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## **Information Is Not Enough: Cultural Capital, Cultural Capital Translators, and College Access for Disadvantaged Students**

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## **Abstract**

Taken-for-granted aspects of the college application process present serious cultural barriers to disadvantaged students. Analyzing ethnographic data collected at two low-income, public high schools, this working paper seeks to understand subtle cultural elements that impede disadvantaged students, how school staff in a new program try to identify and overcome these cultural barriers, and how students respond. Consistent with cultural capital theory, these staff act as “cultural capital translators” to help students acquire subtle, taken-for-granted information and skills that colleges require, and help them overcome barriers to college-related activities. The researchers find that students have difficulties with three cultural tasks in the college application process—seeing the pros and cons of the various college options, knowing how to identify which options match their own interests and needs, and knowing which attributes colleges value in admissions and how to present themselves accordingly. They consider how cultural capital translators help students understand these requirements and overcome the associated barriers, and implications for policy reforms to improve college access.

# **Information is Not Enough: Cultural Capital, Cultural Capital Translators and College Access for Disadvantaged Students**

Michelle E. Naffziger and James E. Rosenbaum

## **INTRODUCTION**

While reformers focus on removing the material barriers to college access, are there cultural capital barriers that they are failing to see? In the status attainment models of the 1970s, students made college plans, and everything else seemed to follow (Jencks et al. 1972; Sewell and Hauser 1975). In the days when few low-SES students had college plans, that may well have been true. However, reformers now tell all students to attend college, and indeed 92% of high school graduates have college plans (Rosenbaum 2001). Nonetheless serious problems remain, particularly for disadvantaged students. In a large city school system with a high proportion of disadvantaged students, 35% of seniors who report plans to attend a specific college the following fall actually do not show up at any college a few months later (Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth 2006). Not surprisingly, the discrepancies are much greater for low-SES students and low-SES high schools.

While reformers focus on removing the material barriers to college access, cultural capital theory suggests other barriers that may go unnoticed. As we shall show, many aspects of the college choice process that middle-class actors take for granted pose difficulties for disadvantaged students. These barriers may not be intended, or even noticed, but they may impede college access. When, as we discover, high-achieving students avoid considering selective private colleges because of sticker prices (which aren't actual prices), when they avoid considering an out-of-town college because of a desire to save gasoline, when they only consider colleges attended by someone they know (and they know few people who've attended college), when parents discourage college because they think the college is taking their child away, when a student avoids mentioning a great honor because she didn't realize its significance (and it was never praised at home), when a student's college application lists his gang email (which is a symbol of pride in his neighborhood), or when students delay college until they earn enough money to pay for four-years of college, these misconceptions pose cultural barriers to college, while students will seem to be making free choices. In each case, students are making cultural interpretations about meaning

and value which seem reasonable from their experience, but the problem arises because their experience is limited. In each case, the college coach identified the cultural problem, and helped students see alternative perspectives to consider in making their choices and actions. In some cases, the problem had not even emerged, e.g., anticipated sticker shock in the summer after graduation, but the college coach expected that it would arise and took precautionary action.

Annette Lareau has shown cultural capital barriers for children's school success and parents' ability to help their children respond to teachers' demands (Lareau and Weininger 2003; Lareau 2000; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau 1987, 2003). This theory suggests that disadvantaged students not only need information about rules, they also need specific "cultural capital" -- subtle, taken-for-granted, information, understanding, and skills. It also suggests that certain activities and attitudes common in middle-class culture may support college choice and enrollment, but their importance is not seen by disadvantaged students. Cultural capital theory poses important questions about the implicit and subtle cultural requirements built into the college process.

This study examines whether cultural capital may pose barriers to college access, what kinds of cultural capital, and how it is manifest. Moreover, we study two high schools in which a staff person takes the role of "cultural capital translator" (our term), and we describe the kinds of translations this person does and speculate on their influence.

American society has opened college access to all, but has it removed the cultural capital requirements? In the following, we observed three kinds of requirements. To navigate the college application process, students must be able to see the pros and cons of the various college options, know how to identify which options match their own interests and needs, and know what attributes colleges value in admissions and how to present themselves accordingly. We consider how a cultural capital translator can help students understand these requirements and overcome the associated barriers.

What is remarkable in these observations is students' mistakes-- many are plausible, but wrong. What is also remarkable is that middle-class readers, like middle-class policymakers, will be surprised that anyone could make some of these mistakes. Indeed, these mistakes contrast with what researchers have seen among middle-class students (McDonough 1997, p. 357; Naffziger and Rosenbaum

Unpublished). These mistakes, and middle-class observers' difficulty in even imagining that these mistakes would occur, suggest the possibility that reformers must learn to anticipate the many ways college access may be impeded, not just by material resources, but also by lack of cultural capital.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Following Bourdieu (1977; 1984; 2001; 1990), research on the role of cultural capital in education assumes that gatekeepers use assessments of cultural capital as a basis for reproducing inequality through granting or denying educational rewards such as good grades or college access. Toward that end, scholars have considered how cultural capital influences students' success in school, college admission decisions, educational attainment, and the role that higher education itself plays as a site for students to develop cultural capital (DiMaggio and Useem 1982; DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1987; DiMaggio and Useem 1978; Kaufman and Gabler 2004; Farkas et al. 1990; Lareau and Weininger 2003; Lareau 2000; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau 1987, 2003; Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008; Maas and Aschaffenburg 1997).

Despite reformers' great interest in increasing college access to low-SES students, researchers have devoted little attention to the implicit rules, or social know-how required by the college application process itself and how students can obtain and learn when and how to use this know-how. Work by Janice Bloom provides a promising start for examining these questions. Bloom suggests that students require cultural capital defined as "information about higher education and the application process" (Bloom 2007, p. 357) in order to navigate the college application process. As Bloom explains, middle and upper class parents have firsthand experience of applying to and attending college and can draw on this experience to assist their children in this process. Poor and working-class students and their parents often know little about the college worlds they hope to enter and fear "sending their children off to a world that is alien to them" (2007, p. 361).

While we agree that information about college is one form of cultural capital that all students require in order to apply to college, we will broaden Bloom's important work. Besides acquiring information, we find that they need more, including knowing what to do with information once they

receive it. In addition, Bloom pays little attention to the difficulties students have in coping with the specific demands of the college application and choice process, or on how school staff might help them cope with these difficulties and draw on cultural capital they already possess for these tasks.

As highlighted by Lareau and Horvat (1999), cultural capital is valuable only in certain contexts and it must be activated in order to be useful at all. Actors develop strategies to determine when and how to use the cultural capital they already possess, as in the case of Latino youth studied by Carter who “deploy culture to gain status” (Carter 2005, p. 6) within their peer group or as in the case of African American youth who figure out when to use the “dominant” forms of cultural capital valued by educators and the “non-dominant” forms of cultural capital valued by their peers and communities (Carter 2003). Carter shows us how students learn to use cultural capital in the contexts where it will be useful, but does not suggest strategies for how others can help students learn to do this.

However, going beyond these studies, this study also examines dynamic properties of conveying cultural capital and students' subsequent actions. Like Bloom, we seek to identify implicit cultural-capital requirements of the college process (including some aspects she didn't note), but we also examine how school staff try to act as "cultural capital translators" to discern and explain cultural capital. These staff members try to interpret the information students receive to improve “transparency” (Stephan, Goble, and Rosenbaum 2008) to the middle-class college world they are hoping to enter. Acquiring cultural capital and learning how and when to use that new capital and the cultural capital students already possess is a dynamic process; the observations and analyses in this paper can indicate the mechanisms that explain this process.

This study examines two research questions. First, what cultural capital barriers do students encounter as they try to engage in the college application process? Second, how does a cultural capital translator try to help students overcome these barriers? Without such understanding, policy reforms will inevitably fall short of our goals, and disadvantaged students will be blamed for their failures, when subtle cultural barriers are actually at fault. We argue that cultural capital translators can help students overcome these barriers, and we also suggest other ways to address these barriers.

## **The Program: Cultural Capital Translators**

This program, called the "postsecondary coach program" hired youth workers to explain and facilitate the college process to all students in these schools. In 12 high schools with high proportions of low-income and minority students, postsecondary coaches, who are experienced in working with disadvantaged youth, work in tandem with guidance counselors to assist students to apply for college. The coach program provides a space, computers and internet access, and one coach for each high school.

In a roomful of students (usually comprising 4-20 students in any given period), the staff person closely oversees all aspects of students' college application process, providing college information, reducing cultural misunderstandings, and helping students take appropriate actions. While the program calls them "post-secondary coaches" or "college coaches," it is more appropriate to consider them "cultural capital translators," because much of their time is spent explaining aspects of the college process which are well-known to middle-class students. The nature of their cultural capital translations will be seen in our subsequent description.

College coaches work closely with groups of students encouraging certain activities and attitudes, and explaining and assisting the various steps in the college process. Coaches focus students' thinking on creating priorities. They discuss college admission requirements and likelihood of acceptance. They encourage students to acquire additional information about colleges from handbooks and from other individuals. Consistent with cultural capital theory, they act as "cultural capital translators" to take the customary unstated elements of the college choice process, and spell out the subtle, taken-for-granted, information and skills that are required. We are able to uncover previously hidden cultural barriers to college access by observing the problems that students encounter which the designers of the college process (and we) never imagined, and by observing the ways these staff help students understand the implicit cultural rules and meanings in the college process.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

Identifying the barriers students face and the help they need in responding to them presents a methodological challenge. Observation of students as they learn about and seek information on colleges,

meet with college representatives and complete financial aid forms and college applications presents an ideal opportunity to collect data with which to address our research questions. This kind of observation would not be possible at many schools because students' interactions with counselors are short and infrequent and much of students' college search and application work is done at home or in the library. However, the postsecondary coach program presents a unique opportunity for observing the college application process because it provides a college resource room where students come on a regular basis to seek help with their college application process.

We base our analyses on ethnographic observations collected at two Chicago public high schools with cultural capital translators. Although a majority of students in both schools are disadvantaged, one has a much higher proportion of disadvantaged students. The two schools also differ in their ethnic composition; the student body at one school is primarily African American and the student body at the second school is primarily Latino. The coach at the first school<sup>1</sup> is African American and the coach at the second school is Latino. What is important for this research, which enables the researcher to observe the college application process, the cultural capital components, and the ways they can be translated, is that both high schools have a college resource room and a special staff person. This room enables the researcher to observe the college process as it is happening in these two different contexts. It is unusual to be able to observe students during the college application process, because it's often done in the privacy of students' homes. Both schools also have this staff person, who answers students' questions and advises their application activities, so the researcher can see how a cultural capital translator can react to students' cultural capital difficulties, and often we can observe how students respond to their actions.

Based on more than 75 hours of participant observation, these data were collected over a period of one and a half academic years. After each observation of day-to-day activities in the college resource room, and in many activities (college fairs, college representatives' talks, financial aid and college application programs), observations were recorded in field notes. Guided by grounded theory and using a process of inductive coding, we identified instances where coaches provided students with basic information, but also instances where students encountered difficulty with the college application process



and how cultural capital translators provided or helped develop social skills and know-how in order to overcome these difficulties. We grouped similar “difficulties” together and present these findings here.

While we don't have "a control group" without a cultural capital translator, we will employ this approach in future work using quantitative analyses analyzing differences between schools that do and do not have this staff person. What quantitative analysis cannot do is to examine whether indeed disadvantaged students face cultural capital obstacles, what forms they take, and how the cultural capital translator detects and addresses them. These process issues are the task of this study.

## **FINDINGS**

The college choice model assumes several kinds of cultural capital --that all students can see the pros and cons of the various college options, they know how to identify which options match their own interests and needs, and they know what attributes colleges value in admissions and how to present themselves accordingly. In observing the students in these urban schools, the vast majority of whom are low-income and ethnic minorities, we find they have difficulty with all three of these assumptions, difficulties which the cultural capital translator takes actions to reduce.

### **Seeing the Pros and Cons of the Various College Options**

While reformers generally assume that all students can see the pros and cons of the various college options and can make informed choices about them, we repeatedly saw examples where this was not true. Indeed, some options preferred by middle-class students are not considered, not valued, or not acted on, until college coaches provide explanation.

Studies of middle-class high schools find that most people assume that all students understand college options and their relative value. Even back in 1963, researchers described this process in an upper middle-class suburb (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963). Yet, although low-SES students living in low-SES urban communities may report college plans, they may have difficulty seeing the value of various options.

Research suggests that when students value and make choices upon certain attributes,

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the anonymity of our research participants we omit school names and distinguishing characteristics.

specifically: selective colleges, on-campus residence, and colleges with programs that match students' goals, higher college enrollment and persistence results (Tierney, Corwin, and Colyar 2004). Middle-class students generally value these three qualities (McDonough 1997; Naffziger and Rosenbaum Unpublished). We find that low-income students in our study have difficulties with all three, and college coaches help students with them.

While research finds that students are more likely to complete college if they attend more selective colleges (Melguzio 2008; Long 2008), disadvantaged students often do not even consider these colleges. Although these students understand that these colleges are somehow better, they mostly think they are not meant for them because of their high tuition. For students coming from families with annual earnings less than \$25,000 a year, tuitions of double that are incomprehensible. College coaches help students see these colleges as affordable, and as a result, as a real possibility. One high-achieving student we observed was on the verge of giving up considering a selective private college because of its high tuition. The college coach explained that some private schools can be cheaper than public schools, that the "sticker price" is not the actual price at colleges that have scholarship funds. She encouraged the student to apply to selective schools and that doing so is her best way to get aid. Without this guidance, students like this one might not see schools that could actually be a good fit for them.

Middle class students see dormitory living as part of the college experience (McDonough 1997; Naffziger and Rosenbaum Unpublished), and research shows that dormitory living strongly benefits social integration and college persistence (Tinto 1993). However, many of the students in our study saw dormitory living as unfamiliar and undesirable, and they don't see the value of living on campus. As one student worked on her application for a large state school where her college coach had attended, the student said she'd prefer to live with a family in the area and asked if this is a problem. The coach explained that while the student could petition to live with a family, most colleges require students to live on campus the first year and that doing so was a good idea because "*living in dorms gives you a chance to meet people*" (fieldnotes). When another student asked her college coach if she should live on campus or at home, the coach encouraged living on campus: "*If [your mom will permit] staying on campus [as] an option, then you should do that*" (fieldnotes). Although students saw many disadvantages to living in

dormitories, the coaches helped them see advantages.

Low-income youth who haven't traveled much are often reluctant to consider more distant colleges. They see the disadvantages of distance, but don't realize possible advantages. As part of identifying realistic options for college, college coaches help students evaluate colleges on a broader set of criteria than those that students might come up with themselves and to consider additional criteria which students find meaningful. Students are concerned about distance and use this concern to rule out potential options:

*Students started talking about Knox College. Someone asked where it was. The college coach said, "Gaylesburg, Illinois. It's a little over three hours away." A student commented, "If you want to waste money on gas then it'd be a good place to go." The college coach rejoined: "Knox has the only Peace Corps prep program in the country. And they have one of the top English programs." (fieldnotes)*

The college coach encourages this student to evaluate this college based on the quality of its programs instead of solely on distance. Without the guidance of the college coach, this student would have ruled out this college on the basis of distance alone.

Like students, parents also have difficulty seeing the value of dormitories and distant colleges. In order for students to see a college as a valuable option, they must feel that they have parent support. While parents want the best for their children, they don't always see the value of their college plans. One college coach reports that parents often see college as a challenge to the family:

*A lot of our parents don't want their kids to go away, particularly daughters. Parents have come and talked to me and asked, 'Why am I trying to send their children away?' (Emphasis ours). They see anything out of the home as bad. I tell them that it's temporary. It's good for them for the long term. It's a good thing. (fieldnotes)*

This coach explains that most students in this high school are first generation college students. Their parents have not attended college and they don't see the value of leaving home.

Students also have fears that they don't easily admit. Although students did not report this to me, many students reported fears to the college coaches. After working with students over several weeks, the college coaches report that many students in their school are "scared to go away" (fieldnotes), and one of our college coaches suggests that the African American boys she works with are even more scared to go away than the African American girls (which may reflect realistic concerns about discrimination or threats they have faced).

Sometimes seeing value requires discovery. Many of the students we observed prefer colleges where they know someone. However, since they know very few people who have attended college, their options are limited. A college coach helped students figure out who else from their school was planning to attend a particular college, so that they would feel more support. College coaches can also supplement students' social contacts. We observed several instances of coaches linking their students to alumni from their high schools who have gone on to college. Knowing that a prior graduate of their school has gone to a particular college makes that college seem more familiar. In the course of a visit from a parent of a former graduate, a coach learned that the graduate had a great first year at Stanford University. While Stanford is an internationally renowned school to many middle class families, the discovery of this prior graduate's experience became important information for advising other students to consider Stanford. As the coach told the mother, "*For students, their frame of reference is whether someone they know goes there. If they don't know someone who goes there, they don't think it's a good school*" (fieldnotes).

While the college reform literature emphasizes making college affordable, reforms rarely make simple proposals to reduce tuition or hand students money. Most reforms require complex procedures and substantial cultural understandings in order for financial resources to be accessed. The students we observed had three kinds of difficulties. In some cases, students lack basic facts that are well-known by middle class students (Naffziger and Rosenbaum Unpublished). Perhaps having over-learned the cultural lesson of avoiding debt, one student at a college fair we observed asked a college representative if he would have to pay for all four years of college at once. Sometimes students don't ask; they just make assumptions, and base their plans on those assumptions. Although he hadn't said this to his counselor, another student told the researcher that he planned to delay college because he wanted to work in order to save up for all four years before starting school. Mistakes like these can be easily corrected by providing information; however, middle-class adults may not realize that these issues can arise.

Correcting some misconceptions about affording college requires more than just providing information. It requires students to understand the limits of traditional values on "self-reliance" and on how much sacrifice must be made. Applying for aid is complex, and as college coaches help students complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), which is required to get Federal and

State aid, they discover that students' values can interfere. Although the middle-class designers probably did not realize it, the form requires extensive cultural knowledge. As one college coach reports, "*I like to highlight things and make sure they know to accept work-study and loans. Because ... if they don't [check the box which says they'll] accept loans, then they just get stuck with all the [added] debt [of unsubsidized loans]*" (fieldnotes). Students have many misunderstandings about this process. One student said, "I don't want to be indebted to anyone, I want to pay for college on my own." Another student delayed completing his FAFSA application because he felt that if he took the "*free money*" from FAFSA, he "wouldn't appreciate" it (fieldnotes). Another said he would only take a "loan as a last resort," and, while there's nothing wrong with that attitude, he didn't realize that this "last resort" must be checked early -- students need to check the appropriate box expressing willingness to take a subsidized loan early, in order to be able to request one later.

College coaches must teach students the difference between assets and income, and how much sacrifice government grants expect. While the government expects families to make some sacrifice, one student seemed to think a more extreme sacrifice was being required. A coach told this student that the government did not expect his parents to rent out his little sister's bedroom, in response to a FAFSA question on rentable space (fieldnotes).

When approaching a new complex domain like scholarships, students are understandably reluctant to move quickly. College coaches help students enter this activity and overcome reluctance. They help students learn about scholarships and complete scholarship applications. As part of this process, college coaches compile and distribute information about scholarships and scholarship deadlines. They match students to particular scholarships on an individual basis, such as a musician encouraged to apply for a marching band scholarship (fieldnotes). Sometimes they encourage many students to apply simultaneously for a relevant scholarship. For example, one day while we were observing, a college coach, having just learned about a scholarship deadline, convinced between 15-20 students to apply for an "*unmet need scholarship*" (fieldnotes). All of those applications were started, completed, and mailed off that day while we observed. (It is noteworthy that quantitative analyses have shown that students in coach schools (which are unselective) are more likely to be successful in receiving scholarships than in other

schools, even schools with selective enrollment, unpublished).

Given the thousands of scholarships with different requirements and different payouts, students must necessarily evaluate various options. Coaches also help students negotiate the subtleties of the scholarship application process, such as determining which scholarships are worth the effort. Coaches warned students about scholarships with small amounts of money or criteria that don't match the student. However, a college coach encouraged students to apply for the highly prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship, won by 27 CPS students last year because unlike other scholarships, it does not require reapplication each year. Finally, they edit and offer suggestions for essays and help students strategically apply for aid. For example, college coaches have learned that students must list an Illinois school first on their FAFSA application in order to qualify for the Illinois MAP grant and advise their students to fill out their applications accordingly. Without hands-on advice from college coaches, students cannot be expected to understand these subtleties.

Moreover, coaches sometimes must anticipate problems that students don't state. One coach explained that although students go through the college application activities in senior year, "*sticker shock*" sometimes occurs in summer after senior year as students or parents realize the full cost of college. To help prevent this scenario, this college coach helps students plan for how to cover expenses and hosts financial aid prediction workshops to help students anticipate early what the full cost will be.

### **College Match: Choosing Schools that Fit Students' Interests and Needs**

Navigating through the college application process and choosing schools which fit students' individual interests and needs requires familiarity with college culture, college demands and the relationship between education credentials and future employment. McDonough (1997) found that all students use cultural capital to guide their college search process, and students from different backgrounds had different understandings of what types of schools they can and should attend. Whereas middle and upper class students in her study saw selective schools as appropriate matches, low income students saw community colleges or local campuses as appropriate. Students then organized their college search process around this class-based "range of acceptable institutions" (p. 155). Familiarity with college

culture is required in order for students to see beyond this limited range of options and determine which colleges are a good fit for individual students. Without this form of cultural capital, student mistakes can range in their significance, with some adding extra roadblocks to the college application process and others derailing college attendance altogether.

College coaches help students discover options that they had not considered. One college coach explained her role as follows:

*I help kids think about schools they haven't heard of before. Kids like to go to schools where they know someone, and they want to go to college with their friends... I'm trying to help kids apply to more than just the "Saturday afternoon schools," the –[for-profit] schools they see [advertising] on TV for football. (fieldnotes)*

In addition, coaches help students with a much more subtle task: that of determining which schools suit them individually. One student who is considering a large state school with few student services is advised by the coach: *"You know it, I know it, you need more support [services in college]."* Without the help of the college coach, this student would not have known to consider support services as an important element to look for in a college. Identifying which schools are a good fit for them requires a self-understanding, which is a form of cultural capital.

College coaches help students apply to schools that match their interests, financial situations and personal needs. One student who knows that she wants to study nursing tells the college coach she is going to put "undecided" as her major choice because she is unsure of whether or not a particular school has a nursing program. The college coach advises her against this choice: *"If you're interested in nursing, why don't you just go to a school that has an undergraduate nursing program?" [The college coach] pulls out a book of Illinois state schools. She tells the student to go to their websites, under academics and see if they offer nursing (fieldnotes).* In this instance, the student was focusing on a college because it was familiar, and the college coach prevents her from attending this poorly matched school where she can't pursue her desired career.

Students often ask college coaches for their opinions about schools. College coaches provide their opinions but are clear about which criteria they use to make this decision. One student asked her college coach *"What's the best fit school for me? Is North Park a good fit?" (fieldnotes).* The college coach

replied: “Well, it’s Christian, which I know you want, and it’s affordable. Let’s see what happens when you get admission letters” (fieldnotes). Another student interested in completing a program in car sound systems asked his college coach whether one school he is considering is “a good school?” (fieldnotes):

*College coach: “Yeah, it’s a community college. Some schools on TV aren’t accredited. They try to get you in and out and done. Yeah, it’s a good program, they help you find jobs. A few friends of mine went there and they found jobs.” (fieldnotes)*

The student asks whether he would need to get more education. The college coach explains that students choose between certificate and degree programs and checks which the student wants to do: *College coach: “I say degree, but some just want to get a certificate and get a job quick. No? You want to invest? Become a professional? Cool.” The student starts filling out the Triton application (fieldnotes).* College coaches help students to identify their educational and career priorities and to ensure that the schools they are applying to meet those priorities.

While middle-class people take the choice process for granted, some cultural devices need to be learned. In the college resource room, we observed a student trying to decide between the schools that had accepted him, and a counselor showed the student how to make a pros-and-cons list, and guided him through the process. She helped him make lists for each school and walked him through considering the pluses and minuses of each:

*“When they finish writing out these [lists of] yeses and nos, [the college counselor] says, “Now, in terms of money, we’d put them in this order. But in terms of yeses, they’d go in this order” ...As they talk about money, the student shares that he hasn’t received all of the financial information from all of his schools. [The college counselor] is surprised: “Well of course you can’t make a decision if you don’t have that information! Let’s get on the horn.” They start calling schools to track down the student’s missing aid packages. (fieldnotes)*

The counselor helps this student compile a pros-and-cons list, evaluate the schools in terms of his personal priorities, and also instructs him to track down missing information that he requires to make his decision.

Without this cultural capital translation, these students often misinterpret information about colleges; resulting in poor school choice. One student planned to reject a college acceptance because he interpreted a "conditional admission" which required a summer semester as indicating that this school “didn't really want” him (fieldnotes). Another student planned to reject a college acceptance from a



selective college because the college had compulsory chapel, and he didn't want a heavy religious emphasis. He reconsidered and accepted after the coach explained, "*It's chapel, not church. At black schools they have motivational speakers and stuff in chapel*" (fieldnotes). In both instances, college coaches helped students translate cultural capital into terms that made sense and seemed relevant and appropriate to them.

### **Learning to Identify Attributes Colleges Value In Admissions and How to Present Themselves Accordingly**

The college application process requires students to market and present themselves in ways that would be valued by colleges. This self-marketing and self-presentation takes on two forms: identifying their valuable attributes and presenting effective self-images.

#### Seeing What Colleges Value

By the beginning of high school, middle-class students know that colleges value extracurricular activities, and many students choose activities that fit the colleges they seek to attend. In contrast, many of the students we observed were not aware of the importance of extracurricular activities. One of the more observant students figured it out early in senior year, after seeing the questions posed on a college application form. After seeing the questions on extracurricular activities, and the 1-3 inches of space following the questions, she realized she needed to do something to fill in those spaces. So, for the first time, in the beginning of senior year, she was joining extra clubs "*Just to put something there...*". She was afraid she wouldn't get in to college if this 3-inch space only listed one activity. No one had ever told her about those questions and no one had advised her to add activities to fill space on the application; however, she inferred those spaces needed to be filled if one was to be admitted to college.

Many college applications require personal statements which ask students to discuss meaningful experiences. Colleges request these essays without much explanation, as if they assume that students automatically understand what kinds of experiences colleges would value. This understanding is not automatic in the students we observed, and as a result, many struggle with the essay. For instance, a Hispanic female student that we observed couldn't think of any achievement. The college coach

suggested writing about her selection as an Illinois State Scholar. This is a prestigious award given on the basis of grades and test scores, and it doesn't require application. The student doesn't understand and says, *"I didn't do anything for that!"* The coach helps her translate her experiences into terms that will be meaningful for a college:

*Sure you did. You had good grades and a good ACT score...[You're in the] top 10% out of ... high school seniors in Illinois. ... You can write about how you feel to be one of the best students in the state. About how you felt when you told your mom.* (fieldnotes)

Interestingly, based on our observations of counseling activities in a middle class suburban high school in a separate project, we observed that middle class students also make this mistake; but their parents help them understand what counts as qualifications and how to describe them in applications. In effect, what the college application procedures assume is automatic often comes from the oversight by educated parents. This kind of oversight is not available to most of the disadvantaged students we observed.

In contrast, this student's mother did not recognize the value of this accomplishment: *"She didn't care. She didn't know what it was"* (fieldnotes). By identifying the value of this achievement in ways middle class colleges recognize, the coach helped this student activate her cultural capital. The college coach made it possible for this student to recognize that she had an accomplishment she could talk about and why, exactly, a college would find this experience meaningful.

### Students Learning How to Present Themselves

Students also encounter barriers in knowing how to present themselves to colleges and college representatives. They don't automatically know how they should dress or what they should say when visiting a college or meeting with a representative, or which parts of their personal identity are appropriate to share on their college applications. College coaches help students overcome this challenge by demonstrating and teaching the social know-how required when interacting with colleges. College coaches explain what students should wear, such as when one coach discouraged wearing sweatpants to a scholarship fair, and how students should speak with college representatives, both in person and on the phone: *"When we make business phone calls, we need to speak slowly and clearly. I know it sounds ridiculous, but we can't use our regular voices"* (fieldnotes).

Appropriate self-presentation also applies to written applications. College coaches advise students on the appropriate physical appearance of their applications (neat, readable handwriting) as well as much more subtle aspects of the application. For example, in reviewing one student's cover letter, the coach advised against saying he'd be "*willing*" to go to their college. She told him that "*he's not doing them a favor,*" and instead he should say he would be interested in attending their institution. This student's application listed his email, which included a local gang name. She told him he could keep that email account for fun, but that he'd also want to have a more professional address for college applications and she suggested free accounts and gave him an example. In a neighborhood where gang affiliation is known by everyone and a symbol of pride, students may not realize that colleges would see it differently.

On the other hand, disadvantaged students often do not understand the college hierarchy, and realize when college admission is easy, and sometimes students put enormous efforts into perfunctory tasks. Not understanding this difference can result in lost time and frustration. For example, we observed one student spend almost two class periods on her essay for a nonselective area college which would admit her automatically upon submission of a complete application. The student did not give up this task until the coach insisted that she use an essay she had written for another school and focus her attention on another school's application (fieldnotes).

## **CONCLUSION**

The high school-college transition is a key event in American society, and with a wide variety of colleges offered, our society is rightly proud of the choices offered. However, the value of choice very much depends on students' seeing the options and understanding their value and implications. Without such information and understanding, choices are unlikely to offer much benefit.

The college choice model assumes that all students can see the pros and cons of the various college options, they know how to identify which options match their own interests and needs, and they know what attributes colleges value in admissions and how to present themselves accordingly. In observing the students of these urban schools, we find they have difficulty with all three of these assumptions, difficulties which the cultural capital translator can reduce.

Is this really cultural capital? Some of these examples involve providing information and as such, might be considered as simple counseling activity. However, there are several reasons to consider it cultural capital:

1. Much of this information would not need to be presented to middle-class students. It's not just that middle-class students know this-- their parents closely oversee the college process, and make sure their children know this. In fact, Mitchell Stevens' (2007) recent ethnographic work of admissions processes at a small highly competitive liberal arts college finds that students' parents, most of whom are from the upper and upper-middle classes, are so well apprised of the specific requirements of the college application process that they organize their and their children's lives around meeting and whenever possible exceeding these requirements. This process sometimes starts even before the child is born.
2. Many of these examples are not just about information, they are about meaning and value which is closely tied to access to opportunity. Sixty percent of the student body at the liberal arts college studied by Stevens (2007) were from out of state, and parents and students fought hard for the privilege of attending this school, despite its distance from their homes. For many middle-class students, part of the meaning of college may be to live on their own, away from parents. Indeed, we can't even imagine middle-class parents asking a college counselor, "why are you trying to take my daughter away from me?" The value of living in dormitories, of attending particular colleges, of considering distant colleges (and even preferring them) are clearly valued in middle-class communities, while many students in these two urban schools did not see these values until the coach pointed them out.
3. We surmise that part of the middle-class understanding about college is a standard image of what Brint and Rotondi's respondents define as "the full college experience," which includes "a style of life in which opportunities to spend time with friends, participate in campus activities, and 'enjoy life'" (2008, p. 15). This is implicitly based on living on campus. Disadvantaged students we observed did not talk about college in this way, and the coach provides the first exposure to these ideas for many of them.

Of course the usual way this cultural capital is conveyed is by parents (Bloom 2007). Unfortunately, parents who have not attended college often can't convey appropriate information, meanings, and values. Without parents who possess this cultural capital, students encounter many difficulties in applying to college. Our study has important implications for stratification research and

social mobility research. In the tradition of Bourdieu, we show how access to opportunity is indeed regulated by cultural capital; however, we also identify examples where cultural capital was changed and highlight the dynamic nature of conveying cultural capital. With the help of a cultural capital translator, students are able to overcome cultural capital barriers by seeing college as appropriate, identifying schools that fit their interests and needs, and identifying their own attributes that colleges would value.

The college coach is a particularly good way to convey this information because the college coach interacts with students in small groups at the very time that they are doing their college search and applications. Whenever a student asks a question that may be of general interest, the coach calls for everyone's attention and gives an answer that will benefit everyone. In their daily interactions with students, they are constantly learning about the cultural divide that separates these students from the traditional college application process.

We suspect there are other ways to learn about these cultural capital barriers and provide such assistance. Workshops or small-group activities in after-school periods or in regular classrooms might be feasible. Even non-school locations such as YWCAs or church groups might provide such information and help interpreting that information.

While these observations must be regarded as tentative and of uncertain generalizability, they identify phenomena that could potentially undermine the effectiveness of more society-wide reforms that seek to improve college access through providing resources. Material resources are clearly needed, but they may not be sufficient.

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