needs of the "typical" student on campus. These models, much like Tinto's, appear less developed for meeting the individual and family needs of a varied college population. This study normalizes the range of experiences between Black college students and their families.

Other work suggests that the importance of this separation might be gendered (Kane 1998; Sy and Brittian 2008). Astin, Astin, and Sax (2008), for example, argue that it is more important for women than men to sever ties with their families in order to be successful in college. Given prevalent gender typing of household duties, some studies reveal that young women may place more importance upon

assisting their families than do young men (Klein, Graesch, and Izquierdo 2009). Espiritu and Wolf (2001) found that sons are less restricted by their parents and therefore not expected to provide practical assistance to the same degree as daughters, if at all. Dayton et al. (2004), Maramba (2008), and Kane (1998) assert that Latinx and Asian American young women are more likely than young men to be called upon to assist with household chores, translate for their parents, and care for younger siblings. Sy and Brittian (2008) explore the impact of family obligations on Latina, white, and Asian American young women, and found that they engage in duties such as paying bills, disciplining younger siblings, and caring for sick or physically disabled relatives. Winkle-Wagner (2009) finds that Black daughters who are expected to continue to contribute to their families during college experience this tension of having to fulfill multiple and often competing obligations at the same time. Similarly, Goldrick-Rab (2017) finds that low-income women in particular often feel the pull of home and family. No single piece of literature examines the ways in which gender differences between young men and women may have an impact on college students' giving to their families. This paper fills these gaps.

A growing emphasis on college attendance as the most promising route out of poverty and a corresponding focus on moving low-income Americans into postsecondary education have contributed to significant growth in enrollment among the children of low-income families (Goldrick-Rab and Roksa 2008; Haskins et al. 2009). Although growing numbers of young adults from low-income families are choosing to pursue various forms of postsecondary education, scholarship paints a dramatically different picture of their college experiences and academic outcomes compared to their upper-middle class peers (Hofer et al. 2009; Jack 2019; Lareau and Cox 2011; Stephens et al. 2017). Low-income students are far more likely to first enroll in two-year community colleges or less competitive universities closer to home, and to commute to school while living with family or off campus (Bozick, 2007; Goldrick-Rab 2010; Kim and Rury 2011). They also tend to work longer hours (Roksa and Velez 2010), enroll in fewer credits (Choy 2000), and be less engaged in academic and social experiences at college—experiences such as participating in extracurricular activities and study groups, and making friends—which tend to promote greater integration and persistence in college (Astin 1993; Martin Lohfink and Paulsen 2005; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Pike and Kuh, 2005; Tinto, 1993). This paper will show that this is, at least in significant part, a byproduct of low-income students' commitment to family.

Class-based differences in family structure may also play an important role in the level of material assistance low-income families can provide their children. Low-income families are less likely to provide their children with material resources (i.e., monetary resources) (Hill Collins 2005; McLanahan 2004). As a result, children of low-income families are more likely to assume responsibility for their own expenses at much earlier ages (Clydesdale 2007; Schoeni and Ross 2005). This income gap leads low-income college students, for example, to assume far more debt than their upper-middle class peers (Addo, Houle, and Simon 2016; Choy and Berker 2003; Covarrubias et al. 2019; Gladieux and Perna 2005; Goldrick-Rab 2017; Jackson and Reynolds 2013)—money that they feel obligated to share with their families to ensure the families' survival, as this paper will show. Such family interdependence, especially in the form of financial support, caregiving, and guidance is not new. From slavery to the present, research shows the importance of these networks in sustaining Black families, Black communities, and the Black helping tradition (Omi and Winant 2014; Pattillo 2013; Stack 1974).

METHODS

This paper builds on a larger collaborative research project investigating inequalities in family involvement in the lives of college students. In the overarching project, the research team and I conducted more than 200 semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a diverse sample of full-time undergraduates (Black, Latinx, Asian American, and white), between the ages of 18–25, at a predominantly white, public, residential, research institution in the northeastern region of the United States (hereafter, Flagship University). Flagship University is a historically white institution and remains majority white today. Institutional data in the year the interviews were conducted report that the student body was seventy percent white. Asian Americans accounted for slightly over nine percent, Latinx students comprised 5 percent, and Black students made up less than four percent of the undergraduate student population.

We recruited and interviewed students using race matching between researcher and participant. As a self-identified researcher, I recruited and interviewed only Black/African American participants, while co-researchers recruited and interviewed Asian American, Latinx, and white participants. Race matching is a common yet controversial practice (Davis et al. 2017). Seidman (2006) identifies co-race interviewer/interviewee pairs—especially white and Black pairs—to be "problematic" and racial differences to create "difficulties in establishing an effective interviewing relationship" (100). Fontana and Fey (1994) argue that race matching is especially helpful when interviews explicitly ask about racial themes. While our interview guides do not directly ask about race, our in-depth interview approach seeks to "elicit stories and case-oriented narratives" (Miller and Crabtree 1999:189) and probed when students raised race in their narratives. These narratives were likely to include racially explicit accounts of family and college life, especially among Black, Asian American, and Latinx participants attending a historically white university.

Much research adopts a monolithic view of Blacks—often comparing Blacks as a homogeneous group to whites. This study examines the ways Blacks are diverse and far less homogeneous than previously reported, as differences among them are organized by class and gender. Few studies look at what appear to be relatively advantaged Blacks—those who attend college (for exceptions see Dow 2019; Ide et al. 2017; Lareau 2015). Further, most research has focused on comparing Black young adults to white young adults, and it has, as a result, failed to explore the diversity among Blacks that provide a deeper understanding of Black families and differential resource exchanges.

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit students: we obtained a list of all enrolled students from Flagship's Undergraduate Registrar Office. The list included: each student's name, race/ethnicity, age, email address, home address, and grade point average (GPA). In addition, we obtained a university list of all students receiving the federal Pell Grant.

As for social class, initially, the study considered the three oft-used factors of education, occupation, and parental income. However, problems arose with using the latter two. Students knew whether their parents graduated from college. In contrast, students were often unsure of their parent's occupations beyond a broad, generic categorization, and noted that parents changed jobs frequently. So, too, students were unaware of their parents' income and those who provided an amount often admitted they were unsure about its reliability. As indicated, the research team also requested and gained access to each student's financial aid information. This included whether the student was a Pell grant recipient, received some assistance but not Pell, or received no financial aid (although we used these data, they too were imperfect as Pell assistance was based on the income of parents or legal guardians whom the students listed when they applied for aid). Decisions about what "counts" as markers of class proved to be far more complicated and messier than initially anticipated and much literature indicates. This should give pause to survey researchers who rely on student assessment of parental income.

Recognizing these challenges, this paper operationalizes social class as low-income or upper middle-class. Students were categorized as upper middle-class were ineligible for any FAFSA-based financial aid while low-income students were eligible for the Pell Grant. During the time period in which the study was conducted, the Pell Grant was primarily awarded based on parent/guardian income, with seventy percent of recipients listing household income as $30,0000 or less, and almost all recipients reporting $60,000 or less in annual household parental income (Protopsaltis and Parrott 2017).

In-depth interviews with participants ranged from one to three hours, with most interviews lasting approximately an hour and a half. Interviews included questions and probes about whether or not they lived on campus during the academic year, interactions with family and kinds of support (including money, guidance, connections, practical and emotional support) given by and to family members (including parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and other extended kin), perceived obligations and contributions from students to family during college, assessment of the impact of family involvement on the college experience, and perceptions of college success. These questions allowed for the analysis not only of the range of financial, social, and cultural support families provide, but also of the support given to students from other kin and support students provide to their families. In-depth interviewing is especially useful as a method to illuminate people's narratives, conceptions, reasoning, and the potential contradictions within them (Lamont 1992; Pugh 2013).

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. During data collection, analytic memos were written about each participant. Each week, memos, thoughts, and significant preliminary, yet emerging, findings were discussed with members of the research team.

Coding was done in three stages. First, in the preliminary stage of analysis, broad and highly flexible codes were created based on topics of interest, past literature, and our interview guide. Second, after collecting and transcribing some interviews, searching for patterns, commonalities, and distinctions and discussing them, the research team then created a new coding scheme reflecting these initial insights. Third, the research team used qualitative software Nvivo10 to create a final set of refined and specific codes. An intercoder reliability test was conducted using percent agreement among all interviewers. The test found high consensus: over multiple tests, coding matched an average of 97 percent of the time.

FINDINGS

This paper presents a two-fold analysis: first, this paper analyzes the experiences of low-income students and upper middle-class students. Within each group, gender differences are analyzed. There are notable differences in the ways in which these two groups describe their involvement with their families. The findings begin by highlighting the contributive roles that low-income students assume as they remain heavily involved in their families and how their familial involvement limits their college experiences.

Financially Disadvantaged Students

Low-income students' narratives emphasize their involvement within their families—by giving and getting, which pulls them away from campus life. These women and men say that they assist their families by giving: 1) practical assistance; 2) money; and 3) advice. And in doing so, these students ascribe to two sets of values: one is a sense of independence—the value that college personnel and some families tend to emphasize during this time of life; the other is the value of family and continued involvement with it. Students talk about their commitment to family broadly, invoking support not only from their nuclear family members, but also other kin—whether it be grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Giving Practical Assistance

Low-income students report having to fulfill significant domestic responsibilities. They at least sometimes find themselves torn between their role as family member and as student, wanting to give, but at the same time worrying about what giving means for their college trajectory. An example is a low-income student, Cecilia. She talks about the strain she feels as a result of the domestic duties she is responsible for when she goes home every weekend:

> I *have* to help out when I go home on the weekends because my mother works late. These extra responsibilities interfere with me really focusing on my classes and getting work done . . . sometimes I think, "am I ever going to graduate because all of this family stuff?"

Interestingly, while low-income men did not talk about providing practical assistance, nearly all of the low-income women report having to provide such assistance to their families. They spoke not only of caregiving for younger siblings, but for mothers and grandparents. The data revealed that birth order did not impact a student's sense of responsibility. Sometimes assuming caregiving responsibilities meant that students had to formally take time off from school. Take Rhonda, a first-generation and low-income student who took a semester off. Now reenrolled, Rhonda shares how she continues to shoulder household obligations as an attempt to alleviate the stress her mother feels:

> I took a semester off from school because going so far away was really hard on my mother . . . I could tell that she knew that things were going to change with me being away . . . I have three brothers but all the weight of getting stuff done around the house—cleaning, cooking falls on me.

She, like other women, understands providing practical assistance in gendered and racialized terms:

> It's something that strong women, strong Black women have been doing for a long time. We know how to make it work to keep the family going. I just think Black families need strong Black women to hold things down.

Not only do many low-income women talk about their responsibility to provide practical assistance to their families, but they also emphasize that they think of this as spending desired time with their families. These narratives are central in the lives of low-income participants, who are responsible – as one woman put it – for "holding the family up."

Geographic distance means that for some women the reality of going home regularly is not an option. To remedy this, strategies are set in place by low-income students and their families to ensure that they can continue to participate in practical tasks. Alisa describes how she and her family devise a system where she monitors online utility bills and insurance accounts. Although she is 100 miles away from home, she is responsible for reminding her when bills are due and making online payments.

Or take Sophia who recalls how her mother, aunt, and grandmother bundle important documents until she returns home so that she can review them:

> When I go home my family is ready with stuff that they need me to do. I read important mail. . . . When I'm at school, my aunt will send a picture. I learned how to file taxes and now I do my mom's and grandma's taxes.

Notice that for Sophia, like so many others, she talks of "my family" and then easily moves beyond the nuclear family: here it is not just her mother whom she helps but also her grandmother and aunt. They all coordinate to make the exchange of support possible.

Giving Advice

Low-income students routinely discuss assisting a range of family members, including mothers, fathers, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents who ask for advice. For example, Kim, a low-income woman living in a multigenerational household with cousins, an aunt, uncle, siblings, grandparents, and a single mother, reflects on the ways in which she provides advice to extended kin from afar:

> I'm the first person in my family to go college; like a big university. My family expects me to know it *all* [laughs]. They'll just call me up and ask me all sorts of random questions I'm expected to know.

As she continues, she reveals a dense family network of expectation:

> Like once, my brother texted me, "Hey Kim, Isaiah, your cousin will be calling you, so if you get a call from a random number, that's him. He needs to ask you a few questions about legal court stuff. Everyone knows you're the smart one in the family about to graduate college soon, so could you help him out?" And in the back of my mind the entire time I'm reading his text message, I'm thinking, I'm an English major. I don't know *anything* about the law! [laughs]

Another student, Rudy shares a similar story:

> I'm a first-gen college student so everyone is excited for me. They're all convinced that I'm in med school right now even though I constantly tell them that I'm pre-med. . . . My grandpa calls me asking questions about his asthma and joint problems. He doesn't have insurance, so I'll be on the phone with him while flipping through textbooks trying [to] answer his questions. I know that he appreciates my advice.

Women and men equally report giving advice to family members. During their interviews, Kim and Rudy say that while they are not experts in many of the subject areas that their family members ask about, they feel responsible to find answers to the general information that family members seek.

What giving advice sometimes means is that these students come to assume the role of "cultural ambassador" to and for their families. In this role, cultural ambassadors provide a college roadmap for a wide range of kin, for example. Further, because many participants were deeply involved in church as youth ministers or as mentors in organizations such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, their role as "cultural ambassador" to their families and communities is seen to be a continuation of the roles they have always assumed. Some students even advise their parents who are currently enrolled in college about educational matters. Students say that they do this as a means to uplift their families. Some students spoke even more broadly, about reaching back to be of service to the Black community in efforts to reduce educational inequality and generational poverty. Though low-income students realized that these attempts are on a small-scale, "doing my part to help Black people out," was a common sentiment. One student, Antonio, who jokingly refers to himself as the "college representative of his family," points out:

> I'm sharing information, I'm telling them how college works, how to talk, what things mean, so hopefully we can uplift the entire family. Get some people who have degrees in the family. I feel obligated to share college knowledge with my family.

Similarly, other students like Luke, go on to be even more expansive, suggesting he is not just turning inward to help his own family, but he has even larger goals. Helping his family is a way to help the Black community more generally:

> I think that's something that Black people want to do . . . sharing info and being a rep for the family. I'm not just helping my family, but I feel like I'm helping other families, and the Black community be in a better social position . . . if we don't do it for each other, no one will.

For low-income women and men, though, it is a reciprocal process in a very broad sense: it entails, as they see it, giving not only to the nuclear family but to a wide range of extended and fictive kin as well as the broader Black community from whom they receive support.

Giving Money

Most low-income students mentioned working over 25 hours a week in low-wage service-sector jobs—as bartenders, retail workers, fast food workers, babysitters, or nursing assistants. They report working long hours and late shifts to cover basic material needs for themselves, and, as importantly, to send money home to their families.

For these students, giving money is essential for their families to thrive, and, in some cases, survive. Students' understanding of their roles in relation to giving money, though, differs by gender. Men perceive their financial contributions to the family as their "duty" as a man. Typically raised by single mothers, some say they see themselves as their families' primary "breadwinner." The oldest of eight, a low-income student, Martrez, who calls himself "the man of the house," states how his mother and younger siblings rely on his financial support for basic necessities:

> My mom has a disability, so she can't work . . . but she and my little sisters still need to eat. Some might think, "he's still in school, he shouldn't be doing this." but I have to do this. I wouldn't be able to sleep. I'm still the man of the house even though I'm at school. I work at least 20 hours a week, sometimes more, just so I can send money home so my mom can pay bills. They're counting on me.

Another student, Khalil, talks about how giving money to his family comes before his academics:

> If I had to choose, my family comes first. If I need to work longer hours to make more money and if working more hours means that I have to miss a final or write a paper because they need me at home, I'll do it. They're expecting me to hold my weight.

Low-income women also provide their families with financial assistance but their narratives tend to be different: they describe the importance of monetary support as a way to pool resources and care for family, and, in doing so, be, as many put it, a "good daughter." Tarika shares that she contributes to

her family financially to lessen the burden, but does not refer to herself as the head of the family. She says: "I've been working ever since I've been in college. I always send money home every pay period. It's what a good daughter does."

Further, low-income women report giving money as a result of self-imposed expectations and feelings that they "left the family." Tanesha expresses a sense of guilt for going away to college, rather than staying close to home. She talks about assisting her family financially and her attempts to remain a good daughter even from a distance:

> Leaving and going away to college was hard. I felt like I was a bad daughter for saying, okay, I'm going to live this other life at this other place and go to school. I didn't want my family to think I was turning my back on them. I get a refund check every semester and I always give my family half. I feel guilty giving money and not being able to be there to really help out.

Note that both low-income women and men talk about giving money, but they engage in gendered assessments – Martrez emphasizing that he is the "man of the house," reporting the continuation of an "adultified" position (Burton 2007) sustaining their sense of duty, even if it comes at great costs (i.e., missing a final, turning in incomplete assignments, not dedicating enough time to study for upcoming exams, etc.). Low-income men talk of themselves as "heads of household" – a hierarchical formulation—while young women talk of themselves as being "good daughters" in familial or relational terms that still situates them within—rather than at the top of—their families.

Giving monetarily did not come up just in terms of the present – the time students were in college. Low-income women and men also talk about their plans to provide for their families in the future as well. They say that giving money in the future is a family expectation – as family members anticipate that a college degree will bring about financial stability. One low-income man Rod stated, "my mom thinks I'm going to be rich!" Because of this, students say that family members – both nuclear and extended kin – look to these college-going students as supporting the entire family in the future. Students' understanding of these future expectations and witnessing their families' economic hardships cause them to aspire to become financially secure for everyone. A low-income student, Lemar talks candidly about this self-imposed expectation to support his family in the future:

> My mom is expecting me to put her in a house and pay all her bills. I'm holding myself to do that once I graduate, too. Giving back to her since she's made so many sacrifices for me. That's the least I can do to tell her, but more so to show her thank you.

This version of a norm of giving serves to shore up a commitment to advancing through college. And that commitment to college, in this sense, does not compete with family. Instead, it shores up family.

Disadvantaged Students: Receiving Support

Although lower levels of access to financial, social, and university-specific cultural capital pose challenges, students share how their families generate powerful, yet overlooked forms of support, such aske emotional support. Many colleges and universities fail to recognize the diverse nature of resources that financially disadvantaged families generate for their children and the value of what those children give back.

According to students, various forms of emotional support began while students moved into their dormitories. This was a clear indication of just how big a deal going to college was for many family members. Young men and women shared how family members assisted them in "making the bed, unpacking suitcases, hanging clothes, cleaning up the room, and introducing themselves to roommates." Other students remembered their family engaging in family prayer for protection and placing pictures on study desks to give them a "piece of home."

Students like Timothy talk about how the emotional support he receives from family trumps financial support: "There's some things money can't buy, no matter how much you have. Just knowing that my family is praying for me is really all I need."

Low-income students did talk about receiving financial support from affluent aunts, uncles, and grandparents. These students say that this is a natural, normal way of doing family. Harriet discusses how her uncle pays for her books and how this offsets additional college expenses:

> I'll never forget my first semester of college and I learned that I had to pay for textbooks, like finding out for the first time they weren't free. I remember calling my uncle crying, feeling embarrassed and he was like, "This is an investment. Why wouldn't I help you?" He pays for my books every semester. That takes away a lot of stress from me; otherwise, I don't know how I would pay for it.

Other students' family members, like Jaquan's, pool resources to support their college-going student:

> My family knows that every dollar count, so my mom, my mom's boyfriend, my oldest sister, my cousins, and aunts sometimes only have $5, $10, to spare with the mentality that, this will add up. And it does. The mini donations, so to speak, make it possible for me to get stuff I wouldn't be able to afford on my own.

Financially Advantaged Students

Upper middle-class students tell a very different story about the involvement of family. In contrast to low-income students, upper middle-class students typically talk about what they get from their families: they say they receive academic, financial, and social support from their college-educated mothers. Undergraduate men and women say that their mother's support allows them to move through college with ease. Not a single upper middle-class student reported ever having to or feeling obligated to give back to family members. Theirs is not a story of reciprocity; it is a story of one-way receiving.

Take Kenya, an upper middle-class student. Kenya was always the "smart kid," she recounts, describing herself at the start of the interview. There was never a time when she was not going to college. She remembers deciding where—not if—she would attend college. Her parents both struggled to get degrees – her mother an associate's degree, and her father a bachelor's and then a Master's degree – very late in life. But, these degrees, as she notes, "changed my life." After her parents earned their degrees, Kenya was able to enroll in a private middle and high school for students who were gifted in mathematics and science. In this gifted and talented program all of her classmates were white. Now in college, Kenya recognizes that her parents' financial support (i.e., paying her college tuition and room and board, cell phone bill, and giving her extra spending money) serves as a means of lessening the stress that she suspects that she would feel if she did not receive such support. The financial support that she receives from her parents allows her not to have to work on or off campus for pay, as is true for the majority of upper middle-class students interviewed. Kenya does state that she is "technically employed" in a research lab to enhance her future graduate school application profile:

> I work in a lab here on campus with a professor. I don't get paid, but it's good because I'm doing it for the experience and it looks good for graduate school.

She later mentions that her research assistantship was made possible due to a social connection – her mother's boss:

> My mother actually works with the professor's wife. My mom mentioned that I was attending Flagship and in my third semester they set it up. I work in the lab with the professor and his lab assistants . . . working in the lab will help me get into grad school.

Kenya makes no mention of giving the kinds of support to her family that so many low-income students discussed.

In addition to money and social connections, upper middle-class mothers help students navigate through college. For example, some upper middle-class students shared that their mothers obtain their university email passwords and closely monitor their course schedules, offer to proofread papers, and call or email college personnel if and when issues arise. When asked what forms of support their family members provide during the academic year, an upper middle-class student, Tianna, talks about a roommate conflict she was having and how her mother intervened on her behalf:

> My mom gets stuff done. I was having a difficult time living with my roommate because she was a serious partier. My mother called Res Life and spoke personally with the director after my RA told me that I couldn't switch rooms. I don't know what she said, but the next thing I know, I was switching rooms [laughs].

Students like Jazz say that her mother's involvement in her academic life provides her with an "added advantage":

> I feel like I'm way ahead because my mother helps me out so much here. She edits my papers. That's really an added advantage. She takes the time out to tell me little tidbits of information that other college students just don't know . . . like, going to office hours. She learned all that stuff while she was in college so she's sharing that with me now.

Although upper middle-class women and men report receiving various forms of social, cultural, and financial support from their college-educated mothers, only half express appreciation of this help. The other half say that this kind of involvement has negative consequences.

The data reveal that these sentiments are gendered in two senses. Upper middle-class men were most critical of their mother's involvement. They describe their mothers as being "nosy," "invasive," or "butting in." One upper middle-class student, Jahmal, describes his disdain:

> My mother over does it. She emailed my professor once after I got an average grade on [a] paper she looked over for me. . . I applied for a job as an RA . . . but I didn't end up getting the job . . . she ended up calling to ask why I hadn't been selected . . . she won't let me live . . . I just want to do my own thing.

Melvin had similar examples to share:

> My mother is too much. Most of the time I want to do things on my own, but then I'll let her read a paper that I'm writing for a class. She'll just change everything . . . she's a perfectionist, and I'm not . . . I wish she would back off. I want to create my own path.

Here, we see upper middle-class men speaking of a drive toward autonomy. For these sons, maternal regulation of academics was seen as a negative aspect of their college experience. They report ways to evade unwanted forms of support, such as not speaking too regularly to moms on the phone. In contrast, Ciara speaks about their mother's provision of support positively: "I try not to take the things that my mother does for me for granted. I know that she just wants me to be successful."

Ciara's response is typical of most upper middle-class women interviewed. Women overwhelmingly stated that they do not take their privilege for granted. Upper middle-class men had a tendency to speak about the strategies they employed to push their mothers away, in part as a way to convince themselves that they can "do college on [their] own," as one young man Travis put it. It is in these ways that the myth of meritocracy is both masculine and able to flourish—upper middle-class men who receive social, cultural, and financial capital believe that they can succeed on their own, with little help from their mothers. Of course, a number of factors could explain these differences but when asked, the students focused on family.

DISCUSSION

Going to college has now become a commonplace for emerging adults. Over half of Black high school graduates go to college immediately after high school (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020) and most students from all economic backgrounds now expect to earn a college degree (Goyette 2008). Many scholars and journalists write about this process. What is less commonly discussed are the ways in which the college experience remains unequal. The experiences of low-income and upper middle-class students in this study highlight these inequalities and the ways these are rooted in family relationships. Instead of the outdated assumption of the Black disadvantaged family as problematic, even pathological, this paper emphasizes a more complex story—one told through college students' narratives.

These young adults say they value family and they act on that value; we might interpret this as a counter narrative and a form of at least implicit resistance to college norms that emphasize immersion and separation. At the same time, these students recognize the ways that this value sometimes stands in the way of their ability to reap the rewards of college's institutional frames that are designed and organized for those from more advantaged backgrounds (for related argument see Evans and Moore 2015).

For many upper middle-class students, college is simply the next step in the "natural" progression of their education. Conversely, low-income students did not have the same pathway to college. They do not talk about taking this next step for granted. Instead, they talk about consciously choosing to attend college in spite of their families' inability to pay for their education. Attending college for low-income students is an effort to improve their future financial prospects for the betterment of themselves *and* their families.

Once students begin to attend college, families can serve as a help or hindrance to students' transition to and experience in college – whether by helping them move into a dorm, suggesting a major or course, giving advice or encouragement, reading a final paper, or discussing career possibilities. Some families do all of these things, while others do some or none. Further, some students encourage their families' involvement, while others want to keep them from "intruding too much." And for the low-income, going to college also means continuing to assist their families. This paper shows that college and family relationships are inextricably linked.

Upper middle-class families, those with college-educated mothers, heavily invest in ensuring that their daughters and son excel academically. Although some upper middle-class students came from two-parent households, many explain that their mothers influence their academic success. This study also found costs for upper middle-class students: their experiences and values often diminish the sense of obligation to family, weaken some family ties, and conceal aspects of their ongoing dependence. Upper middle-class sons, more often than upper middle-class daughters, make claims about their own self-worth, personal successes, and independence, and often resent their mother's over-involvement, by not recognizing the extent to which those very successes are a result of the family ties from which they attempt to distance themselves.

For some, both family and college pull students in multiple directions. Overall, these processes have two, perhaps contradictory outcomes. Most scholars who look at families focus exclusively on nuclear families. Low-income students are seen to value extended kin relationships. Sometimes with grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins all residing in the same household, these students talk about how they fit into the helping tradition of their families. The majority of low-income students act as cultural ambassadors to their families by serving as metaphorical "tour guides" for the college experience.

This paper argues that although providing support may sustain family (which these students so clearly value), providing and receiving support from family also reproduces inequality. Low-income students take jobs, often with extensive hours, so they can give money to family members. In this sense, they share the cultural assumptions of employed Black workers whom Lamont (2000) describes as displaying a moral sense of self-centeredness on sharing with others in need – what she calls the "caring self" which she (and the Black workers) contrasted to more individualistic whites.

Reciprocation sustains families at the same time that it hinders student progress. Specifically, low-income students stated that their academic performance and participation in clubs and organizations was hindered. They said that they cannot just focus on their studies; they want and *have* to help family. Thus, their potential for college success is constrained by the ties of kinship. This trade-off is similar to that which scholars who examine work and extended family find among upper middle-class and low-income Blacks (Chiteji and Darrick Hamilton 2002; Stack 1974). This paper suggests that this trade-off can start early, and that it is not just about money: for example, low-income women sometimes feel burdened and distracted by other family work, such as frequently going home to provide practical assistance or advice they feel they owe family. This paper also suggests another model of reciprocation: both low-income women and men believe that they have an obligation to support their families financially after college as well. That, many students tell me, is a key reason why they attend college. And that sense of obligation provides an incentive to stay in college. Given the current economic climate, however, it may be hard to put these beliefs into practice: how many will be able to buy their mothers the homes that they envision?

There are limitations to the study. The study takes place at one institution, in the northeastern region of the United States, which is relatively advantaged in terms of wealth and educational attainment. And although my focus is on both low-income and upper middle-class college students, these students are relatively successful in that they were admitted to a moderately selective four-year institution. It is unclear whether similar patterns would persist in different geographic regions, at less selective universities, or community colleges. Future research at such sites could aid in assessing the generalizability of these findings.

Going beyond the student narratives, research is needed on how higher education organizations' policies and practices may address these inequalities and increase opportunities for historically underrepresented students. For example, college administrators are developing strategies to involve families; however, their focus on parents (to the exclusion of other kin) typically favors financially advantaged students. This study's findings provide insights for ways to shape institutional supports to address the needs of diverse undergraduates. To develop these student pathways, it is crucial to understand the ways that students from diverse backgrounds experience college, and their ongoing familial relationships. This understanding may help in undermining the reproduction of inequalities among college students. The college experience provides opportunities for students to invest their financial, cultural, and social support into projects of class production and reproduction. If administrators and organizational decision makers hope to increase opportunities for students of color and working-class students, then understanding the types of resources these students carry with them is a crucial step in structuring opportunities for these students which respect and value students' identities and relationships with family members and their communities.

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