Lifting While We Climb: Undergraduate Students of Color Communal Uplift and Promotion of College-Going within Their Communities

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Abstract. This critical qualitative study examines the ways first-generation Students of Color (Latina/o/x, African American, Native American, and biracial) at two predominantly White institutions in the Midwest activate their college knowledge, or cultural capital, to assist youth from their communities in viewing higher education as a viable option. In sharing cultural capital, participants are actively attempting to influence the habitus of youth of Color. By encouraging the pursuit of higher education, participants in this study were engaging in communal uplift. Findings reveal the need for colleges and universities to acknowledge, validate and support underrepresented students in their communal uplift efforts.

Keywords. Students of Color, habitus, cultural and social capital

Courtney L. Luedke is Associate Professor and Coordinator of the Higher Education Leadership Program at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Her research explores how Students of Color are socialized into, and within, the academy. She examines critical, bi-directional socialization that encourages students to bring their identities into their educational experiences. She also looks at critical relationships (family, peers, faculty, and staff) and their influence on students' educational trajectories.

Researchers have attributed gaps in access to college knowledge[1] to students and their families, describing their experiences from a deficit perspective (Espino, 2014). In doing so, researchers have ignored structural barriers, or the ways in which institutions reproduce limited access to college-going cultural capital (Espino, 2014). "College-going" is a term used throughout the current publication to describe an environment or orientation that contributes to the development of a college-going habitus, which is connected to my use of social reproduction theory. Racially and ethnically underrepresented students, in particular, often experience intersecting barriers in accessing college-going knowledge. Barriers include being a first-generation college student, coming from a low-income household or neighborhood (Oakes, 2005), and having an increased likelihood of attending poorer-quality K-12 schools (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Oakes, 2005). Discrepancies in access to college-going knowledge (i.e., cultural capital) is prevalent for students who are the first generation in their families to attend college (Espino, 2014; Massé, Perez, & Posselt, 2010). These inequitable societal and educational systems make accessing higher education more challenging for first-generation Students of Color. This is particularly concerning, because continuing education beyond high school is viewed as a form of upward mobility, socially, and economically (Belfield & Levin, 2013).

For many students, experiencing their own challenges related to college preparation and access contributes to developing a desire to make the pathway to college for others less tenuous (Gonzalez, 2012). An emphasis on communalism over individualism in communities of Color contributes to students' desire to give back (Gonzalez, 2012; Guiffrida, Kiyama, Waterman, & Museus, 2012; Muñoz & Espino, 2017). Researchers have documented the myriad ways in which Students of Color seek to serve as role models to family members (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; Pérez & McDonough, 2008), community members (Brooms, Franklin, Clark, & Smith, 2018; Guillory & Wolverton, 2008; McCallum, 2017), and peers (Luedke, 2019). Researchers have also documented ways that faculty of Color (Stanley, 2006) and staff and administrators of Color (Luedke, 2017) often serve as role models and mentors to Students of Color.

Having a role model who can impart social capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) valued in higher education and developing (and maintaining) relationships with individuals who have college experience may increase exposure to college knowledge, which could lead to developing a college-going habitus. Engaging in relationships and environments that promote college-going may be particularly beneficial for individuals who may be the first generation in their families to pursue higher education. The purpose of this study is to un-

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[1] I use college knowledge and cultural capital interchangeably in this manuscript to describe cultural capital valued in accessing and persisting in higher education.

cover how first-generation Students of Color seek to influence college-going dispositions in youth of Color in efforts to uplift their home communities through accessing higher education.

Literature Review

I begin the literature review by examining research on the role of communalism and racial uplift to highlight the importance of these orientations to communities of Color that served as propelling factors in the communal uplift in which students sought to be engaged. Next, I review scholarship on role modeling and its place in college-going as serving as role models was central to participants. Finally, the literature on college-going knowledge and aspirations is referenced to illuminate the ways that Students of Color acquire college-going knowledge and develop and expand their college-going habitus. A communalistic orientation encourages students' investment in their communities; through role modeling, students have the opportunity to share college-going knowledge and impart college-going aspirations.

Communalism

An emphasis on communalism over independence can be found in many communities of Color (Guiffrida et al., 2012). In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois wrote some of the earlier, significant work on racial uplift, noting the spiritual striving of African Americans. He described how African Americans strove for increased opportunity despite myriad obstacles (DuBois, 1995). Over the years, scholars have examined the ways in which communities of Color have worked toward racial and communal uplift. For example, Murtadha and Watts (2005) examined the experiences of historically influential African American women school leaders who served as change agents and fought for social justice and examined the use of community engagement as a way to leverage resources. The leaders recognized, "that community strengths, not individual abilities, were needed to bring about change" (Murtadha & Watts, 2005, p. 606). African Americans engage in racial uplift through volunteerism, giving back to their communities, and charitable giving through organizations that seek to uplift and empower the Black community (Gasman, 2002). McCallum (2017) found that Black doctoral students named giving back to their communities as a primary motivation to pursue graduate education.

The literature base on racial uplift, while primarily grounded in the experiences of African Americans, can also be found within the context of communalism and a strong commitment to reciprocal familial relationships in other communities of Color. Although similarities in communal uplift exist across communities of Color, there are important culturally based distinctions that can be made between particular communities. Communalism and interdependence over individualism is central in Native American culture

(Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). Native American students' sense of belonging on campus can be tied to maintaining strong connections to one's family or "clan kinship" (Tachine, Cabrera, & Yellow Bird, 2017, p. 799). Scholars have found that Native American students' families and communities were their largest supporters in persisting through college (Waterman, 2012). Peers are also instrumental in contributing to a students' sense of belonging in college for Native American students (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007; Tachine et al., 2017). Increasing college completion rates for Native American students can be tied to promoting self-determination within Native American communities (Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, & Solyom, 2012). Self-determination can be linked to sovereignty, which reflects the right of Native Americans to govern themselves.

An emphasis on reciprocal relationships and a collectivist nature embedded within many Latina/o/x families contributes to students developing a desire to give back to their families (Gonzalez, 2012; Muñoz & Espino, 2017; Sáenz, García-Louis, Drake, & Guida, 2018). Moreover, Yosso (2005) described familial capital (present within communities of Color) as extending beyond the nuclear family to extended family, close friends, and community (often referred to as kin in the literature). A commitment to uplifting and supporting one another as peers in the Latina/o/x community has also been explored (Luedke, 2019; Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). Scholars have also found that Mexican American students often held a strong commitment to addressing social inequalities through pursuing higher education (Abrica, 2019; Abrica & Hatch-Tocaimaza, 2019).

Pursuing higher education has been one critical avenue for racial uplift (McCallum, 2017). Recent studies suggest the primary motivator of pursuing a college degree extends beyond access to greater employment opportunities; greater economic gain or prestige often takes a secondary position to supporting one's family and community for Students of Color (Gonzalez, 2012; Harper & Quaye, 2007). One way that students may give back to their families, peers, and communities is through serving as role models.

Role Modeling

Role modeling is an important avenue in sharing college knowledge, experiences, and strategies valued in higher education (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Luedke, 2019; Luedke, 2020). Role models who overcame similar obstacles as protégés passed on validating messages; messages were received positively, because students could relate to their role models (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Luedke, 2017; Luedke, 2019). Brooms and colleagues (2018) found that Black and Latino males served as community change agents by serving as role models to youth peers in middle and high schools. These college men were motivated to serve as role models due to their own experiences, as a way to fill a community need, and as an avenue to contribute to the development

of youth. Peer role modeling and mentoring in college benefits not only the mentees but also the mentors who experience increased retention, academic success, expansion of professional networks, and personally through a greater sense of identity and satisfaction within themselves (Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000). Reciprocity was a strong motivating factor for many Native American students who participated in peer mentoring programs (Shotton et al., 2007).

One longitudinal study of youth found that students who had a race- and gender-matched role model performed better, academically, than students who did not (Zirkel, 2002). Role models instilled an increased sense of students' own potential and encouraged students to devote more time to their goals. Zirkel called for qualitative research examining the functions of the role models themselves to better understand what makes their roles effective for Students of Color.

College-Going Knowledge and Aspirations

While high schools should be a setting where students are acquiring college-going knowledge and resources, Students of Color often encounter teachers and counselors who do not believe that every child who aspires to attend college, should (Liou, Antrop-González, & Cooper, 2009). Students turn to their communities, community agencies, and community members for support of their academic aspirations (Liou et al., 2009). Students of Color who experience disparities in support of their higher education dreams, often desire to reverse this trend by serving as role models or mentors to youth peers of color by sharing their college experiences (Brooms et al., 2018). In the college-going process, families of Students of Color often provide encouragement and support in pursuing college (Espino, 2014; Luedke, 2020; Waterman, 2012). Older siblings, extended family, and kin, who have college experience, often share their college knowledge with youth (Luedke, 2020; Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Latina/o/x students enrolled in college support peers by sharing strategies and knowledge that will support one another in navigating college (Luedke, 2019; Sáenz, Mayo, Miller, & Rodriguez, 2015). Unfortunately, oftentimes, schools and researchers overlook the assets that students from communities of Color bring with them to their educational experiences (Gonzalez, 2012; Kiyama & Harper, 2018; Liou et al., 2009).

In sum, scholars have documented ways in which communities of Color promote collectivism and uplift through supporting access to higher education. Relying on family, kin, and peers for support and uplift has occurred despite underrepresentation, exclusion, and racial discrimination toward communities of Color (Espino, 2014; Kiyama, 2010; Luedke, 2019; Luedke 2020). The role of family in particular has gained increasing recognition in the literature from asset-based scholars; however, we know less about the role of currently enrolled students in promoting college-going. There remains a gap in the literature in the ways that promoting college-going in communities

of Color (particularly with youth peers) has been connected to intentional acts of communal uplift, where students enrolled in college seek to share college-going knowledge with members of their home communities, often communities of Color. This study seeks to better understand how Students of Color seek to influence college-going dispositions in youth in efforts to uplift their communities through accessing higher education. The lives they touch individually may yield cumulative effects as growing numbers of youth of Color are increasingly knowledgeable about how to enter higher education.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was informed by Bourdieu's social reproduction theory, which examines how status and inequality are perpetuated or transformed generationally through family and schooling (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Social reproduction theory is composed of four main concepts, including social capital, cultural capital, the *field* (italicized to distinguish the theoretical concept from other usage of the word), and habitus. Social capital is the network of relationships built upon trust that an individual can access in different *fields* as a form of currency or reward. The depth and breadth of social capital are both instrumental. Cultural capital describes the skills, knowledge, and preferences that can be used as a form of currency in particular *fields*. There are three forms of cultural capital: embodied, the development of skills and abilities valued in social settings; objectified, the physical possession of items that signal wealth; and institutionalized, academic degrees, credentials, certificates, and awards that indicate education and experience (McDonough & Nuñez a 2007). The *field* is the place in which different forms of capital are given value; *fields* comprise patterns of power structures present in the larger society. To understand social reproduction, we must understand how inequality is reproduced or disrupted within various *fields*. Some scholars (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008) have suggested that *fields* may be shifting, allowing for increasing valuing of capital, while other scholars have suggested that perhaps Students of Color seek to create *sub-fields* within a field (Luedke, 2017), these sub-fields are akin to counterspaces (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) where capital is acquired and exchanged more easily than on the larger *field*. Luedke (2017) found that Students of Color created *sub-fields* with Staff and Administrators of Color where they acquired capital that supported their persistence in college. More research on the role of *fields* as shifting to be more open or *sub-fields* would allow us to better understand how People of Color in particular are exchanging capital across and between *fields*.

Habitus is the embodied accumulation of different forms of capital, norms and tastes that inform whether opportunities seem viable (or not); it is what constrains or transforms one's dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus is em-

bodied in all aspects of oneself, from thinking, feeling, speaking and beyond (Bourdieu, 1990; Reay, 2004). Cleft habitus is the experience of transition when someone experiences two habitus concurrently (Bourdieu, 2004).

While educational institutions have the opportunity to expand social opportunity, they are more likely to confer cultural capital valued in educational systems to those who already possess capital (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Thus, students whose parents have not attended college may experience difficulty in accessing and navigating higher education (McDonough, 1997), particularly when their existing form of capital is not valued (Espino, 2014; Kiyama, 2010). Massé and colleagues suggest that students who do not identify strongly with the "academic domain" are less likely to develop dispositions that include attending college, because they perceive their likelihood of success to be low (2010, p. 288). However, as students accumulate capital valued in higher education and increase their identification with academics, their college-going habitus may shift (Massé, Perez, & Posselt, 2010).

Scholars have criticized the ways in which some researchers have misinterpreted Bourdieu's theory. Musoba and Baez (2009) critiqued the ways in which many scholars misuse capital theory to fit an American perspective. They argued that scholars in the United States,

> [C]onvert Bourdieu's theory from one focusing on class formation to one focusing on individual interests, which is concerned with the investments individuals make of themselves in order to ensure their economic well-being. In essence, when scholars use Bourdieu's theories to make individualist arguments, they are essentially converting those theories from one concerned with social structures to ones concerned with human capital. (p. 152)

Social reproduction theory was established as a critique of social class reproduction systematically, not individually. Yosso (2005) asserted that Bourdieu's work meant to provide a critique of social reproduction, while others have misinterpreted his theory to assert that some communities have cultural wealth and others do not. Yosso developed community cultural wealth, which acknowledges various forms of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and relationships held by marginalized families and communities that are often unrecognized in the literature. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) responded to the scholars who misinterpreted habitus to be deterministic and affirmed that habitus "is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable, but not eternal!" (p. 133). Consistent with Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Yosso (2005), I affirm that some have misinterpreted Bourdieu's work as deterministic, rather than malleable; and being individualistic, rather than class-based (see also Musoba & Baez, 2009). Bourdieu's theory created room for agency (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reay, 2004), which is important as we consider students'

communal uplift efforts. This study engages the full social reproduction theory, considering each of the concepts within the full context of the theory. Few scholars have employed the full social reproduction theory framework to examine research related to college-going; research often focuses on one of the social reproduction theory concepts in a single study (see discussion in Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Without attention to the full theory, nuances within students' experiences may be missing from the analysis.

Scholars have developed theories and concepts that address forms of capital [see community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), funds of knowledge (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992), and racial capital (Waring, 2016)]. What distinguishes community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge from social reproduction theory (and social and cultural capital), is the role of the *field*. The *field* is the place in which particular forms of capital are given value (or not). Racial capital was coined by Waring (2016), who found that Black and White bi/multiracial individuals draw on their racial resources to establish an, "in" within both Black and White communities. Waring's findings reveal that racial background can influence one's accessibility and acceptance within different communities. Participants within my study drew upon their racial resources and racial capital to establish insider status, which they drew upon to promote college access when they returned to their home communities in efforts to uplift their communities, engaging in racial uplift. Everyone has capital, but the *field* concept shines light on where particular forms of capital are given value. Specifically, this study will shed light on how first-generation Students of Color seek to influence the college-going habitus of youth by sharing their own experiences and cultural capital, potentially increasing access to college, disrupting social reproduction. Students made concerted efforts to share capital across *fields*, by bridging *fields*. They sought to bring cultural capital valued in higher education to youth of Color in their home communities, serving as cultural bridges (Lopez & Stack, 2001), to influence their college-going habitus and prepare them with the capital that would be valued in the *field* of higher education. In doing so, participants sought to uplift their communities by contributing to the development of a college-going habitus and increasing college-going collectively for future generations.

METHOD

This work stems from a larger study where I set out to engage in a critical qualitative study on relationships important to first-generation Students of Color accessing and navigating higher education. In addition to learning about significant individuals in participants' college access and persistence journeys, students revealed their own experiences in serving as role models to promote college-going. In this study, I seek to illuminate my participants

as role models seeking to engage in communal uplift through contributing to the development of a college-going habitus of youth from their communities. Consistent with my critical approach, I sought to understand relationships that disrupted unequal power dynamics that were built as a result of historical, social and political histories (Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, & Gildersleeve, 2012; Patel, 2016). These unequal power dynamics have resulted in disparate rates of college access and retention in higher education (McDonough, 1997). Using a critical approach brought together inquiry and critical social theory (social reproduction theory) (Carspecken, 1996; Pasque et al., 2012). Social reproduction theory examines how inequality is reproduced or disrupted and transformed, generationally. My critical approach guided my development of interview questions, relationships with participants, and data analysis process. The guiding question for this study was: *How do first-generation Students of Color seek to influence college-going dispositions (habitus) in youth of Color in their efforts to uplift their communities through the promotion of access to higher education?*

Data Collection

I recruited participants through purposeful chain sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through purposeful chain sampling, key contacts (including students and staff) shared my contact information with participants. I was also invited to announce the study at three culturally based student organizations. Participants recommended other students to participate, and I accessed participants through direct connections.

Data collection for the larger study resulted in in-person, semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I focus on 25 students (15 Latina/o, four Black, one Native American, and five biracial). Nine participants were women and 16 were men. Five of the participants were first-year students, four were sophomores, 11 were juniors, and five were seniors. Participants self-identified as first-generation college students (neither parent had earned a bachelor's degree or higher) and attended one of two predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the Midwest: one large research-intensive university (Midwestern University) and one mid-size comprehensive (Midstate University).

Research Sites. Both predominantly White institutions were in one state, situated within the more racially/ethnically diverse part of the state. Access to research sites, institution type, location, and gatekeepers were all factors considered in identifying sites. Midstate University is located in a smaller community within 50 miles of two larger cities. At the time of data collection, Midstate University was composed of approximately 90% White students. Midwestern University is located in a mid-sized metropolitan area and, at the time of data collection, 87% of the student body was White. Based on student interview data, each campus had one institutionally formalized partnership

for community outreach. Student organizations had developed formal and informal partnerships with high schools to promote college-going. The institutions themselves did little to bridge *fields* between students' home communities and campus; as a result, students created their own formal and informal connections to bridge the *fields* of home community (or community of Color) with higher education to disrupt inequality.

Interviews. Consistent with critical approaches to research, I encouraged students to select the location of the interview in an attempt to eliminate perceived power imbalance between participants and myself (Pasque et al., 2012). Interviews lasted, on average, between one and two hours. Prior to beginning interviews, participants signed a consent form and completed a demographic questionnaire. The interview included questions on: the college access process, significant relationships prior to and during college (reciprocal support), academic and social engagement on campus, postgraduation plans, what success in college meant to participants, and a reflection upon their college journeys. While the original interview protocol did not contain specific questions about giving back to one's community, I identified this theme early in the process and probed accordingly in subsequent interviews. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and de-identified by replacing sensitive information (names, institutions, and organizations) with pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity.

Coding and Analysis

The larger study used the constant comparative method to simultaneously collect, code, and analyze data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Analysis included open, axial, and selected coding. In connecting this analysis process with my critical approach, I compared emergent themes to existing social theory. The constant comparative method was an ongoing process, which occurred while I conducted interviews and analyzed field notes, audio files, interview transcripts, and analytic memos (open coding). Initially, I coded the data using in vivo codes (in participants' words). *In vivo* codes were typically two- to five-word phrases that were attached to small sections of data. Next, I combined and integrated preliminary concepts into sub-concepts, properties, and dimensions through multiple rounds of reviewing transcripts while creating and refining the codebook (axial coding), and transcripts were transferred to NVivo (electronic qualitative coding software). At this stage, some of the concepts included: relationships, family, perspectives on college success, and communal uplift. For example, the concept of relationships had sub-dimensions, which included off-campus relationships and further dimensions, which included gender, characteristics/qualities of relationships, and types of support. In the next phase of analysis, I analyzed the coded data (from the axial coding process) with social reproduction theory concepts, and when appropriate, I made references suggesting the

relationship between coded data and social reproduction theory (selective coding). For example, I coded when a participant described sharing cultural capital regarding the college application process with a student from their former high school; this was an intentional act of resistance to fill a void not provided by the institution (K-12 education system). Through this process, I was able to understand how students shared cultural capital by building upon their values and relationships to aid in shaping the college-bound habitus of youth of Color.

Researcher Positionality

My experiences as a former first-generation college student and a multi-racial Latina inform the questions I ask in my research and the ways I engage meaningfully with participants. Prior to beginning interviews, I took time to share my identity and my own educational journey. This is consistent with my critical approach to research and another example of how I sought to equalize power between participants and myself (Pasque et al., 2012). Sharing my experiences with students helped to build rapport and enhanced the research experience for both the participants and myself. I seek to work *with* my participants, and I see my scholarship as a form of resistance.

Trustworthiness

I incorporated multiple techniques to ensure trustworthiness. I conducted two stages of member checks (Carspecken, 1996; Luedke, 2017). I provided participants their transcript, separately emailed study themes, and gave them the opportunity to discuss findings. I used peer debriefing, where I reviewed my analysis with colleagues until consensus was reached (Carspecken, 1996). In the peer debriefing process, I initially coded the data alone and presented my analysis to colleagues for interpretation. Together we reviewed our analysis focusing on data not interpreted the same and reexamined the data until consensus was reached. Finally, I conducted negative case analysis (Carspecken, 1996) where I sought out data that did not fit with the primary themes and reexamined this data to uncover areas of contrast.

Limitations

Participants from this study come from one state and two different public 4-year institutions. Participants were recruited through purposeful chain sampling through key and direct contacts. Findings are not meant to be generalizable but rather lend us the opportunity to better understand the experiences of the participants and their efforts in promoting college-going in communities of Color, which they connected to what success in college meant to them.

FINDINGS

"I think specifically for Students of Color and first-generation students ... being successful is completing it [higher education] and giving back... . Like the phrase "lift as you climb," as you're climbing the ladder you're also lifting up the people under you to come up with you. So I'd say that would be success to me." – Esteban, participant

Esteban, like many participants in my study, was committed to ensuring that others, particularly individuals from his community, saw college as a viable option. In an effort to encourage other Students of Color and other first-generation students to pursue college, he lived by the mantra "you lift as you climb." His success was directly tied to collective success. I share the communal uplift efforts of Students of Color who helped shape the college-bound habitus of youth, allowing students to see college as a viable option.

In responding to my research question: *How do first-generation Students of Color seek to influence college-going dispositions (habitus) in youth of Color in their efforts to uplift their communities through the promotion of access to higher education?,* I found a larger overarching theme of students' commitment to communal uplift through giving back to their communities, and three sub-themes that were the mechanisms or strategies that they used to realize their larger goal of communal uplift. Grounded in students' commitment and desire to give back to, and uplift their communities through accessing higher education, students engaged with youth in the following ways to influence the development of a college-going habitus: 1) Students saw themselves as role models and took ownership and pride in this identity, as they understood that students were looking up to them to learn from their experiences. 2) They developed or nurtured the rapport they held with youth. It was critical that youth could relate to, and had a sense of trust with, participants (oftentimes because of similar identities or experiences). 3) Finally, students grounded their outreach in their own experiences. Through these efforts, students imparted their knowledge (cultural capital) to contribute to uplifting their communities by sharing their college experiences and imparting cultural capital relevant to the *field* of higher education in ways that would support students' development of a college-going habitus. In doing so, students bridged *fields* between community and higher education. The actions or strategies students used were not strictly sequential and appeared to be more fluid, although they were often all present in students' experiences of promoting college-going. The themes help to highlight the overarching motivations and strategies students employed to engage with and motivate youth. In this study, 24 of 25 students described their communal uplift efforts as they related to promoting higher education in their communities,

this was particularly important to them considering their first-generation status. Students disrupted negative rhetoric around whether students from their communities could attend college by both intentionally giving back to their communities, growing into and owning their role model identities, establishing and nurturing rapport, and grounding their outreach in personal experiences.

Communal Uplift Through Giving Back

Students commitment to exposing (or reinforcing) the consideration of pursuing higher education was intricately tied to their desire to give back and uplift their communities. Damien, a biracial student majoring in engineering, worked with high school students in a pre-college after-school program and sought to encourage youth to view college as a viable option.

> I eventually got to build relationships with the students I was tutoring. I really felt like they're completely oblivious of college, and I want them to understand what college is like and how the pre-college program will completely change your life. Because that's what it did for me, even though I didn't realize it when I was their age. I wanted to be a role model for them. I wanted to be the one that they look up to and can follow my path to college.

Damien encouraged students he worked with to become more familiar with college and to view college as available to them, suggesting that the students had a difficult time seeing themselves as college aspirants, likely due to societal messages they internalized to the contrary. Damien hoped to influence their college-bound habitus by serving as a role model. He narrowed the gaps between the *fields* of community and higher education as he worked with students in his home community high schools to encourage educational aspirations and impart cultural capital, such as study skills and the resources offered by the pre-college program.

While many students worked with high school youth to encourage college-going by attending college panels, returning to their high schools, or tutoring like Damien, several students were intentionally pursuing degrees that would allow them to explicitly help their communities through their careers. One student was planning to dedicate his lifelong career to the mission of encouraging first-generation students and Students of Color to pursue college. Joseph, a Black student majoring in social work, was committed to using his degree to help others: "I want to be in a position where I can help people . . . [W]ork with families and schools. That's my goal . . . I want to form my own foundation for kids whose parents didn't go to college, to show them that you can, to encourage more people to go." Joseph wanted to be a community resource; to work with children who might not think of college as an option, potentially altering their college-bound habitus by encouraging them to realize that college *is* for them. He reflected on the lack of college resources

in his community and set out to use his degree as a tool to help others access this cultural capital. He sought a career that promoted collective success.

Growing into and Owning Their Role Model Identity

Students noted their role model identities in varying degrees. Some shared the intentional actions without referencing the title, and others had become more comfortable asserting their role model identities. Max, a Black student majoring in business, felt fulfilled when he helped others, particularly other African American students and youth with their educational journeys.

> If I could take my struggles and help somebody else with it than that—that makes me feel better.… Now that I'm in college, and I'm a senior I can really see the difference I make in younger people's minds with me giving them advice about things that I went through that they might be going through…. It's all the thought that really counts and I just say it from my heart and just say it from what I've learned and hopefully it helps.

Max shared his experiences so that others might not have to experience similar obstacles. He understood that everyone had their own challenges, but he hoped that sharing his knowledge of the university (cultural capital), might alleviate some of the stressors that others faced.

José, a Latino student double majoring in communication and Spanish, intentionally served as a role model to students from his own high school. José highlighted the need to break generational cycles of not having access to college; he sought to do so through role modeling.

> A lot of people look up to me. Especially back in my high school and my town. People are like, "José went to college; he went to a big college, Midwestern University."… It's pretty cool to have people text you, or call you, or Facebook message you and say, "Hey man, can you help me out with some applications, can you read this over? What do I need to do to get to MU? What do I need to do to get to college in general?"… I most want to be a role model to kids who are like me. Their parents didn't go to college, barely went to high school probably in México or wherever they're from. I serve as a role model to them because it shows, even though with all these barriers, I still made it here.

Because of José's commitment to helping others access college, word spread amongst students from his high school. They reached out to José with their questions about the application process and college more broadly. In the interview, he explained that he also returned to his high school to sponsor workshops on college preparation. José hoped that the workshops would target Students of Color who were not receiving the same support in college preparation as their White peers. Through these workshops, and informal interactions with students, he imparted cultural capital about the college preparation and application process. He also sought to bridge *fields* between

his home community and campus, so that this cultural capital could be shared.

Establishing and Nurturing Rapport

Establishing rapport with youth was important to building trust: students highlighted different commonalities they had with youth. For example, participants highlighted participating in the same program (Damien) or being of the same ethnicity (José). In the excerpt below, Alfonso, a Latino student majoring in engineering, references returning to his high school, which has a very high enrollment of Latina/o/xs. Alfonso returned to his high school and others to serve on college panels through the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), the student organization he was involved in throughout high school (junior chapter) and college.

> I was working with their outreach and I was doing basically what they did for me when I was in high school. I got the opportunity to do the same thing as a freshman and advocate how important a college degree is and advocate that it's actually possible. I was in the exact same shoes [as] a lot of the students… I didn't think it was possible, and I waited until halfway through my junior year to actually put an effort into making this dream of mine a reality. . . . The students take me a lot more seriously than I think they would any of my other fellow colleagues because I can honestly say that I sat in that room…. Students look forward to somebody that's been in their situation to talk about it and someone more in a less formal settings since I was a student there.

Alfonso suggested that he related to students on a deeper level than other volunteers, because he attended the same high school. This invited students to see themselves in him, because they could relate to his experiences. Alfonso was particularly dedicated to instilling the mindset, or habitus, that college is "actually possible," highlighting that some students doubted that attending college could be a reality for them, disrupting other messages students received. Notably, since Alfonso and other SHPE members have volunteered, several students from his high school have enrolled at Midwestern University. Alfonso's involvement with his community provided an outlet for him to maintain community attachment and worked to bridge the gaps between his home *field,* and that of his university.

Javier, a Latino student majoring in sociology, served on high school panels and relied on his experience of coming from the same community as a way to connect with youth:

> I feel like I could be a role model too. [It's] another thing I want to do. Last year I visited a high school and I spoke to students in my school about my experiences 'cause I really appreciated those girls coming to our school and talking to [us] about college. Because if they didn't come, honestly, I probably wouldn't be here. I probably wouldn't even care. So I'm trying to give back,

give back to my community too. I think it will be a good life story to tell to students. If I can get through it, you can get through it. So kind of relate to them. I've been doing a lot of that.

Javier established rapport by relating to students and sharing his experiences. He sought to encourage a new generation to pursue higher education, because he benefited from similar encouragement. He felt a sense of pride in ensuring youth from his community knew college was possible, suggesting that similar to him, many of them may not have believed that college was possible, due to opposing societal messages and perceived college barriers.

Grounding Outreach in Personal Experience

Students emphasized the ways they grounded their outreach efforts in their personal experiences; this theme has shone through in the stories previously presented and is illuminated in the excerpts below. Olivia, a Native American student majoring in botany, shared the importance of being able to give back to Native Americans on her reservation.

> I want to contribute to the community. I don't want to lose my sense of culture. I'm already losing what I know of the language.... I want to leave, get educated, get experienced, see the world, or a lot of things and then come back. Share the experiences, tell people there's more than just this Rez [reservation]. A lot of people will just think, "oh I'll get a job at the casino." Like no, they don't have that many jobs, there's 9,000 of us members, 5,000 live on the Rez and there's only a few hundred jobs at the casino, like no, no. I'll just kind of be a little bit of a role model for others on the reservation … I just want to come back, because I mean home is home. I'll always come back home.

Olivia reflected on her internal need to be a role model and to show tribal members that there are myriad opportunities and careers that can be explored beyond what they may have been exposed to, potentially altering their habitus. Serving as a role model allowed Olivia to give back to her community and maintain a strong cultural connection, which for Olivia, was paramount. She used her own experiences as a way to share this.

When Eduardo, a Latino student majoring in public relations, enrolled in college, he quickly became committed to encouraging others, particularly other Latina/o/x students, to strive for a college education. He recalled his own experiences to connect with, and motivate, students.

> I can sit in front of people and tell them that they can come to college, whether they are undocumented or not, whether they have the funds or not…. Just yesterday I was actually speaking to this woman that came to an outreach program that our campus held for high schoolers. I was on the panel, and I'm very open about, when I say I'm undocumented, I don't hesitate … I told 'em, look at yourselves and—look at the path that you are taking. I was in

> your shoes ... I told my story and she actually told me yesterday that she went home that day and she told her dad, "I want to go to college," because of the fact that I opened up and I told them my story ... When she told me that I was like, it's a sense of accomplishment. My story can actually change somebody's opinion on whether they want to come to college.

Eduardo sought to connect his experiences with others and encouraged students to view college as attainable, potentially altering their college-bound habitus. The woman he inspired reflected on her position as a citizen and decided to enroll in college. Eduardo's presence on the panels served as a visual marker that obstacles could be surmounted, and college could be accessed, all possible because students were able to connect with aspects of Eduardo's experience.

Marisol, a Latina student majoring in public policy and administration, worked with her sorority sisters to establish a mentoring program for young Latina women in her nearby high school. She suggested that Latina students seek help from someone they can trust and relate to.

> Because we have a mentoring program I feel like I can see myself as the girls … we went to the same high school, we relate on a lot of levels. I let them know, I'm like, honestly don't get caught up in the hype of college. Everyone comes here and they're like, "Oh my God parties, its freedom you can do whatever you want." Don't get caught up. I wish somebody would have told me how much freaking work you do, like homework wise … here they give you months, they could give you an entire semester to get this one paper done … I just wish I was better prepared for everything.

Marisol described the realities of college to her mentees. She emphasized the differences in the types of work assigned in high school and college. She took steps to ensure that her mentees were better prepared by sharing valuable cultural capital around faculty expectations and academic workloads. She encouraged her mentees to find a balance between academic and social opportunities, while keeping their academics a priority—all grounded in her own experiences with her transition to college. Marisol and her sorority sisters built relationships with the young women in the mentoring program and served as social capital all while bridging *fields* between home community and higher education. They hoped to influence the college-going dispositions (habitus) of these women by sharing their experience in higher education and encouraging the women to pursue it for themselves, all while applying cultural capital acquired through the mentoring program.

DISCUSSION

Communal uplift occurs as students actively resist societal messages around who can (and cannot) access college and intentionally serve their

communities by growing into and owning their role model identities, establishing and nurturing rapport with youth, and grounding their outreach in personal experiences to promote the development of a college-going habitus. Through these efforts, students owned the social and cultural capital they garnered growing up in their communities (Gonzalez, 2012; Kiyama, & Harper, 2018; Yosso, 2005); this capital included an emphasis on "we over me," a communalistic orientation that propelled students to give back. Students used these shared experiences to relate to youth from their communities and other communities of color (see discussion of racial capital by Waring, 2016). They bridged this capital with cultural capital valued in higher education, which they acquired through their own role models and experiences in college. In this process, they sought to impart cultural capital acquired in college as a way to minimize the barriers between the *fields* of their home communities and the *field* of higher education in efforts to disrupt the reproduction of inequality.

Theoretical Implications

Students of Color activated and shared their knowledge and experiences of higher education in efforts to help shape the college-bound habitus of youth. Students activated all forms of capital concurrently when engaging in communal uplift, encouraging youth from their communities, particularly youth of Color, to see college as available to them. Bourdieu's social reproduction theory created room for agency (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Reay, 2004); students used their agency to share cultural capital valued in college with youth from their communities. The students served as cultural bridges (Lopez & Stack, 2001), brokering between home communities and higher education. Cultural bridges created spaces where individuals can learn about, acquire, and try out new forms of capital valued in dominant institutions (higher education) in a culturally affirming space (2001). Students initiated the sharing of cultural capital, or college knowledge, valued in higher education that could not only transform the habitus of youth, but they did so in a way that was culturally nurturing. Stanton-Salazar (2011) examined the role of institutional agents (defined as people who hold hierarchical positions of high-status within an organization or institution) who transferred valued institutional cultural capital, such as resources, opportunities and programming valued within particular organizations. In the current study, participants served in similar roles, although they did not hold formal high-status positions as the individuals in Stanton-Salazar's study. Participants imparted knowledge and resources serving as cultural bridges, bridging the *fields* between home communities, communities of Color, and higher education. This is an important finding and contribution to the literature, one that can guide our understanding of how a communalistic orientation may influence Students of Color while enrolled in college. We can use this knowledge to support students in these efforts during college.

In their interviews, students emphasized the importance of sharing their backgrounds with youth they worked with in order to build rapport and trust, which enabled them to relate in ways that were more meaningful. Waring (2016) developed the concept of racial capital, where biracial individuals were found to have an "in" with other biracial individuals. Students in this study described feeling that they had an "in" with youth of Color from their communities, they often shared the same racial or ethnic background and were perceived to share other similar experiences, because they often grew up in the same communities or attended the same high schools. This "in" provided a level of trust that facilitated the participants' abilities to share their experiences with youth. Communal uplift contributes to the literature by providing a new avenue for understanding how students bridge their embodied cultural capital with their new cultural capital that is acquired in college, engaging in communal uplift by valuing interdependence and community attachment. This finding also illuminates how important trust and community building are to Students of Color. Other scholars have highlighted the vital role of trust (Luedke, 2017) and care (Rodriguez, Massey, Sáenz, 2016) for relationship building for Students of Color.

Current applications of social reproduction theory, which focus on the individual benefits as opposed to communal benefits (see analysis in Musoba & Baez, 2009), contradict students' sentiments about their own participation in higher education. Scholars have emphasized the ways Students of Color reject notions of individual success in preference of communal success (Conrad & Gasman, 2015; Gonzalez, 2012; Luedke, 2019; Luedke, 2020). We must consider the ways in which Bourdieu left room for agency in his theory and think about the ways in which Students of Color are using their collectivist orientations to challenge stratification. Other scholars encourage us to understand and use social reproduction theory more communally in order to accurately capture students' realities and Bourdieu's intentions (see Luedke, 2020; Musoba & Baez, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Students in my study used their capital in communal ways to help others, and they encouraged upward social mobility through accessing higher education. Their educational pursuits were intrinsically tied to their desires to give back to their communities by serving as role models demonstrating that accessing and persisting in college is possible.

I describe communal uplift as an agentic from of capital that embodies the ways Students of Color use their own experiences and backgrounds to encourage youth, particularly youth of Color, to view attending college as a viable option. This is consistent with how Yosso (2005) affirms one's cultural background as an asset in community cultural wealth. Students became agents of social change when they used their lived experiences for communal benefits. Students were valuable sources of social capital, linking their home community *field* and the higher education *field* as cultural bridges (Lopez

& Stack, 2001), or cultural brokers. Extending Yosso's (2005) social capital, the ability of students to rely on community resources and social contacts for support in navigating institutions, students in this study did not access a new *field* alone, rather, they ensured that members from their communities had opportunities and options to access, and prosper, in the *field* of higher education as well. They attempted to bridge the *fields* by bringing peers from college to their home communities and high schools. In these calculated acts, students physically bridged the *fields*. Moreover, they bridged these *fields* in figurative, yet substantive, ways when they shared cultural capital across and between *fields*. Much of the scholarship in higher education that employs social reproduction theory focuses on social or cultural capital, as a result the role of the *field* is under-investigated (Luedke, 2017). This study gives a stronger understanding of the ways that first-generation Students of Color are actively working to exchange capital between *fields* in efforts to develop the college-going habitus of youth from their communities with aspirations that college-going will increase generationally over time.

Students were acquiring capital, taking ownership of it, and then creating capital for others. Specifically, students shared embodied cultural capital (McDonough & Nuñez, 2007) on how to prepare for college in high school, the college application process, the role of financial aid and scholarships, and more generally shared their own experiences in college as a way to role model that college *is* possible. Stanton-Salazar (2011) described this behavior as the role of "empowerment agents" (p. 1068) who shared cultural capital valued in higher education and also sought to empower youth with a critical consciousness, "with the means to transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole" (p.1068) In sharing their embodied cultural capital, participants provided others with information and tools to access the *field* of higher education. Students worked to dispel stereotypes of who was college eligible, requirements for college entrance, and what college entailed. Participants worked toward garnering institutionalized cultural capital through the acquisition of their college degrees (McDonough & Nuñez, 2007). The role of objectified capital did not arise as a central concept; it was also not probed for in interviews.

Much of the research on the concept of habitus merely references, or appropriates, the term habitus, rather than operationalizing the concept within research (Reay, 2004). Cleft habitus occurs during an experience of transition when someone experiences two habitus concurrently (Bourdieu, 2004). Lee and Kramer (2012) conducted a mixed-methods study analyzing cleft habitus and mobility for low-income college students at selective colleges. Students in their sample minimized their contact with friends and families from their home communities in an attempt to avoid negative interactions as a result of differing habitus. Lee and Kramer suggest that as a result, participants lost out on the opportunity to become "multi-class navigators," suggesting

that by minimizing relationships with family and friends from their home communities, they were missing out on opportunities to pass along valuable cultural capital that could benefit long-term familial and communal mobility. While Lee and Kramer's study consisted of students from multiple racial and ethnic groups, their sample was overwhelmingly White. My findings demonstrate the ways Students of Color made concerted efforts to navigate and intentionally bridge multiple *fields* simultaneously. Students bridged connections to their home communities with their experiences in college to empower youth, expanding their habitus in ways that may include college as a viable option. Students were accumulating additional forms of cultural and social capital, but not at the expense of previously held values and relationships (see Luedke, 2020; Luedeke et al., 2019; Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016; Yosso, 2005). This is an important contribution to the literature, one that helps us better understand how bridging *fields* and exchanging capital has the potential to increase college access, potentially impacting college-going generationally and uplifting communities.

Asset based research with communities of Color has highlighted the important and valued role of education in Native American (Brayboy et al. 2012), Latina/o/x (Luedke, 2020; Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Sáenz et al., 2018), and Black communities (McCallum, 2017; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). While there appears to be an implicit link connecting the emphasis on education and communal efforts toward upward social mobility, these findings contribute to building this link explicitly, through communal uplift. My findings reveal that communal uplift is fostered when Students of Color work toward transforming the college-bound habitus of youth from their communities by resisting societal messages and serving as visible resources promoting college access and by verbally sharing their capital, garnered in their home communities and in higher education, in ways that seek to bridge both *fields,* to contribute to upward mobility—disrupting the reproduction of inequality.

Practical Implications

Communal uplift benefits students' commitments to their communities, institutional outreach goals, and society by increasing access to higher education, leading to greater social mobility. We must continue to push the boundaries of the *field* of higher education, ensuring that capital accumulated in home communities and on college campuses are valued and shared in ways that build upon and expand capital already present in communities of Color (see Gonzalez, 2012; Luedke, 2020; Yosso, 2005). Higher education institutions can enhance students' sense of belonging when they nurture students' collectivist orientation (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017).

We must build stronger bridges between communities, particularly marginalized communities, and institutions of higher education (Kiyama & Harper, 2018; Luedke, 2020). Strengthening and expanding college access

programs to work directly with enrolled students in recruiting potential students is warranted. Students have been informally involved in sharing information about college, and we can do more to formally recognize and reward this work by acknowledging students' roles as cultural bridges and collegiate recruiters. Several participants engaged in this work through involvement in culturally based student organizations. Institutions could recognize and incentivize this communal work and college promotion by supporting student organizations through financially supporting these efforts and providing institutional recognition (for the students and advisors of the organizations who support and promote this work). Institutions typically rely on full-time staff to fill admissions offices, but what if we hired (more) Students of Color as part-time college recruiters? Hiring these students could produce myriad benefits, including on campus employment opportunities and an institutionally supported way to bridge *fields* of community and higher education. This study reaffirms the unique opportunities students have in serving as cultural bridges (Lopez & Stack, 2001), bridging home communities and higher education. Hiring Students of Color would strengthen relationships between racially and ethnically underrepresented communities and colleges and universities. If we seek to be beacons of access and inclusion, we must do more to increase access and include students from communities of Color.

CONCLUSION

Communal uplift occurs as students give back to their communities by engaging in the following intentional and resistant acts to promote the development of a college-going habitus of youth of Color: 1) growing into and owning their role model identities; 2) establishing and nurturing rapport with youth; and 3) grounding their outreach in their personal experiences. Students engaged in these intentional acts as they attempted to disrupt structures and notions that impeded communities of Color from accessing higher education. Students sought to increase access to higher education through their communal uplift efforts. Engaging in communal uplift can contribute to upward mobility when *fields* are bridged and capital is shared in nurturing ways.

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