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# Choice Factors Impacting Black Canadian Students' Decisions to Attend University in Ontario

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Choice Factors Impacting Black Canadian Students' Decisions to Attend University in Ontario

by

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# CHOICE FACTORS IMPACTING BLACK CANADIAN STUDENTS

## **Abstract**

Choice Factors Impacting Black Canadian Students' Decisions to Attend University in Ontario

The purpose of this study was to explore, with a sample of fifteen (15) Black undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the various factors that influenced their university choice process, including the decision to attend university, and to attend a particular institution. This research employed a qualitative case study methodology to understand the lived experiences of participants. Two data-collection methods were utilized, including a survey questionnaire and individual interviews. A review of the literature was conducted to devise a conceptual framework for the design and analysis of the study. The data from individual interviews, surveys and the researcher's field notes, revealed participants' perceptions and experiences during the university application and enrolment processes, and was reviewed against the literature as well as emergent themes.

Having analyzed the findings, it became clear that as Black communities in Canada have historically struggled for physical access to educational spaces, then control over the apparatus of education within those spaces, then for the development of independent Black alternatives; the lived experiences of the participants in this study, all Black undergraduate students, mirrors this trajectory. Participants, through their interview responses, told a story that would be familiar to students of educational histories pertaining to Black communities and those with the lived experience of interacting with educational spaces as Black people.

## **Acknowledgements**

The prospect of thanking those who have contributed to the completion of this study and this doctoral journey, is easily the most daunting aspect of the process. How do you find the words to express this type of gratitude? I am fully aware that my right to be in this position has been won, by peoples whose names and faces I may never know, upon whose shoulders I walk everyday. I thank them all for their sacrifices and will continue to try to honour them in word and deed.

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Dr. Dianne Gereluk, thank you for your bottomless well of support and advice, and for guiding me through this process. You have been instrumental in getting me to the point of completion. I look forward to working with you in the future. Drs. Shirley Steinberg and Marlon Simmons, thank you both for your wise counsel, keen attention to detail and most of all your commitment to making our society more inclusive of those who have been traditionally marginalized. I continue to learn from your example.

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To the young people who participated in this study, I cannot thank you enough for your candour and for your trust. I do hope that I have been able to appropriately shed some light on your stories. You are each brilliant and beautiful, and I look forward to witnessing your individual and collective impacts on the world. As I reflect on these brilliant young people, I cannot help but to think about those Black students, but for a variety of reasons, who could have been their compatriots. All of us who identify as allies of Black students must keep these young people in our thoughts and act accordingly.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

### **Introduction**

This study sought to consider the various factors that influenced the university choice process for Black undergraduate students in Ontario. The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of fifteen (15) Black undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution, through a discussion of their lived experiences during the application and enrolment processes. This research engaged this topic through a qualitative case study methodology to understand the lived experiences of Black undergraduate participants. Participants in this study consisted of fifteen (15) Black undergraduate students, in their first year of study in university in Ontario.

This chapter begins with a consideration of the background and context within which the study is framed. This is followed by a statement of the problem and purpose, as well as the associated research questions. The chapter goes on to describe the research approach, the motivations behind my interest in the topic and my prevailing assumptions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the rationale and significance of a study of the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students in Ontario, as well as the key terminology used throughout the research.

### **Background and Context**

In a global economy that increasingly requires the attainment of post-secondary credentials to secure employment, institutes of higher learning are under pressure to ensure that a greater percentage of the Canadian population gains access to this level of education (Dugan and Robidoux, 1999; Miner, 2010). Improved access to historically marginalized populations, it is argued, will help to level the economic and employment playing fields, provide a competitive

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advantage and help to secure the social and financial future of the nation, and will ensure that a greater percentage of Canadians have an opportunity to enjoy a better standard of living (Miner, 2010; Norrie and Lin, 2009; CCL, 2009).

Aside from the social and financial wherewithal of Canadian society as a whole, many institutions face their own critical fiscal reality as well. In an era of shrinking government funding, higher education institutions have come to rely increasingly on international and “non-traditional” student tuition and have in response, opened their doors to said students in unprecedented numbers. For example, according to the *Economic Impact of International Education in Canada* report (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade for the period from 2000 – 2010, 2012), the number of international students studying in the Canadian education system increased at an average growth rate of 7% per year.

As well as this necessity to increase international student enrolment into post-secondary institutions in Canada, there are demographic shifts afoot that can have significant implications to university enrolments in the future. In March 2010, Statistics Canada released a study conducted on behalf of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Canadian Heritage and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada entitled, *Projections of the Diversity of the Canadian Population, 2006 -2031* (Malenfant, Lebel & Martel, 2010), which provided a glimpse into post-secondary education and the projected changes in Canadian demographics. One in every three people will be from a racialized group, which will account to approximately 14.4 million people. Racialized group members will continue to be overrepresented in the younger population, including up to 36 percent of those under 15-years of age by 2031. The projections suggest that in light of demographics alone, it is in the best interests of Canadian universities and colleges to become more ethnoculturally diverse toward 2031 (p.3). In this regard it will become

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increasingly important for post-secondary institutions to consider the school choices of traditionally marginalized populations in order to maintain or expand their market share of the school-going Canadian population.

Attempting to establish whether Black students' presence in Canadian universities reflects the percentage of Black people in the country, is particularly challenging. Canadian post-secondary institutions do not collect and/or publish race-based data. Consequently, it is difficult to determine with great certainty the prevalence of Black students on university campuses in Ontario. Further, the overwhelming majority of the available published research related to Black students' decisions to enter four-year degree granting institutions, is primarily focused on African-American students, and even in these cases often focused on comparisons between historically Black institutions and traditionally White institutions. Given the distinct historical, political and social differences between Canada and the United States, such American studies may prove limited in understanding Black students' processes for choosing post-secondary institutions. It is possible that there are differences between those who constitute the Canadian "Black communities" in terms of their university choice decisions.

Historically, Canada has been home to a diversity of Black communities, some who have been in the country for generations, recent immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and the United States, and refugees from all over the world, so the idea that a single study could capture the lived experiences of all of the various Black communities that exist within Canada, is unlikely. To regard these disparate Black communities through a monolithic lens, might not yield accurate representations of their lived experiences. It has been argued by Foster (2007) and others, that a Black community has been fashioned on the basis of their rejection by the White

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dominant society and, consequently, that Blacks are linked into a community by the common experience of oppression (Thomas, 2008).

Conscious of this tension, this study considers Blackness through self-identification and will attempt to incorporate the various intersectionalities that exist within what are broadly termed “Black communities”. In order to better understand the context of Canada as it relates to Blackness, I will discuss the notion of Blackness in Canada and the ways in which the variance has evolved.

### **Formation of a Black Identity in Canada**

In order to explore the factors that influence the university choice process for Black undergraduate students, it is important to consider the notion of “Blackness” and the ways in which diasporic consciousness has assisted in the construction and definition of Black identity within Canada. Such a consideration can help to establish an understanding of the various peoples that come together to form “Black communities” in Canada. This is a muddled process at the outset, but is further complicated by how these identities influence and are influenced by an education system that is often regarded as unfriendly or even hostile to Black people. What does it mean to be Black? Who qualifies? Is there such thing as a singular ‘Black community’ in Canada? In this section, I trace this notion of “Blackness” in Canada from an historical perspective to the present day, and then consider how being Black in Canada, impacts and is impacted by the prevailing system of education.

### **The Development of Black Identity in Canada**

There is an inherent challenge in attempting to discern Black identity. It requires one to define Black and to have that meaning encapsulate people from a variety of different and disparate cultures and contexts. Further, it suggests homogeneity, and silences the stories of

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Black people from various parts of the globe whose experiences, and consequently whose identities, may be very different. Such conversation challenges the notion of conducting a research study that seeks to identify the factors that influence the school choice process for 'Black' undergraduate students. I am conscious of this tension; however, this study considers Blackness through a lens of self-identification and attempts to consider how gender, ethnicity, original geography, culture, sexual orientation, class, and other intersecting factors, weave their way into the discussion. That being said, it is important in order to set the context for this study, to consider Blackness within Canada, and the ways in which the definition has evolved over time.

A number of scholars have considered the notion of Blackness, in particular Black identity, in diasporic contexts, including Canada, and the ways in which Black communities have interacted with diasporic institutions over their sojourn within those countries. Stuart Hall, George Sefa-Dei, Carl James, Rinaldo Walcott, Marlon Simmons, Ali Abdi, Afua Cooper, Awad Ibrahim, Dionne Brand, Habiba Cooper Diallo, Edward Shizha, Lance McReady, Paul Gilroy, Katherine McKittrick, Charmaine Nelson, Cecil Foster, Benedicta Egbo, Michelle Wright and others, have all considered the ways in which the intersecting realities of race, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic status, impact identity formation, lived experiences, health and well-being, systemic racism, legislation, questions about citizenry and globalism.

Specific to Canada, Black communities have grown largely through immigration. This is not to suggest that there haven't been Black people in Canada for generations, but Canada has not had as large a domestic Black population as the United States, and not the same level of reliance on the enslavement of Africans toward the growth of their economy (Winks, 1997). This is not to say that there are no connections to be made between the ways in which Blackness is

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defined and re-defined in Canada and the United States. Black people in both countries have a common history of colonization, miseducation and discrimination that foment themselves in similar ways; however, it is important to consider the uniqueness of the Canadian landscape, and the inherent diversities within the Black communities in Canada, in order to get a more accurate picture of the lived experiences of Black Canadians. Failure to consider these intricacies, runs parallel to traditional hegemonic considerations of Blackness and Black people in diasporic contexts.

### **Shared Colonial Histories and the Implications for Schooling in the Canadian Context**

Much of the scholarship concerning Black communities in Canada has been recorded as early as 1608. Since then, the sojourn of Black Canadians shares some similarities and some distinctions to the history of Blacks in the United States. The enslavement of Africans in Canada was not as widespread, was not a system of plantation labour, and had little influence on the development of the Canadian economy compared to the United States. Enslavement did, however, legally exist within Upper and Lower Canada in the 18th and 19th centuries until its abolishment in the British Parliament in 1833 (Winks, 1997).

Much of the early Black communities that settled in Canada were comprised of individuals coming from the United States as still enslaved “property” of British Loyalists, or as free Black men who “earned” their freedom after fighting on the side of the British during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 in the 18th and 19th centuries. Silverman (1985) further notes that part of the desire to come to Canada was prompted by a fear of being captured and returned to a life of enslavement, for those escaping from the Southern United States, and for those Blacks coming from States in which slavery had been abolished, a means to flee legal discrimination.



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Despite the commonly held perception that Canada was a land of promise for freedom-seeking enslaved Africans in the United States, the realities of life for free Black men and women in Canada, particularly in areas of larger concentrations of Black people in Ontario, like the Detroit frontier of Windsor, Sandwich, Amherstburg; in Chatham and its surrounding areas where the Dawn and Elgin settlements were established; London, Brantford and Wilberforce; along the Niagara peninsula at St. Catherines, Niagara Falls, Newark and Fort Erie; and in the large urban centres of Hamilton and Toronto, was far from desirable. Racism, and a mismanaged immigration and settlement portfolio, created significant conflict and disharmony between White settlers and these Black communities (Clairmont & Magill, 1999; Winks, 1997). Blacks who arrived in Canada as fugitives from slavery in the US, although initially well received, eventually faced mixed reception and outright discrimination and segregation (Winks, 1997).

These realities played themselves out in very public and overt ways, particularly concerning the education of Black children. At the height of the Underground Railroad, the Common Schools Act was passed in Canada, providing for the creation of separate schools. While intended to create separate schools along religious lines, it was used to create segregated Black schools, particularly in those areas of Upper Canada (Ontario) less well represented by a vocal abolition community (Cooper, 2016).

Toronto did not develop segregated schools, but in the southwestern parts of Ontario, particularly Windsor and Chatham, segregated schools remained in place. In many cases, local Black families did not wish to have Black only schools, but were forced to do so by the lack of accommodation they received when they attempted to have their children attend a local, White school. In some cases, Black families attempted to bring suit against their local school trustees in order to ensure their children received a quality education. The vast majority of these, even when

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the ruling favoured the plaintiff, resulted in a loss of earnings, often a loss of job and more likely than not, an inability to receive justice (Cooper, 2016).

Near Chatham, in Merlin, the last segregated Black school in Ontario was finally closed in 1965 following lobbying by concerned African-Canadians to have it closed. Elsewhere, segregated schools were phased out around the same time, with the last segregated school in Canada, which was in Nova Scotia, closing in 1983 (Cooper, 2016).

While these realities speak to the conflicts that arose to ensure that Black students could be physically present within school buildings that could provide “quality” education, they do not consider the battles that continue to the present day to ensure that the curriculum being presented, accurately reflects the contributions, civilizations and considerations of dark-skinned people to Canada and to the world. Pertinent to this study, this begs the question: given the colonization both physically and psychologically and the denial of the rich histories of Africa, and the impact of said negation on the descendants of those who were physically colonized; were the steps taken to sue, and battle in court for the right to attend White institutions, misguided? Stated more plainly, was/is the fight to be physically included in educational spaces that have been complicit in conveying anti-African sentiment and untruth, more detrimental to Black students? And, if so, how do these considerations impact how Black students regard universities, and their sense of belonging on university campuses? This study will shed some light on the ways in which Black students weigh their options with respect to choosing university, and then choose a particular institution.

Despite these difficulties, Blacks in Canada were able to establish communities, build families and contribute to the Canadian economy. Currently the Canadian Black population is largely comprised of immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa (Statistics Canada, 2011).

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Waves of Caribbean workers came to Canada in the 1950's when changes to the immigration system opened the doors a little further. These included Prime Minister Mackenzie King's removal of the outwardly racist immigration selection guidelines in 1947 as well as changes to the Immigration Act that encouraged domestic workers to come to Canada from the Caribbean after 1955 (Anderson, 1993). There were stipulations, however, for these domestic workers, including that they must be unmarried and between the ages of 18 and 35 (Bashi, 2004). In 1966, the program was suspended due to the fear that the women accepted as domestic workers would bring their unskilled partners and children into the country. It was reinstated in 1973 with revisions: domestic workers could remain in the country, so long as they kept those positions and worked for the same individuals. If they failed to maintain this in any way, they were at risk of being deported. At first, these workers were denied the opportunity to obtain Canadian citizenship; however, after protests, they were permitted to apply after residing in Canada for three years (Bashi, 2004). In 1967, explicit racial discrimination in immigration policy was officially outlawed and the points system was implemented as an attempt to have a universal set of criteria by which immigrants would be assessed (Anderson, 1993).

Immigrants directly from Africa were similarly affected by the 1967 change in Canadian immigration policy, in that their entrance to Canada was no longer formally restricted. However, African immigrants continue to be marginalized through an imbalance in the numbers and locations of Canadian immigration officers around the world. As compared to 46 immigration officers in Europe, 26 in South East Asia, and 11 in the Caribbean, there are a total of 8 immigration officers on the entire continent of Africa (Pupkampu & Tetty, 2005).

Professionally-trained immigrants to Canada from a number of jurisdictions, including the Caribbean and Africa, face further discrimination, as their qualifications are rarely accepted

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in the Canadian labour market. Many of these immigrants must start over, often taking low-wage and menial positions in order to begin to establish a life for themselves and their families (Pupkampu & Tetty, 2005).

It is important to highlight this history as it speaks to the constant tension that exists for Black people in Canada. The reality that Black skin has been regarded as un-Canadian, and that this sentiment prevails to the present day. The Canadian “Black communities” then, include Black immigrants to Canada from a variety of countries in the Caribbean and Africa, from Europe, the United States, as well as a population of Black people whose Canadian genealogy goes back centuries. This study selected participants who self-identify as Black Canadians, and attempted to consider the various intersectionalities that contribute to the diversity of the Black population in Canada.

With respect to my own journey in Blackness, I knew I was Black from an early age, because my mother and father told me. Much of my identity was formed from the lessons I learned from my parents, through books, movies and family discussions; however, I also recognized the ways in which I would be treated differently from my White peers. Whether it was being passed over for accolades that I knew I deserved or not being challenged the way that I knew I should, the reality of being, and being educated in a country in which I am a visible minority necessarily impacted my identity formation. So part of my Black identity is ancestral, cultural and historical and part is experiential.

My father was an immigrant to Canada, originally from Jamaica, my mother from Trinidad. They met in Miami in the early 60s. My father had left Jamaica to go to college in the United States. My mom’s whole family had moved to Miami in hopes of forging a better life for themselves. The late 60s were a tumultuous time in Miami. Many of the male children in my

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mom's family had been part of the growing Black Power movement in Trinidad, and found solace in the Black Panther Party in the United States. Both of my parents witnessed the Liberty City riots in Miami in 1968, and a few years later moved to Canada for a new job my dad had been offered. Their experiences undoubtedly encouraged them to ensure that their children understood the nature of our ancestry and the connection that we had to the continent of Africa, to the Caribbean, to North America; in short, to Black bodies wherever they were collected. These lessons stayed with me, and throughout my adolescence and into adulthood, I have maintained an interest in combatting oppression and celebrating the contributions that Black communities have made to societies throughout history. Having had the opportunity to work in the classroom and in administration, in private and public secondary and post-secondary Canadian institutions, and having advocated for marginalized students, particularly Black students in these settings; this study provided information towards addressing long-standing systemic barriers affecting Black students in Ontario.

While there were never any questions for me about the great chain of being that led to my introduction into the world, having been born in Canada, I questioned how I belonged, particularly when the reality of my being Canadian was always in question from others. "Where are you from?" was a question that I was asked throughout my years in school, which I continue to be asked. The message was and is, that I could not be from Canada. Anthony Stewart summed it up best during a lecture at McGill in January, 2015: "I became aware from an early age that my claims to my own Canadian-ness were under constant strain; a strain that only increased as I aged, gained more academic credentials, and grew increasingly aware of the stories I was relentlessly told about the nation where I was born. Stories that, more often than not, imprinted upon me a sense of non-belonging, of being insufficiently Canadian." (Cupido,

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2015). Part of the roots of Black Canadian identity lies in the experience of being regarded as “un-Canadian”. This can manifest itself in an urge to adopt those traditions considered “Canadian” by the dominant culture, (if those indeed were not part of the cultural conditions of the subject in the first place); or, develop or embrace a counter-culture that suggests to a Black adolescent that those things deemed “Canadian” are not for them. It is a living testament to, and embodiment of, the necessity and impossibility of racial identity, that Black Canadians could be imprisoned into un-Canadianness and simultaneously disalienated from it (Fanon, 1967; Hall, 1990), simply by being Black.

This rings true for the development of Black identity in diasporic contexts, as the formation of identity is rooted both in history and culture, but also in the expectations and behaviours that confront Black individuals in spaces where they are the visible minority. I, therefore, situate this study within the broader relationship between the Black communities in Canada, and the public education system.

### **Immigration Policies and the Disavowment of Black Citizenship**

As stated previously, part of the roots of Black Canadian identity lies in the experience of being regarded as “un-Canadian”. This sentiment is rooted in a history of immigration policies and practices that have sought to limit the numbers of Black immigrants to Canada. The 1901 Census indicates that of the 5,371,315 population in Canada, 12.7% were immigrants (i.e. born outside Canada) and of those 57% of immigrants were born in the British Isles. 96% of the population was of European origin (Walker, 2008). It can be argued that considering the history of Canada, these numbers are expected; however, there were specific policies enacted to ensure that these percentages remained status quo. In 1906 the Immigration Act was passed which enabled the Department of Immigration to “deal with undesirable immigrants” by providing a

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means of control. Grounds for deportation included becoming a public charge, insanity, infirmity, disease, handicap, becoming an inmate of a jail or hospital and committing crimes of “moral turpitude”. In 1910, Section 38 was added to the Act and allowed the government to prohibit landing of immigrants “belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada, or of immigrants of any specified class, occupation or character”. That same year a group of Black farmers from Oklahoma sought to flee harsh racism at home, to come to Canada to start a new life. In 1911 an order in council was drafted prohibiting the landing of “any immigrant belonging to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada”. In 1919, Section 38 of the Act was amended to add new grounds for denying entry and allowed Cabinet to prohibit any race, nationality or class of immigrants by reason of “economic, industrial, or other condition temporarily existing in Canada” because of their unsuitability, or because of their “peculiar habits, modes of life and methods of holding property”. The sum total of these measures resulted in a 1931 Census in which the population of Canada was 10,376,786, of whom 22% were immigrants (i.e. born outside Canada), and 97.7% of the population was of European origin (Walker, 2008).

The Immigration Act was again altered in 1952. It provided for the refusal of admission on the grounds of nationality, ethnic group, geographical area of origin, peculiar customs, habits and modes of life, unsuitability with regard to the climate, and probable inability to become readily assimilated. This allowed for the continued “whitening” of Canada and narrowing of what would be considered “Canadian”(Walker, 2008). In 1955, the Canadian Domestic Workers program opened the doors to women from the Caribbean, the vast majority of whom were working professionals in their homelands. These women accepted low wages and poor working conditions, in exchange for what they viewed as an opportunity to forge a better life for

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themselves and their children. They came, in other words, to provide menial labor for a society whose practices and ideology had already restricted its Black population to performing menial jobs. Moreover, married women and mothers were ineligible for the domestic indenture scheme; the reason being that Canada did not want this scheme to result in a significant increase in its non-White population. The women that did come over faced a situation in which they had few rights, and often were at the exploitative whim of their employers (Thomas, 2008). There existed no grievance mechanism for domestic workers who faced abuse and harsh working conditions, and provided no protections from employers who would threaten deportation for contravening orders.

The sum total of the policies and practices related to immigration suggest roots deep in colonial myths and attitudes, and allowed the White establishment to define citizenship, Whiteness and Europeanness based on the “other”. In other words, a ‘we are us because we are not them’ mentality that persists today even as demographics have changed. What this means to Black born-Canadians and recent immigrants is a consideration that they are not truly Canadian (Simmons, 2012). The ramifications of such sentimentalities, by necessity, must have an impact on all parties involved in the education system in Canada.

### **Blackness in Canadian Education**

Having grown up in the system and then worked in both secondary and post-secondary, public and private schools as a teacher and administrator, I have a particular perspective on the realities that exist within the education system, that continue to proliferate the status quo, despite the best efforts of well-intentioned people. It is important to start the consideration of systemic barriers at the beginning. Hegel, a German philosopher whose ideas influenced John Dewey, one of the architects of the public education system, once wrote: “Education is the art of making man



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ethical.” (Hegel, G.W.F., 2001). Hegel was a historian but that did not stop him from arguing that: “Africa was no part of the historical world.” That, blacks have “no sense of personality; their spirit sleeps, remains sunk in itself, makes no advance, and thus parallels the compact, undifferentiated mass of the African continent.” (Hegel, G.W.F., 2001). In the context of history, Hegel was part of a movement to defend, rationalize and maintain a system of chattel slavery. It is important to consider the fact that Hegel was interested in protecting the status quo even as he argued for the liberatory possibilities of education. This suggests that a system designed to help uplift, can at its very root seek to lock some people out. If the root of a tree is bitter, the fruit it bears will be as well. If we can recognize that some of those who shaped the system were bitter, then we should recognize that aspects of the system need to change if we are to expect better-tasting fruit. When systemic bias goes unchecked we see very little improvement in achievement gaps and a proliferation of the “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” mentality that advances the idea that lack of achievement is evidence of not trying (James, 2012).

If one accepts that Canadian society is structurally and culturally unequal, then one can come to the conclusion that Canadian schools participate in that larger societal dynamic, functioning both to reflect and perpetuate those inequalities. This is done through implicit and explicit reinforcement of power relationships, within curricula and in hiring practices, as well as the proliferation of differential treatment. (Codjoe, 2006; Mensah 2002; Cannon 1995; Campbell 1989; Lewis 1992; McKague 1991).

The fallout of a system that both reflects and helps to shape inequity in the larger society, for Black students, is three-fold: a) Black students buy into the notion that Black people have not contributed to Canadian prosperity and the growth of the nation – this can lead to a lack of motivation concerning school and/or feelings of inadequacy or the lowering of personal

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expectations for academic success; b) Teachers, guidance counsellors, school administrators are all impacted by: a curriculum that is most certainly not inclusive, a barrage of negative media imagery pertaining to the Black community, and experiences with Black students who are searching for an identity, resulting in lowered expectations, higher suspension rates and alarming dropout rates for Black children in high school; and c) Black children growing up without a racial and cultural grounding from home, during the time of crisis, when they have recognized differential treatment and cannot find the answers to ‘why?’ from school, will find those answers in other places, i.e. media, music, movies, etc. The nature of these images can contribute to negative self-perception and then difficulties in school and in the larger society (James, 2005, 2012; Sefa-Dei, 2016).

These issues are significant to the relationship that exists between Black students and universities and the external and internal considerations of “fit”. Marginalization from education impacts not only the decision to attend university, but can likewise inform the choice of school. This is to say that even with Black students who achieve academically and are in a position to successfully apply and matriculate into university, the difficulties, due to racism in the education system, persist (Codjoe, 2001).

### **Problem Statement**

While issues of access to post-secondary education for poor communities are well documented (Finnie, Childs, and Wismer, 2011; de Broucker, 2005; Bussière, Hébert and Knighton, 2009; Cameron and Heckman, 2001; Ermisch and Francesconi, 2012; Keane and Wolpin, 2001; Cunha, et al., 2006; Heckman, 2007), the factors that influence application and enrolment decisions of racialized groups is emerging (Freeman, 1997; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, and Rhee, 1997; Jackson, 1982; McDonough, Antonio, and Trent, 1997; St. John and Noell,

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1989). However, there is a paucity of research specific to Canada and even less still with respect to Black racialized groups in Canada. While research does exist pertaining to the university aspirations of Black Canadians, (Sefa-Dei, 2008, 1995; Cheung, 2007; Beckford, 2008; Shizha, 2016; James 2012), this research is focused on high school-aged students. The enrolment decisions of Black university students in Canada, from their own perspectives, remains relatively unknown.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of Black undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution.

This study provides some information pertaining to university admissions and enrolment processes, and the ways in which these can be used to target and recruit Black students. The results of the study might also assist in identifying strategies to improve the numbers of Black applicants and enrollees to universities in Canada.

This study provides some information specific to the factors that influence the decision to enrol in university for a sample of Black undergraduate students in Ontario. This study explores a sample of first-year undergraduate Black students' perceptions of the factors that influenced their decision to enrol in university as well as in their respective institution.

### **Research Questions**

The primary area of research will consider the following question(s):

RQ1: What factors influenced Black students' decisions to enrol in university?

RQ2: What factors contributed to Black students' choice of institution?

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## **Rationale and Significance**

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of Black undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution.

In light of the demographic changes afoot in Canadian society and in Ontario in particular where Black communities are becoming more populous, it is incumbent upon Canadian universities to consider the recruitment and retention of these ‘non-traditional’ groups of university students (Statistics Canada, 2010). Part of that process can be informed by understanding the factors that influence the university choice process for Black undergraduate students. Canadian universities will be the primary beneficiaries of this study. Admissions and enrolment staff will be provided pertinent information about factors of college choice and their implications for recruiting. From these findings, institutions can develop new strategies or modify old strategies to assist in the recruitment of Black students.

Black students might also benefit from this study by understanding how their lived experiences fit within the broader context of Blackness and its manifestations in education in Canada.

This study may also be used as a component for a longitudinal study that can evaluate university choice factors and the implications of those choices for individual and/or groups of students. Parents and students may also benefit from the additional information provided on external and internal factors influencing university choice.

As a result of this study, more information on the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students in Ontario will be available. There is currently a paucity of said information available for consideration.

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### **The Researcher**

This topic is of particular importance to me as a graduate of an Ontario university. Growing up I always had the expectation to go to university, so the choice decisions for me centred around program not possibility. I wanted to be a teacher, so the schools that offered a Bachelor of Education, in particular, those that offered an opportunity to complete a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Education concurrently, were top of the list. When I recognized among some of my Black peers, a consideration of university study as not something that they aspired to, or thought was “for them”, it galvanized my desire to understand why, but also to attempt to change their thinking. It was an impetus for getting involved in education in the first place, and certainly for considering the impact that misinformation could have on the minds of impressionable youth.

The dichotomy that I find myself in, even today, of critiquing a system (education) that has been shown to be implicit in anti-Black racism (Sefa-Dei, 2016; James, 2012; Codjoe, 2006; Mensah 2002; Cannon 1995; Campbell 1989; Lewis 1992; McKague 1991) , whilst campaigning to enjoy the fruits it bears, is reminiscent of Dubois’ double-consciousness or Fanon’s Black mirage. The idea that I can at once assert Black consciousness from within, but exist within Blackness that has been determined without, by its relationship to Whiteness and White institutions.

It is my hope that the information gleaned from this study can help to link, in a more complete fashion, some of the research that has already been done on the aspirational and academic readiness for university, of high school-aged and younger Black students, and can add to the canon of texts describing the lived experiences of Blacks in Canada and their sojourn in educational spaces.

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### **Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation of this study is the lack of published statistics specific to the numbers of Black students on university campuses in Ontario.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

While there are many private and public colleges and universities in Ontario, this study only examined the effect of competition among publicly funded universities in Ontario. The results are not generalizable to private and/or public colleges and universities in any other part of the country. Further, this study focused on domestic Black students and did not deal with the factors that influenced the choice process of international Black students. Lastly, this study provided in-depth, nuanced considerations of the university choice process for fifteen (15) Black undergraduate students in Ontario and cannot necessarily be used to draw conclusions about Black students across Canada.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Racialized groups:* is used to describe non-aboriginal people of colour, also referred to by Statistics Canada and in the federal Employment Equity Act as visible minorities. Its use here and elsewhere suggests a discomfort with the official use of the term “visible minority” because it implies permanence of minority status that is imposed onto a population. Racialized denotes that process of imposition, the social construction of the category, and the attendant experience of oppression as opposed to the seemingly neutral use of the terms “visible minorities” or “racial minorities,” which have the effect of masking oppressions. (Galabuzi, 2006: xvi).

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*Black students:* is a term used to describe school-goers of African ancestry, who self-identify as part of the ‘Black’ race. In this study, “Black student” is synonymous with “African-Canadian student” and/or “African-American student”.

*University/College choice:* is a term denoting a complex multi-staged process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university, or institution of advanced vocational training (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989).

### **Summary of Chapter One**

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of Black undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution. This chapter provided an overview of the research problem, purpose, and research questions. In the next chapter, an extensive review of literature will be presented and analyzed. Chapter Three will outline the methods and methodology that will inform how this study will be conducted. A discussion of the findings and presentation of the results will be presented in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter 6 will provide conclusions as well as recommendations.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of Black undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution. To carry out this study, it was necessary to complete a critical review of pertinent literature. This review was ongoing throughout the data collection, analysis, and synthesis phases of the study.

In order to shed light on the lived experiences of Black university students specific to their choice decisions to enrol in university as well as in a particular institution, this chapter first situates this study within the broader context of the Black experience in the Canadian education system. It is important that this study be recognized as a continuation of a story that has been told and is unfolding simultaneously, that of the struggles to obtain access to quality education waged by Black communities in Canada. The notions of access and quality have been defined and redefined over the course of the sojourn of Black communities in Canada, and these notions were considered through the lens of the experiences of fifteen (15) Black students in university in Ontario.

The chapter then outlines the available research pertaining to the experiences of Black students in Canadian universities and the ways in which this study will help to add further information therein.

The chapter concludes with a consideration of the prevailing ‘models of college choice’ – derived from US-based studies, as well as existing research pertaining to the college choice decisions of African-American students. These provide a perspective on the ways in which the decision to attend a post-secondary institution have been considered in another jurisdiction, and



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then how those considerations have been applied to the experiences of Black diasporic communities.

### **Rationale**

Shining a light on the lived experiences of Black students in Canadian universities is important for a number of reasons. First, it provides a logical continuation of the existing research pertaining to the university aspirations of high school-aged Black youth in Ontario and the broader experiences of Black youth in the education system in Canada. This type of research is significant in light of the demographic changes underway in Canada, and in Ontario in particular – namely the recognition that racialized group members will continue to be overrepresented in the younger population, including up to 36 percent of those under 15-years of age by 2031 (Malenfant, Lebel & Martel, 2010). It is in the best interests of the country to determine how best to adjust the education system so as to (a) introduce a more effective method of teaching diverse youth, (b) create spaces where the needs of the most disadvantaged are seriously and concretely addressed (and not glossed over), (c) promote schools with strong ties to the community, and (d) help learners build their self-, collective, and cultural identities within an environment of social excellence (James, 2005, 2012; Sefa-Dei, 2016). Further, this research can help to address the historical and contemporary realities of underachievement, alienation, underrepresentation and criminalization that befall African-Canadian students in their interactions with the education system.

With respect to the notion of choice as it pertains to post-secondary education, the expansion of options for university bound students in both the Canadian and American post-secondary education systems, heightened attention to institutional marketing activities (McDonough, 1994) as well as the proliferation of regional, national and international

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institutional ranking schemes, has heightened public awareness of the diverse options facing university bound youth, while fomenting interest in the determinants of university choice (Lipman Hearne Inc., 2006; Renner, 2003; Soss, 1974). Further, claims that life after graduation is significantly impacted by the quality of post-secondary institution attended, has further fueled interest in institutional quality (Hoxby, 2001; Hossler, et al., 1989), and heightened competition for access to the most selective colleges and universities (Alon and Tienda, 2006). Further, scholarly attention to university choice has been spurred by considerations about unequal access to selective institutions, particularly for racialized students (Bowen and Bok, 1998; Bowen, Kurzweil and Tobin, 2005; Massey, Charles, Lundy and Fischer, 2003; Alon and Tienda, 2005).

### **Black Communities and Education in Canada**

The fight to ensure quality education for Black communities has been well documented since the arrival of Black bodies on diasporic soils. The specific issues have changed slightly based on the time period, and the tactics altered periodically, but essentially the struggle has centred around access to quality education in a system that has, from its outset, sought to ban, marginalize, persecute and limit learning opportunities for people of African descent.

In order to more accurately consider the experiences of Black communities and education in Canada, it is important to recognize the history of Black communities in the United States in education, so as to identify any parallels or commonalities. Prior to the Civil War in the United States a series of statutes and ordinances criminalized any person who made an effort to educate or teach those who were enslaved or who encouraged or supported them to teach themselves. Large gatherings of Black bodies were banned, out of fear that learning could lead to a recognition of the wrong being done, revolution and then retribution to White plantation owners and overseers (Williams, 2005). In some states enslaved Africans outnumbered White citizens,

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so most White Southern slaveholders were adamantly opposed to any opportunities for learning afforded to those who were enslaved, and certainly not access to formalized education. One statute in particular, passed in North Carolina in 1830, articulated that “any free person, who shall hereafter teach, or attempt to teach, any slave within this State to read or write, the use of figures excepted, or shall give or sell to such slave or slaves any books or pamphlets, shall be liable to indictment in any court of record in this State.” (Williams, 2005, p.206)

What is abundantly clear is that (a) it doesn't take formal education to be critical of bondage, as enslaved Africans risked life and limb to learn, and (b) the benefits of access to education were recognized by both those with power and those without. Even under the strict and brutal limitations imposed by state legislation and overseer 'justice', enslaved Africans still developed ingenious strategies to become literate. Whether it was 'pit schools', books swiped from plantation house shelves, bibles and lessons provided by sympathetic Whites or free Blacks, there was a hunger for literacy and a recognition that access to it, meant access to a better life (Cooper, 2016; Williams, 2005).

It is easy to draw some parallels between the yearning for education of enslaved Africans as they pressed toward freedom, and immigrants to Canada, like my parents from the Caribbean, leaving behind the life they knew for the promise of a better life, resting squarely on their children gaining access to quality education. Both those who were enslaved and those free who found themselves on foreign soil, recognized how important access to quality education was and is. Some might argue that the resistance to allowing for that learning to happen, demonstrated by White plantation owners and overseers, is similar to the subtler nuances of the current White power structure that was and is both architect and overseer of the public education systems in North America. While the antebellum South criminalized Black learning in and of itself, zero

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tolerance policies and suspension and expulsion practices in the Canadian public education system, criminalize Black learners. I will discuss these in more detail later in this chapter, but thought it important to highlight the similarities at this point.

Even after emancipation, White Southerners' fear of an educated Black population did not dissipate; they used violence and arson to attempt to stifle independent African-American schools that began to emerge (Williams, 2005). Yet, in spite of the danger and meager resources, many of these schools flourished. In addition, newly freed Blacks recognized the importance of self-determination, and as such struggled for control over the administration and staffing of their schools as enrollment grew and 'outsider' involvement encroached. Williams (2005) offers the example of S. W. Magill, an American Missionary Association employee who sought complete control over Savannah's Black educational institutions. He was outraged that the freed slaves had established the Savannah Educational Association, and in response he "complained that black people expected him to work with them rather than hand over authority." Placing Black teachers and administrators in Black schools was part of the Black community of Savannah's larger campaign for self-determination.

Even in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War in the United States, Black communities sought control over the quality assurance of the education of their children. Issues pertaining to the numbers of Black administrators and teachers in the public education system in Canada, persist to today. So in addition to access, there has been an historical battle waged in the diaspora for control of the *apparatus*<sup>1</sup> of education as it concerns the education of African children (Codjoe, 2006; Mensah 2002; Cannon 1995; Campbell 1989; Lewis 1992; McKague 1991). The movement towards Afrocentric and Black-focused education, (which will be

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<sup>1</sup> By 'apparatus' I am referring to the composition of the administration, teaching staff, curriculum oversight, etc.

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discussed later in the chapter), that has occurred in Canada in recent years, fits well within this narrative. To this point there has been no real movement towards the establishment of Black-focused post-secondary institutions in Canada; however, those that exist in the United States, normally referred to as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), have a long and storied history of struggle for the apparatus of education as it relates to post-secondary studies for Black students (Williams, 2005).

Both pre- and post-emancipation Canada saw Black communities engaged in struggles for access to quality education. Although Canada has been historically regarded as the ‘promised land’ for those fleeing enslavement and racial persecution in the United States, Canada has its own unique historical and contemporary challenges related to the education of Black students. At the height of the Underground Railroad, the Common Schools Act was passed, providing for the creation of separate schools. While expressly intended to create separate schools along religious lines, it was used to ensure that Black students would not study in the same schools as White students (Cooper, 2016; Winks, 1969). Where there were numbers of Black families justifying it, school buildings could be erected to house the Black school. These were often poorly resourced and poorly constructed. Where numbers did not exist for the establishment of a Black school, children would either not attend school, families had to move, or students would have to travel long distances to attend a Black school in the ‘closest’ region (Winks, 1969).

Toronto did not develop segregated schools, but in the southwestern parts of Ontario, particularly Windsor and Chatham, segregated schools remained in place. In many cases, local Black families did not wish to have Black only schools, but were forced to do so by the lack of accommodation they received when they attempted to have their children attend a local, White school. In some cases, Black families attempted to bring suit against their local school trustees in

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order to ensure their children received a quality education. The vast majority of these, even when the ruling favoured the plaintiff, resulted in a loss of earnings, often a loss of job and more likely than not, an inability to receive justice (Cooper, 2016; Winks, 1969).

Near Chatham, in Merlin, the last segregated Black school in Ontario was finally closed in 1965 following lobbying by concerned African-Canadians to have it closed. Elsewhere, segregated schools were phased out around the same time, with the last segregated school in Canada, which was in Nova Scotia, closing in 1983 (Cooper, 2016; Winks, 1969).

In response to the cool reception that greeted Black students attempting to enroll in White institutions, many Black independent schools were established. While many of these suffered due to limited resources, some flourished, including the British American Institute established by Josiah Henson at the Dawn Settlement. This first-of-its-kind vocational institution became so successful that some White settlers enrolled their children (Cooper, 2016).

Like the US example, the first movement towards access centred around gaining a physical presence within established educational institutions. Where that was made unlikely and often times impossible, by legislation and/or intimidation, Black communities in Canada also established their own independent institutions, in order to ensure their children had the opportunity to go to school. Braithwaite & James (1996); James (2012); Sefa-Dei (2008); Cooper (2016) and others make it clear that Black communities, particularly those in post-colonial diasporic contexts, recognize the importance and value of education.

It is vital to establish this early context in order to draw the parallels to future struggles for access to education that would be the hallmark of the Black experience in education in Canada. As stated previously the specific issues of access shifted based on the legislative and demographic realities of Canada post-emancipation. Where physical presence within institutions

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became the norm in elementary and secondary schools, that reality in post-secondary education became the new fight, and still seems elusive to today. This includes admission to what would have been considered vocational programming. In Nova Scotia, organizations like the Halifax Colored Citizens Improvement League and Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NSAACP), helped two Black students graduate from the nursing program at the Children's Hospital in Halifax in 1948 (Calliste, 1996). The NSAACP also worked with the Nova Scotia Department of Education to establish both adult education and self-help projects in African-Nova Scotian communities as well as a Black Incentive Education Fund to increase retention in secondary school and to facilitate access to post-secondary education. In Toronto, the Negro Veterans Association led by Wilson Brooks presented a brief to the Ontario Minister of Health in 1947 asking for the cancellation of government grants to provincial hospitals which discriminated on the basis of colour. The brief was in response to Owen Sound Hospital's refusal to admit Marisse Scott to its nurses' training school and the general policy of discrimination against Blacks in hospitals. Ms. Scott was subsequently admitted to the St. Joseph's Hospital school of nursing in Guelph (Calliste, 1996).

As opportunities begrudgingly expanded for Black communities in Canada, so too did the call for more and better access and quality in educational spaces.

### **Towards a 'Quality' Education in Ontario**

With respect to Canadian public schools, Black communities have long recognized that having the right to education does not guarantee that one will have the right education. Consequently, the new struggle became access to 'quality' education, defined by representative curriculum, a representative staff and administrative complement and in lieu of independent Black institutions, a number of self-help, activist organizations who advocated for better

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education for Black youth (Braithwaite & James, 1996; James, 2012; Sefa-Dei & Kempf, 2013; Sefa-Dei, 2008).

As stated previously, once the hurdle of physical access was overcome in Canadian public schools, the challenges faced by Black communities in education in Ontario have been ongoing and well documented. Scholars, education professionals, parents, and communities have identified the issues of access to quality education in the province (Black Educators Working Group, 1993; Board of Education, Toronto, 1988; Braithwaite & James, 1996; Canadian Alliance of Black Educators, 1992; Lewis, 1992; Working Group, 1992). In the 1960s and 1970s, Black and other minority students in the system were being labeled as learning-disabled, and were therefore marginalized from active participation in the academic life of institutions (Coelho, 1988). The 1970s and 1980s saw Black students being streamed into basic, general, and advanced levels (Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller 1992; Lawton & Leithwood, 1988; Radwanski, 1987). This streaming then narrowed post-secondary possibilities for students, and was done sometimes without parents being fully informed of the ramifications. In the early 1990s, the most pressing issues centred around the aforementioned educational apparatus – lack of curricular representation, low teacher expectations and the absence of Black teachers and administrators – and the ways in which these impacted Black student disengagement and youth disaffection with education (Sefa-Dei, Holmes, Mazucca, McIsaac, & Campbell, 1995; Lewis, 1992). In the late 1990s, safe school and zero-tolerance policies and the ways in which they were meted out to Black students, as well as their impact on the individual student and community as a whole, dominated public consciousness (Ibrahim & Abdi, 2016; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005). The early part of the 2000's saw the rise of the Africentric and Black-focused school



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movements in Ontario, leading to Ontario's first publicly funded Africentric Alternative School which began operating in September 2009 (Gordon & Zinga, 2012; Sefa-Dei & Kempf, 2013).

It is important to note that although public consciousness during these periods were largely focused on the issues outlined above, each of the issues intersected with the other in the days pre- and post-emancipation right up to the present. Stated more plainly, the struggles for access to quality education for Black students in Ontario have included a) ensuring physical access to institutions; b) encouraging more effective, representative and sophisticated school apparatus (curriculum, staff complement and policies and procedures); and c) establishing independent Black alternatives. These areas of focus have existed regardless of time period and have been met with resistance from within and without the education system in Ontario.

### **Black Students and the University Context in Canada**

There is a woeful lack of research that exists, specific to the lived experiences of Black students on university campuses in Canada. What has been anecdotally accepted is the reality that Black students face racism on campus and that the numbers of Black university students are disproportionately low compared to their presence demographically in the Canadian population. These assertions are largely based on the experiences of Black students and the researched disparities existing in public elementary and secondary education in Canada. Canadian universities have historically not collected and/or published race-based data. In fact, the University of Toronto only in February of 2016 announced their decision to begin collecting racial census data of their student body. Consequently, it is difficult to postulate with any certainty the presence, or lack thereof, of Black bodies on Canadian university campuses. Some researchers and community activists (Smith & Lalonde, 2003; Habtemariam & Hudson, 2016; Davies, Maldonado & Zarifa, 2014) have attempted to shed light on the lived experiences of

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Black university students in Canada and some of the reasons for the low enrolment numbers.

Smith & Lalonde (2003) explored the phenomenon of 'racelessness' and investigated whether it was a strategy being adopted by Black university students in Canada. While there was no evidence that racelessness was a strategy employed by Black students, researchers were able to establish an indirect relationship between racial identity and academic performance. More specifically, they found that possessing a closer affinity to other Black students led to improved mental health, which produced a more positive academic orientation and subsequently higher GPA.

Habtemariam & Hudson (2016) penned an op-ed piece outlining the ways in which the experiences of Black Canadian university students mirrors in many ways, that of their American counterparts. Both University of Toronto graduate students and members of the Black Liberation Collective, they pointed to the curricular omissions currently existing on campus:

At our own institution, there are no courses where you can study Black people at the graduate level. The school of Global Affairs is completely devoid of programs and courses that focus on the continent of Africa. This is the largest school in Canada, often touted as the best. It's difficult to imagine such an omission with regard to, say, Europe or Asia. Canada itself has a long and vibrant Black history. Should we not be able to study it? (Retrieved from:

<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2016/03/01/canadian-campuses-have-a-racism-problem.html>)

Davies, Maldonado & Zarifa (2014), in an attempt to identify what kinds of students in Toronto attend Ontario's higher ranked universities and to ascertain any differences by socio-economic status, gender or race, tracked an entire cohort of Toronto District School Board,

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(TDSB) students from the ninth grade right up to their enrolment in an Ontario university.

Researchers merged four datasets; the official records for all students in the TDSB who were 17 years of age in the fall of 2006 and attended a regular day school; applications and confirmed acceptances from the Ontario Universities' Application Centre; information concerning demographics and school attitudes from the TDSB's "Student Census"; and data on each Ontario university's resources and ranking. What they found was entry into Ontario's university hierarchy tends to mirror inequalities in general access to universities. Female, Asian-origin, and students from higher socioeconomic neighborhoods are more likely to enter higher ranked and better resourced institutions, while students who self-identify as black and male are less likely to enter such institutions. Researchers further found that of those students who chose to study at York University (an urban institution, ranked comparatively lower), relatively few lived in the city's most affluent neighborhoods, while the converse was true for those who attended Queen's University (a suburban institution, ranked comparatively higher). The concentrations of Queen's attendees near the center, west end, and southeast correspond to the Yonge Street corridor, Bridal Path, Kingsway, and Beaches--all among the wealthiest neighborhoods in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). In contrast, almost no Queen's attendees hailed from humbler areas like York, Rexdale, Downsview, and Scarborough, areas with larger Black and other minority populations.

What this information suggests is that the current context of university education in Canada reflects the historical struggle for access to quality education for Black students. Still struggling for physical access, still struggling for representative curriculum and faculty, still struggling for quality. What has not been seen to this point is a movement towards an independent Black post-secondary option in Canada.

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This study will provide more information on the lived experiences of Black Canadian students in Canadian universities, specific to their decisions to enroll in university and to select a particular institution.

### **Models of College Choice in the United States of America**

Since the purpose of this study is to shed light on the factors that influenced Black Canadian students' decisions to attend university and then choose a particular institution, and since there is a paucity of information on the university-going experiences of Black students in Canada, it is important to consider the ways in which these choices have been examined in other jurisdictions. 'College choice' is defined as a complex multi-staged process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university, or institution of advanced vocational training (Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith, 1989). Conceptually, students' college choice behaviour has been profiled in three types of models, each specifying factors that affect the choice process. These three models include: econometric, sociological, and combined (Jackson, 1982; Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999; Chapman, 1984). Econometric models are characterized by a student striving to maximize the expected utility or investment-like benefit derived from his or her college choice. The selection of a particular institution is dependent on the perceived benefits of attendance at the selected institution outweighing the perceived benefits of another institution (Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989). In the sociological models of college choice, the formation of college-going aspirations is considered part of a general status attainment process, and the focus is on the identification and interrelationship of factors which influence aspirations of college choice attendance (Paulsen, 1990). Combined models provide the opportunity to choose variables from

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either domain: econometric or sociological. In other words, combined models allow researchers to concentrate on the sociological aspects of college choice as a process, while maintaining the decision making perspectives of economics (Lang, 1999).

Combined models are then further sub-divided into two streams. The first seeks to understand the college decision process using the student as the unit of analysis, i.e. how they develop a college choice set, decide where to apply, consider admission criteria, and make their enrollment decisions. The second focuses on institutional characteristics as the unit of analysis, such as cost, size, distance, the quality of programs, and availability of financial aid. Regardless of stream, within combined models, the ‘college choice’ decision-making process is divided into stages that can be summarized under three headings: predisposition/attributes/aspirations; search/gathering information/application; and choice/enrollment. (See Fig. 1 for a consideration of the college choice framework).

Within the earliest, foundational combined models, the factors most commonly identified as impacting college choice included: student background characteristics (Jackson, 1982),

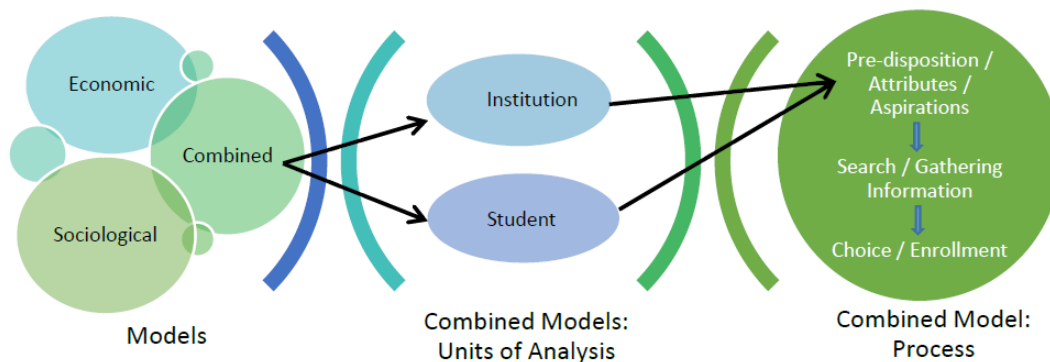


Figure 1: The College Choice Framework

aspirations (Chapman, 1984; Jackson, 1982), educational achievement (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982), social environment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), financial variables (St. John,

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1990; 1991), net cost (St. John & Starkey, 1995), institutional climate (Chapman, 1984), and institutional characteristics (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989).

The four major combined model researchers include Hanson and Litten (1982), Jackson (1982), Chapman (1984), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987).

The Hansen and Litten model (1982) views college choice as a continuous process that includes the stages of having college aspirations, starting the search process, gathering information, sending applications and enrolling. Broad variables that affect college choice are identified in this model, and public policies such as financial aid are introduced as factors influential in college choice (Barnes-Teamer, 2003). Factors influencing college choice include: background characteristics; personal attributes, such as academic ability, class rank and self-image; high school characteristics such as social composition, programs and curriculum; and college characteristics such as cost, size, programs and timelines associated with responding to student inquiries (Barnes-Teamer, 2003).

Jackson's model (1982) includes the stages of preference, exclusion, and evaluation. Jackson uses sociological research in the first stage to show that academic achievement has the strongest correlation with students' educational aspirations. In the exclusion stage, he uses economic theory to illustrate that decision making is really about excluding colleges based on factors such as location, cost, or academic quality. Once the set of colleges has been narrowed, the student evaluates the characteristics of the remaining institutions to make a final choice (Barnes-Teamer, 2003). In Jackson's rating of variables influencing each stage, he rates family background and high-school academic achievement as moderate to strong influencers in all three stages. For the economic perspective, he drew on factors such as location, cost, quality of

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information about an institution, and job prospects of graduates, as important influencers (Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999).

Chapman (1984) proposes a five stage model that includes an individual and institutional perspective and the stages of pre-search, search, application, choice and enrolment. The student characteristics identified as significant in his model include socioeconomic status, scholastic aptitude, educational aspirations and academic performance. The external influences in the model are significant others (friends, parent, high-school personnel), and institutional characteristics including cost, location, program availability, and college marketing efforts (written information, campus visits, admissions/recruiting) (Barnes-Teamer, 2003). This model has no strong connections between the stages, student characteristics and external influences.

The Hossler and Gallagher model (1987) builds on the earlier work of Chapman, Jackson and Litten, in a combined three phase model of college choice. The student, rather than the institution, is emphasized throughout the various stages. This model identifies three stages which include: predisposition, the decision to go to college instead of alternative status attainment paths; search, or the process of learning about specific institutions and their characteristics; and choice, the stage when applications are completed and the student chooses a particular institution (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). They suggest that during the search phase, the process consists of searching for both institutional attributes and institutions. During the choice stage, students compare the academic and social attributes of each college and seek the best value (Barnes-Teamer, 2003). A multitude of factors influence the decision-making process. Amongst them are student characteristics such as their socioeconomic status, ability, attitudes and expectations, race and ethnicity. External factors such as high school background, the encouragement and support of significant persons, attributes of the higher education institutions and their communication

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activities impact the process as well (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Thus, next to sociological and economic factors, the impact of actions taken by universities (e.g., recruitment activities, financial aid offers) on the students' decisions are deliberately included in this approach (Bergerson, 2010; Hossler et al., 1989). The model assumes that in the choice stage, students have made an application decision consistent with the search stage (Barnes-Teamer, 2003).

### **Critique of 'College Choice' Models**

Prevailing 'college choice' models provide a linear framework for the choice process in which students neatly move from one stage to the next, with no consideration given to the possibility that students may move back and forth between the stages as they finalize their college choice decisions. They do not account for individuals moving between stages, returning back to search and/or questioning their aspirations for college. The impression left is that each stage of the process follows the other in sequence. This approach to considering college choice does not capture the essence of the experience in a way that translates the messiness, confusion and non-linear nature of the phenomenon. This is particularly important for marginalized groups, as a 'one size fits all' approach to educational research often does not include their voices. So, while these studies can provide some information about the factors that influence school choice for non-traditional or marginalized groups, they shed very little light on the choice experiences of Black students. What follows is a consideration of the prevailing research specific to the choice process of Black students.

### **African-American Students and College Choice**

There exists a significant amount of research examining the college choice process, but little has focused on this phenomenon specific to Black students (Freeman, 2005). "The research



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on African Americans in every facet of higher education is sorely lacking, from their decision-making process as to whether or not to participate in higher education to their actual participation in the graduate school pipeline” (Freeman, 2005, p. xix). Currently, literature on the college selection process that makes reference to Black students falls into two camps: (1) exploring the effects of socioeconomic status on aspirations to attend college, largely from a high school perspective (Mayes & Hines, 2014; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, and Rhee, 1997; Ellwood and Kane, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; Kane, 1999; Perna, 2006; Hofferth, Boisjoly, and Duncan, 1998; Rouse, 1994; Avery and Hoxby, 2004; Heller, 1997), and (2) exploring the choice process for Black students who specifically enrol in historically Black colleges or universities (HBCUs) (McDonough, Antonio and Trent, 1997; Freeman, 1997; Allen, 1992; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Kim, 2002; Kim & Conrad, 2006; Nettles, 1988; Freeman and Thomas, 2002; Norwood, 2009; Hayden, 2000).

Disaggregated data from national longitudinal surveys in the United States has provided some college choice information specific to Black students. In particular, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s (CIRP) 1993 freshman survey provided McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1997) the opportunity to examine the factors that affected the college choice decision-making process for 220,757 African American students by comparing data from HBCU’s with traditionally White institutions (TWIs). McDonough, Antonio & Trent (1997) found that students who attended Black colleges were influenced by the following: (a) religious affiliation of college; (b) good social reputation; (c) desire to become more cultured; (d) relatives’ wishes; (e) a friend’s suggestion; (f) parents’ wishes; and (g) ability of graduates to secure employment. Students who chose to attend White institutions cited the following as influences: (a) recruitment by athletic department; (b) desire to live near home; (c) good academic reputation; (d)

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availability of financial aid; (e) advice of high school counselor; and (f) particular educational programs.

Recently, Cox (2016) utilized a constructivist, interpretive paradigm to conduct a three-year longitudinal study of the postsecondary planning process as realized by a sample of students at two inner-city high schools in the Northeast United States. A sample of 11<sup>th</sup> graders at each school was selected and their college planning activities and decisions were traced as they moved through, then beyond high school, in order to understand how and when students altered their plans. Researchers found that the college choice process was indeed, not a linear one for these students, despite their aspirations, and highlighted the necessity for further research that can shed light on the unique perspectives of marginalized and lower-socioeconomic communities.

### **Limitations of Traditional Combined Models**

The widely-accepted and oft-utilized college choice model, which provides the foundation for much of the prevailing research, consists of roughly three sequential phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Students first develop college-going aspirations and begin, both consciously and subconsciously, preparing for the application process (the predisposition phase). Following this, students undergo a phase in which they gather information about colleges, (the search phase) and develop a choice set of possible colleges to apply to (Barnes-Teamer, 2003). The third and final phase of the model, (the choice phase) involves several kinds of choices on the student's part - including where to apply to, and whether to enroll upon admission. Within this model, researchers have outlined an intersecting set of conditions that affect students' paths through high school and towards college, including socio-economic status, race, gender, personal attributes, high school habitus, etc. (Perna, 2006). Specific to race and socio-economic status, Black, Latino, and lower socio-economic students have been found to be less able to pay for

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college; less likely to have access to a robust college-preparatory curriculum during high school; and are not necessarily well versed in the nuances of college entrance requirements, college admissions, and financial aid options (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Kirst & Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 1994; Venegas, 2007).

Despite these various and intersecting conditions that may appear to confuse and muddle the process of college choice, the prevailing research utilizes a relatively uncomplicated model, suggesting that students enter each phase, in sequence, at specified points during their K–12 schooling (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Grodsky & Jackson, 2009). This simplified approach to college choice, particularly for marginalized students, perpetuates fundamental conceptual flaws in the model.

For example, because the traditional college choice model employs a ‘one size fits all’ approach to educational research, typical of more advantaged students, working within the model to understand historically marginalized and underrepresented students’ college-going, or non-college-going paths can easily lead researchers and policy makers to attribute disappointing outcomes to students’ deficiencies including poor decision making or inadequate motivation compounded by uninformed parents and poor guidance counseling (Cox, 2016). What follows then, is the model’s underlying rational decision-making framework that assumes that more or “better” information at an earlier point in the choice process would change students’ trajectories (Grodsky & Jackson, 2009; Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Perna & Titus 2005). This contradicts much of the evidence that exists regarding the success, or lack thereof, of interventions designed to provide low income and racially marginalized high school students with intensive academic preparation and improved social capital resources. A number of researchers, (Arnold, Fleming, De Anda, Castleman, & Wartman, 2009; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2009), suggest

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that these interventions do not guarantee college enrollment, in fact, even after such students are provided with assistance in navigating the college application, financial aid, and enrollment processes, as many as 70% of the students who are accepted to a four-year college reconsider matriculation, enroll in less selective colleges, or never enroll at all (Arnold et al., 2009; Roderick et al. 2009). These stories are not captured in much of the college choice research.

The most widely accepted and oft-applied framework for considering college choice, fails to incorporate the stories, lived experiences and realities of low income and marginalized students (Tierney and Venegas, 2009; Bloom, 2007). This certainly includes Black students. As Bloom (2007) correctly points out, low income high school students “grapple with the micro-economics of day-to-day survival” (p. 351), which, in turn, shape the kinds of choices that they are actually able to consider. Similarly, Black students grapple with the realities of anti-Black racism, Eurocentric curriculum and low expectations, in addition to the ‘micro-economics of day-to-day survival’, and this in turn must shape the kinds of choices that they are actually able to consider. Solorzano, Datnow, Park, and Watford (2013) refer to this non-linear journey as a series of winding paths formed by loops, detours, and stop-outs (Cox, 2016).

Understanding the college choice process therefore requires a substantial move away from the idea of a linear, sequential model – one in which students move seamlessly from one phase to the other. This study seeks to reveal, unpack and uncover the messiness of the university choice process and to highlight its non-linearity for Black undergraduate students in Ontario, by employing a case study approach that sheds light on their lived experiences.

### **Summary of Chapter Two**

The lived experiences of Black undergraduate students in Canadian universities is an under-researched area. What is clear from the research that does exist, are the ways in which the

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struggle for access to university education in Canada is a continuation of an historical and ongoing struggle for access to quality education for Black communities across the country. Establishing a physical presence on campus and ensuring a representative curriculum, faculty and staff complement are hallmarks of the struggles in public education that have been waged pre- and post-emancipation. This study will provide more information specific to the experiences of Black students on university campuses in Ontario.

Student college choice is a complex process with existing research identifying several influential factors, and in some instances, contradictory findings. The relative impact of many of the identified factors is less understood as is the duration of their effect during the college selection process. Several background characteristics including socioeconomic status, academic ability, and parental influence are shown in the literature to have a significant impact on college choice, especially in the early or predisposition phase. The impact of institutional attributes is less understood, with college recruiting efforts difficult to understand when the cumulative effects of information are considered. The impact of other institutional attributes such as financial aid is also not completely understood. The issue of student-institution fit is important to the college choice process, as students are involved in the matching of their individual attributes and values with those of the institutions they are considering, and the one they ultimately choose. Students are required to synthesize information about institutions, together with their own needs, values and interests, to make college choices.

Researchers have identified econometric, sociological and combined models to explain the choice process, utilizing quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches therein, but have not been able to determine the most important factors inherent in the choice process. Further, little research has been done to determine the factors influencing the choice process for

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specific populations, i.e. racial and ethnic groups as well as the intersectionalities of those characteristics with gender, socioeconomic status, etc.

The limited data available concerning the university choice process for Black students in Canada, makes it difficult to identify specific factors that would impact this process for Black students in a different way than other students. This is particularly the case when considering the choice process for Black undergraduate students in Ontario. This study will identify the factors that impact the choice process for Black undergraduate students in Ontario.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of first-year, Black, undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution. This study provides some information pertaining to university admissions and enrolment processes, and the ways in which these can be used to target and recruit Black students. The results of the study can assist in identifying strategies to improve the numbers of Black applicants and enrollees to universities in Canada. Finally, this study fills a gap in research specific to the lived experiences of Black university students, and contributes to the canon of scholarly work pertaining to the interactions between Black communities and systems of education, in Canada.

In seeking to investigate these realities, the study addressed two research questions: a) What factors influenced Black students' decisions to enrol in university? b) What factors contributed to Black students' choice of institution?

This chapter describes the research methodology and includes discussions around the rationale for the research approach; a description of the research sample; a summary of information needed; an overview of the research design; the methods of data collection that were employed; the process for the analysis and synthesis of data; ethical considerations; issues of trustworthiness, and limitations of the study. The chapter culminates with a brief concluding summary.

### Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is grounded in an essentially social constructivist philosophical position, in that it recognizes that knowledge is constructed through social relationships and

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interactions and is a shared rather than an individual experience (Vygotsky, 1978). The qualitative researcher examines a social situation or interaction by entering into another's world, in an attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of their lived experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 1990; Schram, 2003). Qualitative research studies can provide a variety of outcomes for researchers, including: a) a description of processes, relationships, settings and situations, systems, or people; b) interpretation of data that can explain, develop, elaborate or clarify reality and/or theory; c) verification of assumptions, claims, theories, or generalizations in real world contexts; d) evaluation of particular policies, practices, or innovations (Peshkin, 1993). This type of research seeks understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, and reports detailed views of informants (Peshkin, 1993). The basis of qualitative research lies in the interpretive approach to social reality and in the description of the lived experiences of human beings. Qualitative researchers do not believe that there is an ultimate truth, but there may be different perspectives held by different individuals, with each perspective having some form of validity (Leedy and Ormrod, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002; Merriam, 1998). For the purposes of discerning the factors that influenced university choice decisions for Black undergraduate students in Ontario, a qualitative approach is suitable as it: allows for an understanding of the processes by which events and actions take place; develops contextual understanding; facilitates interactivity between researcher and participants; adopts an interpretive stance, and maintains design flexibility.



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### **Rationale for Case Study Methodology**

Within the framework of a qualitative approach, this study was well suited for a case study design. Merriam's (1998) consideration of a case as broad enough to warrant being constituted by a person, group, program, specific policy, etc. allowed for case study to be appropriately applied to this particular study. Also, Merriam's description of case study research as particularistic, descriptive and heuristic fit well with the nature of this study. This study focused specifically on Black Canadian, first-year, undergraduate students in Ontario universities and shed some light on their experiences during the university selection and enrolment processes.

The case is defined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context; in short, the unit of analysis. In this particular study, the case is focused on the factors that influenced the university choice process for first-year, Black undergraduate students in Ontario, through an investigation of their lived experiences during the university application and enrolment processes. The geographical boundary ensured that all students lived in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), in order to make face-to-face interviews easily accessible for both the researcher and participant. It was important that the participants be first year students so that it would be easier for them to recall the circumstances surrounding their application and enrolment. Students were required to self-identify as Black to be included in the study.

Further, as Merriam (1998) indicates, qualitative case study is an ideal design for understanding and interpreting educational phenomena:

A case study design is employed to gain an in depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved. The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation. Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research.

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(Merriam, 1998, p. 19)

This study fit well with Merriam's consideration of case study, because it sought to better understand the lived experiences of Black Canadian, first-year, undergraduate students in Ontario universities during the application and enrolment processes, to identify the factors that brought them to their specific institution. As outlined in Chapter 6 in detail, the results of this study can contribute to some considerations of new and revised policies and practices as well as future research opportunities.

### **Research Approach**

This particular study utilized a qualitative case study approach in order to understand the factors influencing the university choice process employed by Black undergraduate students in Ontario. In case study, researchers attempt to shed light on a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. This is the case particularly when those boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred and not clearly distinguishable. In this regard, case study allows for the confusion associated with distinguishing between phenomenon and context by employing specific data collection and analysis techniques to investigate phenomena within the context of 'real life'. Case study inquiries then rely on multiple sources of evidence, many variables of interest and previously developed theoretical propositions, as a guide toward the collection of data (Yazan, 2015).

Yin, Merriam and Stake are three seminal and foundational case study methodologists, who provide roadmaps for the completion of these studies. They have each considered the divergent and convergent ways case study research can be defined and characterized, dependent upon discipline, purpose and individual person (Yazan, 2015).

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Yin takes a more positivistic approach to case study, emphasizing research quality, defined by validity and reliability (Yazan, 2015; Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000). Yin suggests that the qualitative and quantitative researcher have more in common than not, and argues for the consideration of case study research as a legitimate methodology. Stake uses constructivism and existentialism (non-determinism) as the epistemologies that inform case study research. He suggests that case study research is defined by individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used and regards the reader of the research as engaging in another level of knowledge construction, on top of the construction of the participant and researcher respectively (Stake, 1994).

Merriam employs a constructivist approach to case study research as well, considering 'reality' as open to multiple interpretations rather than as an objective entity (Merriam, 1998). Merriam postulates that the case study researcher's task is to explore the ways people make sense of their lived experiences in the world, conscious of the lens that the researcher uses to filter said information (Yazan, 2015).

This study draws from Merriam's work on case study in exploring the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students through a qualitative, constructivist approach, specific to their university choice process. Merriam's consideration of case study research will guide the design of this study. The qualitative, constructivist approach is appropriate, as the study will examine the lived experiences of Black students choosing university, within their real-life contexts. Since this study seeks a better understanding of a complex situation - why Black undergraduate students chose university and then their particular institution - the case study approach was chosen for this study. The case study design will help the researcher identify the factors that influenced the school choice process for Black undergraduate students in Ontario.

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### **The Research Sample**

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to identify the research participants. To yield the most information about the circumstances under study, purposeful sampling is a method that is typical of case study methodology (Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2000). I sought willing participants at Ontario universities from a variety of disciplines. A snowball sampling strategy, sometimes referred to as network or chain sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990), was employed, whereby participants were asked to refer other Black undergraduate students. The criteria for selection of participants included: enrolled as a first-year, undergraduate student and self-identified as Black. The research sample included 15 individuals. It was anticipated that there would be differences among the sample, including gender, age, discipline of study, sexual orientation and ability. Further demographic information about the research participants is provided in Chapter 4.

### **Information Needed to Conduct the Study**

This case study focused on 15 Black, first-year, undergraduate students at Ontario universities. In seeking to understand why these students chose to enroll in university and in their particular institution, two research questions were explored to gather the information needed: What factors influenced Black students' decisions to enrol in university? What factors contributed to Black students' choice of institution?

The information needed to answer these research questions fit into three categories: (a) perceptual, (b) demographic, and (c) theoretical. This information included: the participants' perceptions of why they chose to enroll in university, and then their particular institution; demographic information pertaining to the various intersectionalities that distinguished each research participant from the other, including program concentration/discipline, age, gender,

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sexual orientation and ability. An ongoing review of the literature provided the theoretical grounding for the study.

### **Overview of Research Design**

The following list summarizes the steps that were used to carry out this research. Following this list is a more in-depth discussion of each of these steps. Preceding the actual collection of data, a selected review of the literature was conducted to study the contributions of other researchers and writers in the broad areas of the Black experience in education in Canada and models of college choice in the United States. Following the proposal defense, the researcher acquired approval from the pertinent Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to proceed with the research. The IRB approval processes involved outlining all procedures and processes needed to ensure adherence to standards put forth for the study of human subjects, including participants' confidentiality and informed consent. Potential research participants were contacted by email and/or telephone, and those who agreed to participate were sent a questionnaire by email. The survey was designed to collect demographic as well as preliminary perceptual data. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Black, first-year, undergraduate students representing universities in Ontario. Interview data responses were analyzed within and between groups of interviewees.

### **Literature Review**

An ongoing and selective review of literature was conducted to inform this study. The focus of the review was to gain a better understanding of the broader context of Black experiences in education in Canada and to understand the ways in which university choice has been investigated in other jurisdictions and applied to Black communities therein. Collected data

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was analyzed through the lens of this research in order to fit this study within the broader academic and social context.

### **IRB Approval**

Following a successful proposal defense, the researcher submitted an application for ethics approval from the appropriate IRBs in order to be in a position to collect data. This application included information such as the: background/context, problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions outlined in chapter 1; the literature review included in chapter 2; and the methodological approach as outlined in chapter 3.

### **Data-Collection Methods**

The use of multiple methods and triangulation was critical in attempting to obtain an in-depth understanding of the circumstances under study. Triangulation ensured that two or more methods of data collection were employed in order to check the results against the other. This strategy added rigor, breadth, and depth to the study and provided corroborative evidence of the data obtained (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). Therefore, this study employed two different data-collection methods: survey and interview.

### **Phase I: Survey**

Potential participants were contacted, and those who agreed to participate were sent a questionnaire by email and were asked to return the completed forms electronically. The questionnaire was designed to collect demographic information and to get participants' initial perspectives on their decisions to attend university. A few advantages to online survey research is the access it provides to individuals in distant locations, the ability to reach difficult to contact participants, and the convenience of having automated data collection, which reduces researcher time and effort. Disadvantages of online survey research include uncertainty over the validity of

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the data and sampling issues, and concerns surrounding the design, implementation, and evaluation of an online survey (Fowler, 1993). Further, surveys can be of limited value for examining complex social relationships or intricate patterns of interaction. In keeping with the qualitative research tradition, the surveys used in this study included some open-ended questions that could tap into personal experiences and shed light on participants' perceptions. For the purposes of this study, surveys had a distinct place in the study's methodological design and served as a useful complement to interviews. It is important to note that the results of the survey were used to collect demographic information and to inform the list of questions used during the interviews, they did not factor into the eventual findings.

### **Phase II: Interviews**

The interview was selected as the primary method for data collection in this study. The interview method was felt to be of the most use in the study for a number of reasons. First, an interview has the potential to overcome the poor response rates of questionnaire surveys. Further, it is well suited to the exploration of attitudes, values, beliefs and motives and provides the opportunity to evaluate the validity of the respondent's answers by observing non-verbal indicators. Interviews can also facilitate comparability by ensuring that all questions are answered by each respondent and will ensure that the respondent is unable to receive assistance from others while formulating responses. Well-structured interviews have the potential to elicit rich, thick descriptions and gives the researcher an opportunity to clarify statements and probe for additional information (Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). In this regard, semi-structured interviewing was an effective way to shed light on the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students in Canadian universities, in their own words. (Please see Appendix A for a list of interview questions)

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Each interview lasted at least one hour and was conducted once during the data collection process. Once completed, each interviewee had the opportunity to read over the transcripts of the interview as well as the researcher's notes.

Although interviews have various strengths, there are certain limitations associated with interviewing. Not all people are equally cooperative, articulate, and perceptive. Researcher skill is vital in identifying appropriate questions and drawing answers out of participants. Interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering - they are the result of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee and the context in which that takes place (Fontana & Frey, 2003; Schwandt, 1997).

### **Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis**

The challenge throughout data collection and analysis was to make sense of large amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and construct a framework for responding to the collected information. In this regard, Merriam (1998) cautions researchers to make data analysis and data collection a simultaneous activity to avoid the risk of repetitious, unfocused, and overwhelming data. The formal process of data analysis included assigning codes according to the categories and descriptors of the study's conceptual framework.

The coding process involved identifying common themes in participants' responses and grouping them accordingly. Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest a number of ways code via transcript, including: identifying word repetitions and key words in context; constantly comparing and contrasting participant responses; introducing theoretical perspectives as a lens through which responses can be analysed; searching for missing information; identifying and translating metaphors and analogies when used; and identifying transitions, connectors and other commonly used devices.



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The data that contributed to the coding process included the survey responses, interview transcripts, researcher's notes, and any feedback provided by participants upon their review of the transcript.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In any research study, ethical issues relating to protecting the privacy of participants are of vital concern (Berg, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Pring, 2000; Punch, 1994; Schram, 2003). A social science researcher is responsible for both informing and protecting respondents. The research process involves enlisting voluntary cooperation, and it is a basic premise that participants are informed about the study's purpose. The central issue with respect to protecting participants is the ways in which the information is treated. Although there were no serious ethical threats during the facilitation of this study, various safeguards were employed to ensure the protection and rights of participants.

First, informed consent was the basis upon which participation in the study was measured. Written consent to voluntarily proceed with the study was received from each participant. Second, participants' rights and interests were considered of primary importance when choices were made regarding the reporting and dissemination of data. The researcher was committed to keeping all personal information confidential and stored safely.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research has historically been considered invalid by quantitative researchers who challenge its validity (the degree to which something measures what it purports to measure) and reliability (the consistency with which it measures it over time). In seeking to establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, Guba and Lincoln (1998) use the terms *credibility*, *dependability*, *confirmability*, and *transferability*, arguing that the trustworthiness of qualitative

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research should be assessed differently from quantitative research. I addressed each concept accordingly.

### **Credibility**

The criterion of credibility (or validity) suggests whether the findings are accurate and credible from the standpoint of the researcher, the participants, and the reader (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This criterion becomes a key component of the research design (Creswell, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Mason, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Associates; 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Seeking not to *verify* conclusions, but rather to *test the validity* of conclusions reached, entails a concern with both methodological and interpretive validity (Mason, 2006).

Methodological validity involves asking how well matched the logic of the method is to the kinds of research questions that are being posed and the kind of explanation that the researcher is attempting to develop. Dealing with this type of validity involves consideration of the interrelationship between the research design components—the study's purpose, conceptual framework, research questions, and methods. Interpretive validity involves asking how valid the data analysis is and the interpretation on which it is based. Although this step is somewhat dependent on methodological validity, it goes further in that it directs attention to the quality and rigor with which the researcher interprets and analyzes data in relation to the research design (Mason, 2006).

### **Dependability**

Reliability in the traditional sense refers to the extent that research findings can be replicated by other similar studies. Qualitative research usually does not cover enough of an expanse of subjects and experiences to provide a reasonable degree of reliability. As argued by

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Lincoln and Guba (1985), the more important question becomes one of whether the findings are consistent and dependable with the data collected. For the purposes of this study, the goal was not to eliminate inconsistencies but to ensure that the researcher understood when they occurred. Thus, it became incumbent upon the researcher to document procedures and demonstrate that coding schemes and categories were used consistently.

### **Confirmability**

The concept of *confirmability* corresponds to the notion of objectivity in quantitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The implication is that the findings are the result of the research, rather than an outcome of the biases and subjectivity of the researcher. To achieve this end, a researcher needs to be transparent about the lens through which he/she views the world and the research. Although qualitative researchers realize the futility of attempting to achieve objectivity, they must nevertheless be reflective and illustrate how their data can be traced back to its origins (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Transferability**

Although generalizability was not the intended goal of this study, what could be addressed was the issue of *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); that is, the ways in which the reader determines whether and to what extent this particular circumstance in this particular context can transfer to another particular context. With regard to transferability, Patton (1990) promotes thinking of “context-bound extrapolations” (p. 491), which he defines as “speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions” (p. 489).

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### **Limitations of the Study**

The first limitation of this study was the lack of published statistics specific to the numbers of Black students on university campuses in Ontario. This challenges prevailing sentiments about the lack of access to university education for Black students. The second limitation is that some Black students chose not to participate in the study or were unable to accurately recall what factors influenced their university choice decisions. Further, being that this study focused on Black students in Ontario, transferability of the data is questionable. Further research can be conducted to get a broader sample of Black students across institutions.

This study contained certain limiting conditions that are directly related to the common critiques of qualitative research methodology. Because analysis ultimately rests with the thinking and choices of the researcher, qualitative studies in general are limited by researcher subjectivity. Therefore, an overriding concern was that of researcher bias, framing as it does assumptions, interests, perceptions, and needs. One of the key limitations of this study was the issue of subjectivity and potential bias regarding the researcher's own experiences during his time as a Black undergraduate student in Ontario.

### **Summary of Chapter Three**

In summary, this chapter provided a detailed description of this study's research methodology. Qualitative case study methodology was employed to shed light on the factors that influenced the decision to enroll in university for Black undergraduate students. The participant sample was made up of 15 purposefully selected individuals. Two data-collection methods were employed, including a survey questionnaire and individual interviews. The data was reviewed against literature as well as emergent themes.

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A review of the literature was conducted to devise a conceptual framework for the design and analysis of the study.

The intent of this study was to add additional information to the gaps in research pertaining to the lived experiences of Black students in universities in Canada, as well as to situate those experiences within the context of the larger Black experience in education in Canada.

**CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to explore Black undergraduate students’ considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution. The purpose of this research was to help inform university admissions and enrolment processes, and the ways in which these can be used to target and recruit Black students. The results of the study may also assist in identifying strategies to improve the numbers of Black applicants and enrollees to universities in Canada.

The participants in this research study all resided in the Greater Toronto Area, representative of both suburban and urban communities. Each completed a demographic survey and participated in one semi-structured interview. The chart below provides some information collected in the demographic survey, including: year of birth, housing status, employment status and program of study.

Name*	Year of Birth	Gender	Employment Status	Housing Status	Program of Study
Tiana	1999	Female	Not working	Owned by someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	Sociology
Keon	1998	Male	Working part-time	Rented for cash rent	History
Brittany	1998	Female	Not working	Owned by someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	Sociology
Brandon	1999	Male	Not working	Owned by someone in the household without mortgage	Computer Science
Dionne	1998	Female	Working part-time	Owned by someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	History
Sandra	1997	Female	Working part-time	Owned by you or someone in the	Business

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				household with a mortgage or loan	
Linda	1999	Female	Working part-time	Rented for cash rent	Kinesiology
Chris	1998	Male	Working part-time	Owned by you or someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	Architectural Science
Sarah	1998	Female	Working part-time	Owned by you or someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	Commerce
Carmen	1998	Female	Working part-time	Owned by you or someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	English
Sasha	1998	Female	Not working	Owned by you or someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	Dance
Sam	1999	Male	Working part-time	Rented for cash rent	Mathematics
Celia	1995	Female	Working part-time	Rented for cash rent	Psychology
Ken	1998	Male	Working part-time	Owned by you or someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	Sociology
Chad	1998	Male	Working part-time	Owned by you or someone in the household with a mortgage or loan	History

\*A pseudonym is used in place of participants' real names.

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from the 15 semi-structured interviews and surveys. Seven major findings emerged from this study. These are discussed in this chapter in order of their prevalence in the interviews. First, parental influence was a significant contributing factor in the decision to attend university and to attend a particular institution. Second, 'institutional fit' played an important role in participants' choice decisions. Third, high school personnel, including guidance counsellors, administrators and teachers, had limited

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impact on participants in their decisions to attend university. Fourth, the participants' circle of friends, or individual peer groups had significant impact on whether they decided to attend a university. Fifth, all participants suggested that there were a number of Black students, outside of their individual peer groups, who had the ability to attend university, but who did not consider university an option, and were not expected to attend by all parties in the school system. Sixth, financial considerations were a significant determinant of school choice, particularly concerning proximity, in terms of the necessity not to incur fees for student housing. Seventh, participants reported feeling unsure about their place in university at some point(s) during their first year.

What follows is a discussion of the findings with details that support and explain each finding. By way of "thick description" (Denzin, 1989; 2017), the researcher set out to document a broad range of experiences, and thereby provide an opportunity for the reader to enter into this study and better understand the reality of the research participants. The emphasis throughout is on letting participants speak for themselves. In each case, a pseudonym is used in place of the participant's real name.

### **Finding 1: Parental influence is significant**

One of the most significant findings of this study is the degree to which parental influence is a factor in the decision to enter into university-level study for Black, undergraduate students. This manifested itself in a few ways: parent(s) encouraging the attainment of a university degree as an expectation; parent(s) indicating that a university degree is a requirement to help combat the racism that exists in society; and/or parent(s) being directly involved in the choice of school.

The majority of participants indicated that their parents actively encouraged them to consider university as an option by talking with them about it, helping with the school search,



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and/or setting very clear expectations. It became clear that parental expectation and interest significantly impacted a student's consideration of university as an option. Participants expressed this in the following ways:

They [my parents] didn't force me, but I knew what they expected of me. Especially after grade 10, we talked a lot about what I wanted to do with my life [laughter]. I feel like if I didn't go [to university] I would really disappoint them. I don't think they really cared about what school, just that I went. (Tiana)

Tiana seemed still unsure of what she wanted to do with her life. Her nervous laughter suggested feeling a bit of pressure to jump into university without being totally sure it was the best course of action. Left to her own devices, Tiana may not have gone to university right away. When I asked her if she had regrets about enrolling directly after high school, she quickly dismissed the question, and reinforced the importance of being there. It was clear that Tiana had internalized the necessity of going to university, largely based on the expectations of her parents.

The internal implicit and explicit expectations of Keon's mom, and its impact on his decision to enrol in university echoes Tiana's experience. He states:

My mom was really clear about what she expected of me. She always told me that if I wanted a good job, university was the only way. I don't really feel like I had a choice.

No, it's not something I am upset about. I may have felt kind of pressured, but I know she just wants what's best for me. I can't be mad at that. (Keon)

Keon continued this theme of feeling as though university was not simply an option, but an absolute necessity. He seemed very protective of his mother and her wishes for his future. He was very proud of the fact that he had fulfilled a promise he made to his mother by enrolling in

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university, and seemed determined not to let her down. Both Tiana and Keon expressed what became a common thread regarding the regular conversations between parents and their child about attending university. None of the 13 participants who identified their parents as a significant influence on their school choice decisions indicated that the idea of going to university was surprising, or something that only came up nearing the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Instead, participants suggested that university education was discussed with them throughout their childhood, and university-educated people were celebrated as the answer to a society in which the prevailing expectations for Black youth did not seem to include university education.

Another participant, Brittany, also articulated the level of expectation that was instilled by her parents to obtain a university degree:

You go to elementary school; you do well. You go to high school; you do well. Then you go to university, and you do well. That was the expectation. My parents always said that school was my job. I understood that right from the beginning. They weren't mean about it; they were very clear about it though. I took that in, and I saw evidence. The Black people around me in our family who were doing well financially, all had degrees. So what my parents had driven into me was proven to be true. (Brittany)

In this case, Brittany's parents' messages were correlated by the financial successes of her family who attended university. She internalized the message that one's value is tied to economic success, and the way in which that is to be achieved is by attending university. It became clear that Brittany would not be happy with herself had she not gone to university.

I carried on the conversation with Brittany in order to get into more depth about her willingness to accept the reality proposed by her parents, and one corroborated by living examples of individual success.

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Researcher: “Did you ever question ‘the plan’ in terms of the vision that your parents set out for you?”

Brittany: “Sure I did, and I still do now sometimes. Because I see people with degrees working at Starbucks and I’m like... “Wait, I’m getting a Sociology degree. What am I doing?” But at the end of the day, I will get the paper, and that piece of paper has to open some doors for me that wouldn’t have been open before.”

Brittany was sure that a university education would prove fruitful, and was clear that the expectations her parents had for her had become her own expectations for herself. I got the impression that Brittany put a lot of pressure on herself to do well, to meet her parents’ expectations and her own.

The discourse between parent(s) and child, about attending university took some notable turns. Where parent(s) set expectations for university from an early age, some parent(s) also encouraged their children to regard university education as a necessity to survive what they perceived was a racist society. So not only was university regarded as a means to improve personally, professionally and economically, it was considered a way to protect oneself from the dangers of growing up in a racist society. This was embodied in an exchange with Brandon, a first-year computer science student:

We always talked about successful Black people, like doctors or professors, and how they were a good example of what Black people could do if they got an education. I think this is why my parents were so on education all the time. They think it is the only way to do well. Like, how many times did I hear ‘you have to be twice as good’? I know you’ve heard that before. (laughter) It was driven into my head. So I didn’t think about trades or college or anything like that. University was the only way. It’s like by getting a degree I

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could end racism or something. (laughter and shaking his head) But that's the way I felt.

Going to university was like getting armour. Armour for battle. (Brandon)

When I asked him to clarify what he meant by the word 'battle, Brandon responded, "For the battle with White people. It was like protection. At least that's what I think my parents were thinking. If I went to university and graduated, I would get a good job and be able to deal with life, better. White people couldn't tell me anything."

I noted during this exchange that Brandon kept referring to what his parents thought about the importance of education. When I asked him if there were some incongruences between his parents' perspectives and his own, Brandon said:

(a long pause) I don't know. I mean, I know university is important. I just don't know how much it protects you. Do you know what I mean? From this world man.

Everybody's taking shots. That's why I took this program [Computer Science]. If I'm going to be the only Black guy, then I'm going to be the only Black guy. (laughter)

So...if university is the answer, I'm going to be covered.

Brandon spoke with a matter-of-factness that indicated a deep resolve in the inevitability of having to deal with racism in society. It became clear that he recognized university education as a tool that would equip him to deal with this reality, not necessarily as the panacea, as his parents would have suggested to protect against the ills of a racist society, but certainly as one way to "arm himself for battle". Brandon also highlighted a common theme for many of the participants, and one that resonated with me, because I heard it throughout my childhood – that I should expect to have to be twice as good, twice as smart and twice as talented as 'White folks', to "get what they get". Brandon and I connected with a knowing glance and laugh, at the

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moment that he said the words “twice as good”. He knew that I knew exactly what he was talking about.

Brandon also highlighted the perception of feeling isolated - “the only one” – the one Black person, or one of few in a program, in a university, in a classroom or in a workplace. Many Black people in Canada know this reality of being the only one. Faced with the reality of being one of few Black people in a school setting, some Black students experience an internal conflict - wanting to do well and to fit in, in what appears to be two worlds – their peer group or academic success, more plainly, to be ‘Black’ or to be smart. Some of these students choose one or the other, some attempt to fit into both by being different in different settings; some challenge this oppositional viewpoint by being who they are and being proud of who they are, and can find peace in that struggle (James 2012; Noguera, 2002). Brandon seemed to be the latter – proud of who he is, recognizing the game that exists before him, and playing it with an intention to win.

As demonstrated by Brandon’s and other participants’ responses to interview questions, parent(s) had a direct influence on participant aspirations for university. With respect to the selection of a specific university to attend, a majority of the participants indicated that their parents were either directly involved in the school choice process, and/or that parental considerations of schools significantly contributed to their decisions. Dionne, a first-year history student recounted the ways her parents stressed proximity, in terms of identifying the “ideal school”:

When we discussed where I would go, they [my parents] always favoured schools that were closer to home. My dad said it was for safety reasons. I think it was safety and money though. My mom told me a few times that we would have to figure out how to pay for residence if I went away. But I am not sure if she was actually serious. I wasn’t

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really ever able to stay away from home, like sleep over anywhere. So living on residence wasn't even something I thought about seriously. (Dionne)

Dionne went on to explain that in her family, girls were not permitted to sleep away from home: "I remember my brothers going for sleepovers and wondering why I didn't get to go. It bothered me at first, but I got used to it. I would have been pretty nervous to have to stay on campus anyway."

Despite Dionne indicating that she was happy with the decision to choose a school that was close to home, I was left with the impression that she may have wanted to go away. I asked a few more questions about this choice, and Dionne reiterated the fact that her brothers were permitted to sleep away from home, when she was not. The repetition of this fact, and the incredulous expression that Dionne had on her face when she told me, made me think that Dionne was not particularly pleased with the double standard, and would have likely made a different school choice decision, left to her own devices.

This exchange with Dionne was reminiscent of stories I heard from girls growing up, about the different rules that were applied to them versus their male siblings. Many of my female friends have told me over the years that sleeping outside of the home was not permitted for them, even though their brothers were permitted to do so. Dionne was clear that her particular family values required that girls not be away from home, and that impacted her perceptions of what was possible for her in terms of where she could go to school. There is existing scholarship concerning the ways some immigrant cultural communities socialize girl children versus boy children, in order to demonstrate difference with the dominant culture (Barry, Bacon & Child, 1957; Rumbaut, 1994; Smetana, 2000). This can include the elevation of values like chastity, (particularly that of young women), and can have the effect of reinforcing masculinist and

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patriarchal power in the name of a greater ideal of national/ethnic self-respect (Espiritu, 2001). It is important to note that none of the participants who self-identified as male, indicated that being away from home was frowned upon from a values perspective, by their parent(s).

The involvement of parent(s) in the school-selection process was echoed by Keon, who discussed the influence of his mother in identifying the school he eventually chose for matriculation:

My mom went to this school. I think she would have lost it if I didn't go here. She always talked about chillin' in the student centre and going to the CSA [Caribbean Students' Association] dances. I heard her and her friends talking about a party at the campus club one night and how crazy it was. When we started to go visit campuses she kept stressing about the timing of the visit to this one (laughter). On the ride up, she was talking about introducing me to her old Professors and stuff. She really built it up in my mind. Then when I visited here, I was sold.

Keon took very seriously his mom's considerations of the school he should go to, and he enjoyed the fact that he could attend the school his mother did. I got the impression that his school choice brought him closer to his mother and he would not have made a different decision. This notion of making their parent(s) 'happy' by making a particular school choice was one that was communicated by a number of participants.

### **Finding 2: Choosing based on 'fit'**

The first manifestation of 'fit' described by participants included feeling a sense of affinity or connection to a particular university as a result of the level and quality of communication and correspondence between the institution and the individual. All participants

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reported being contacted multiple times via phone or email following their initial application, by the institutions they eventually chose to matriculate into:

I was actually leaning towards another school, but [my school] made me feel like they wanted me to be there. When they sent the letter of acceptance, they followed up with a phone call making sure I got the letter. It was totally unexpected. I was feeling a bit unsure of myself, you know, going to university and what not, but they made me feel more comfortable, like I would be welcomed. (Sandra)

Sandra described what became a common theme among participants, that the extent to which a school demonstrated support and outreach to enrol a particular student, the more affinity the student felt towards that school. Participants highlighted receiving multiple emails, hard-copy letters and speaking to university personnel on the phone. This individualized attention was an important theme in many of the interviews. I got the impression that participants appreciated feeling valued by a school. For Black students who have been historically, and continue to be, marginalized by school systems in Canada, there is an expectation of mistreatment. When a school demonstrates behaviour to the contrary, it contributes to building a relationship.

When a school looked like they were putting in a bit of effort, it made a difference in the perceptions of the participants. Participants noted that there was a distinction between the template letters and a personal email or phone call from an advisor or a phone, to enquire about their offer from the university.

When I had questions, I was able to talk to somebody and then when I had more I could speak to the same person. I don't know if that's the regular way they do business, but for me, there was a real effort to build a relationship almost. I'm investing a lot of time and money, I want my school to do the same for me." (Linda)



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In this case, Linda speaks to hearing the voice of an individual, in addition to the multiple reminders to enrol in the program. The individual perceptions that universities could be a 'face-less' institution, shift it to an inviting place, and work towards developing an affinity between the individual and the school. This notion of establishing a relationship was highlighted by a number of participants who reported being drawn to schools that were seen to be making an effort. Many indicated that their initial decisions changed based on the level and nature of communication from the receiving institution.

I didn't want to be just another number. And I felt like that with one school in particular. They were my first choice going in. I even really liked the campus when I went to visit. But it was like pulling teeth to get answers to any questions, and I felt like I was being a bother to them. Schools really need to think about who they hire in those enrolment positions. Like if you don't like people, don't work in student services. (laughs) So I changed my mind, because [my school] checked in with me, and answered my questions. At the end of the day, schools in Canada, they all have pretty good programs, the way I was treated really changed the game for me. (Chris)

For Chris, although program was important, it was clear that the connection he made with university personnel prior to making a decision, impacted his school choice. Chris changed his mind from his first-choice school based on their lack of communication. This is an important consideration, in that Chris not only had identified his first-choice school as having his program, but he also appreciated the campus during his visit. It was the interaction with school personnel, and the way that these individuals made him feel welcome, that ultimately made Chris change his school choice.

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The importance of this communication was echoed by Sarah, who kept her first choice in part because of their level of communication.

I got my acceptance letter for one program and got put on a waitlist for the one I really wanted. So I called to see if there was anything I could do. I wasn't holding out a lot of hope, because I figured they would tell me there was nothing that they could do. But I was told I would get a call back. In two days, I got a call from I think the Registrar's office, and they said I could enroll in the program I wanted. Even if I didn't get into the program, I was leaning towards my school, because they really treated me good. When I found out I was able to sign up for my program...that was icing on the cake.

In this particular case, Sarah still decided to go with her first-choice school, but the level and quality of the communication she received from the school, made her feel much more confident in the decision. It is evident in both Sarah and Chris's responses, as well as many of the other participants, that institutional 'fit' from the perspective of feeling an affinity towards a school, or a feeling of being wanted, impacted school choice decisions. The majority of the participants reported feeling a bit uneasy, or unsure about their readiness or 'suitability' for university, and most felt the same uncertainty with respect to deciding on a particular school; these responses suggest that the level and quality of communication demonstrated by schools, impacted participants' school choice decisions.

Participants also suggested that 'fit' was not just based on the way the responses from the school's recruitment staff made them feel. The vast majority of students who identified 'fit' as an important factor in their decision, reported considering the diversity inherent in the recruiters who visited their schools, the marketing materials they received and the makeup of the student-body they saw during campus visits, as impactful to their decision-making. It became very clear

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that study participants also defined ‘fit’ as a sense of comfort in the demographic diversity, or commitment to diversity, that existed at particular universities.

This group came to my school, all White, to talk about their programs. I’m not racist or anything, but I was like, wow, I guess there isn’t much diversity there, or it’s not a priority. The pamphlet had what looked like these stock photos. One Black guy, one Asian woman and a bunch of smiling White folks. It wasn’t really impressive. The thing is, when I went to the campus visit, the school was actually pretty mixed up [diverse]. Maybe it was just that day or something. Anyway, I think that schools should really think about who they send out to recruit. It would be nice if they focused a bit more on being representative. (Carmen)

Carmen’s considerations of the diversity of the recruitment staff were echoed by a number of participants. It was clear that physically seeing diversity represented in recruiting teams could contribute to feelings of comfort with an institution, for study participants. Egalite & Kisida (2018) found that when Grade 4-8 students had teachers of the same race as them, they reported feeling more cared for, more interested in their schoolwork and more confident in their teachers’ abilities to communicate with them. These students also reported putting forth more effort in school and having higher post-secondary aspirations. It follows then that recruitment teams for universities, that are more representative of the populations they are hoping to recruit, can expect to engender greater feelings of comfort with potential applicants from diverse communities. The impression that a school leaves if the recruitment team is not comprised of a visibly diverse group of people, is that the school does not consider diversity important. This was a sentiment that was clearly expressed by a number of study participants, including Sasha:

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I actually asked the recruiters when they came, why they only sent White staff to the visit. I just found it offensive, like, you want me to come to your school, but you make me feel like I won't fit in. They said that they were just one team and that the staff at the university was very diverse, but it just didn't sit well with me, you know? We had just been literally talking about BET (Black Entertainment Television) in my Sociology class, and the whole class was telling me how it was racist against White people. And then this happens. I was screaming on the inside. (Sasha)

Sasha expressed an angst with some of the realities she had to face as a Black student. Her sentiments about wanting to scream, but feeling like she could not, were not unique. To Sasha, it was disingenuous of her classmates to be critical of BET, but find no concerns with universities sending out racially homogenous recruiting teams.

With respect to institutional fit, participants also made clear the importance of seeing a diverse student body on campus. Sam made this point:

Walking around the campus really sold it for me. I knew going in, that in my program, I would be one [Black person] of only a few. But being on campus and seeing all those different people made me feel so good. You know when you're up tight about something and you just start to feel at ease? That's what happened. Don't get me wrong, I get along with everybody, but there's just certain times where you don't want to be the only one. All I know is, that day, I felt like my decision got made. The program was what I wanted and I knew the school was what I wanted.

When asked whether it would have made a difference in the decision to attend had Sam not seen a diverse student body on campus, Sam contemplated, "That's a tough one. I got into all three of my schools, so I may have made a different choice without that visit. This one was the

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program I wanted most, but I was iffy on the school before the tour.” Sam was very clear on the fact that seeing a diverse student body on his campus visit helped him to make his ultimate school choice decision. His responses were not unique, but certainly more pointed. None of the participants suggested that not seeing diversity on campus would make them rule out a school; however, it became clear that it was something that was noted and could impact level of comfort with a school initially. In discussing this sentiment, some of the participants expressed worrying about alienation and loneliness, particularly for those living away from home. They equated demographic diversity on campus with a sense of belonging on campus. This is certainly not to suggest that only Black students consider their comfort level with an institution when making a school selection, but that for study participants, the diversity of fellow students, physically present on campus, contributed to their considerations of comfort level.

### **Finding 3: High School Guidance Counsellors were a disincentive to attend university**

When asked about the level of support provided by high school personnel, including teachers, social workers, guidance counsellors and/or administration, a majority of participants felt they received little or no encouragement or support with respect to the decision to attend university let alone a particular institution. This manifested itself in various ways. Participants reported feeling like they were operating in an environment of low expectations. They also indicated not receiving much information about universities, even when it was requested. During my interview with Celia, she reflected on the ways that her early troubles in secondary school followed her throughout her time there. She felt ostracized by school personnel in a way that was demotivating.

I swear no one from my school expected me to be here. I had a rough time in Grade 9 and it's like it followed me all the way through. Even when my marks were good, everyone

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had this attitude with me from the Principal right on down. I went to the guidance department one day to look at some of the books about the universities. The guidance counsellor told me I was wasting my time. I told her mind her own damn business. If my mom didn't raise hell, I would have been suspended. From then I just stopped expecting help and looked for my own information through friends and online.

Celia expressed a common sentiment among participants – that the guidance department was not particularly helpful, in terms of providing information about universities and their associated programs, and in some cases were purposefully negative about their ability to attend university. In this particular case Celia felt animosity in her interactions with guidance representatives and reinforced the important role her mother (parent(s) or guardian(s)) play in the aspirational and pragmatic considerations of university for study participants. The issue of lack of direction provided to Black students via guidance departments in Ontario secondary schools is an issue that has been identified by the Ontario Provincial government as requiring redress (OBYAP, 2017). In response, the Province is investigating a post-secondary connectors program that aims to utilize individuals with a social work / youth work background, with experience in Black communities, as independent connectors to post-secondary education. The model is still being developed, but the sentiments of study participants would suggest that it is a program that may have merit and may be able to assist some students in making the transition to post-secondary more smoothly.

Other school personnel were identified in subsequent interviews as not providing support to study participants who were considering university-level study. Ken identified the Principal at his school as a person who was demotivating when it came to his aspirations for post-secondary

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and his desire for further information. For Ken, the principal's behaviour was not just personal; he felt the Principal had an issue with Black students in general.

I don't know if I'm being too sensitive, but I felt like the Principal didn't care as much about Black students. He had some problem with a couple of Black students calling him racist, and after that, it's like he had it in for all of us. When the recruiters came to visit, they would always be scheduled during basketball games. I asked the Principal if he could book a different day and he told me maybe I should prioritize better. That's how it always was with him. Forever trying to show his dominance. He didn't like the fact that I would call him out on stuff. So to be straight, there is nobody at the school that I would go to for advice or encouragement about university. (Ken)

I asked Ken to describe, what he perceived as the impact of not feeling like he could go to school personnel to discuss university options. He thought about it for some time. When he did respond his face became sullen: "To be honest, I don't know. For people who might not have the backup at home, it was probably worse. I think about going back to visit and just giving everyone of those a—holes the finger."

Ken's manor and expression were again indicative of other participants who felt ostracized by the experiences in their respective high schools. He expressed a desire to validate his existence as a successful person to school personnel who did not treat him as such. This discussion was reminiscent of issues that I have read about, and discussions I have engaged in, in various Black communities in Canada. There exists a desire by some to "prove" themselves successful. This manifests itself in a variety of ways, including over-tipping, making extravagant purchases and other ultimately self-defeating behaviours. When Ken spoke of his desire to be successful and then finally "prove" to his doubters that he was worthy of their attention, it

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brought me back to these realities. As our discussion continued, and Ken relaxed more, it became clear to me that though he was deflecting, he exhibited signs of being hurt in the ways he was treated and regarded by his Principal. Ken ultimately made it to university, but I couldn't help but thinking of others who may not have had the additional supports or the resolve that Ken demonstrated, and the impacts of their interactions with the Principal.

In addition to getting little assistance with information pertaining to university and/or the application process, some participants suggested that school personnel overtly dissuaded them from applying to universities at all. During my interview with Chad, he told me about an interaction he had with his school's Vice-Principal during which Chad was encouraged to drop out of school.

When I was in Grade 11, I got in trouble for playing my music loud in the hallway. When I went to see the Vice-Principal, who was new to the school, he told me that maybe I should leave school for a bit to focus on my music. I didn't really think anything of it. Then I told my dad. (laughs) My dad came to the school immediately to see him [the Vice-Principal]. My dad asked him if I was White, if he would have suggested that I drop out of school? It was classic. This dude went bright red. (laughing) My dad told him never to give silly advice like that again. The best thing was, he did it in front of me.

(Chad)

I got the impression that for Chad, this moment was a victory. The reality, however, is that had Chad not told his father, or if his father had not come to the school, this Vice-Principal would have believed he did nothing wrong. In fact, he may still believe he did nothing wrong. Although Chad may not have recognized at first the necessity for his father's intervention, it was clear that he understood it after witnessing the exchange between his father and the Vice-



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Principal. Chad and I laughed about the story. I celebrated his father with him. But when Chad left the restaurant, I felt a deep sadness.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Sandra during her interview. She recounted an experience she had with a teacher during her grade 10 year that stuck with her as being particularly demotivating. During a civics lesson, Sandra's teacher distributed an article for discussion. The article concerned some individuals who had been refused admission to the University of Michigan, and they were trying to make the case that they had not been accepted because they were not minorities. Sandra's recollection of the events, paints a picture of a classroom that was an uncomfortable environment for Sandra.

So we get to talking about this as a class. And people have opinions on both sides. And I already don't like this lady [the teacher] because of her attitude. (smiles) So she turns to me and says, "Sandra, what do you think about this?" In my head I want to say "It's about damn time!" (laughter) But instead I say, "Well, for a long time Black people weren't allowed to go to some universities, so maybe they [the schools] are trying to open their doors more." That was it you know. Very, um, diplomatic. So then the teacher says. Now mind you, she didn't challenge anybody else on their opinion. She says, "Don't you think that's reverse racism?" I know the question sounds innocent enough. But the way she said it, and the way she looked at me, made me feel like I did something wrong. Or, like... (pause) ...like, I was being accused of something. I got hot. So I was like, "So you think everybody who got in before, deserved to be there?" I'm pretty sure I raised my voice a bit. Then I said, "What are you going to say when I get into university?" Then the teacher laughed to herself. I was in full on rage now. So I asked what she was laughing about. Not nicely. (laughter) She didn't say anything. She just shook her head and

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laughed again. And other people in the class laughed too. She didn't have to say it. I knew she was trying to say that it was funny, the idea of me being in university. (Sandra)

Now a first-year university student, Sandra found it important to relate an anecdote from a grade 10 class. Clearly this exchange stayed with Sandra as an example of the de-motivation she experienced while in secondary school. It is important to reiterate that Sandra is currently a university student. However demotivating the experience, Sandra was able to successfully transition from secondary school to university. All of the study participants had ultimately successfully transitioned, and all of them could point to instances like these in high school. It is important to consider the impacts of these experiences on those who do not ultimately make it to university, and even for those who do, how it colours their university experience.

While participants did provide more anecdotes about confrontational experiences with school personnel related to their plans for university-level study, many participants also reported just not having any interaction about university at all.

If it wasn't for my mom, I don't know if anybody would have talked to me about going to university. I mean really talked to me about it. We got some general stuff about the courses you take to be able to apply to university. But nobody from the school spoke to me about my specific area of interest and what was the best way to get there. (Keon)

Keon's experiences were indicative of many other participants, who felt that they were not provided appropriate individual support from high school personnel. I was left with the impression that this was an area of contention for Keon, who felt that other students were provided the support, information and encouragement requisite with an expectation for moving on to university-level study. His manner changed during the portions of the interview when he discussed his high school experiences. During most of the interview, Keon was jovial and always

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looking to make a joke; however, when discussing what he perceived as slights by the teachers and administrators at his high school, he was serious and animated. It was clear to me that for Keon, high school was more a place to survive than to strive.

Linda expressed similar sentiments when asked to consider her relationships with high school personnel.

Any info I got on universities I had to fight for. It was like they were doing me a favour if I asked for anything. I would make appointments with the guidance department, and I knew I wanted to do Kinesiology, and they would just point me to the books on the rack. No chat about the best schools or anything. I just feel like they had an attitude with me that was different. And I would ask, like, 'okay, I've seen the book, talk to me about Kinesiology and what I need to get in, and what schools are best, and what I might expect', and it was after all this prodding, they might sit with me and visit the websites of a few schools, like I couldn't do that on my own. At first, I just thought they didn't know what they were doing, but then one day I saw a girl whose mom was a teacher, get a hand-delivered package of information about Engineering (laughing and shaking her head). Maybe they just knew more about Engineering (laughing). (Linda)

Linda perceived differential treatment by high school personnel when it came to getting information to post-secondary. She felt that she did not receive the same attention and access to information that some of her peers did. Linda did not want to make an absolute statement whether this differential treatment was based on race, although she suspected this might be playing a part in the relative lack of support, given that she was a Black girl. Instead, Linda indicated that students with a pre-existing relationship with school personnel, or who had been granted clout based on family or school achievements, were treated better than others. She made

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the point more than once, that she was just a regular student, not ‘the smartest or the dumbest’, and that regular students were forgotten and ignored.

Linda’s experiences and those provided by other study participants were a bit surprising. Having interviewed only students who were successful in their transition from high school to university, I expected that the majority of them would have felt empowered by high school personnel. Instead, it became clear that even for those students who are ultimately successful, school can be a demotivating experience. For study participants, other supports that existed allowed them to persevere despite some of the negativity they encountered in high school; some of their peers did not fare as well.

### **Finding 4: Friends were an important consideration**

When asked about the expectations of their circle of friends, specific to university-level study, the majority of participants indicated that their friends expected to go to university throughout their time in secondary school. The responses suggest that these friends also had parent(s) who set this level of expectation. Within these peer groups, participants reported discussing and thinking about marks for university from as early as grade 9 and specifically identifying universities that they might apply to, in grades 11 and 12. It became clear that university was a part of the regular vernacular amongst these peer groups.

...I mean, we didn’t talk about it [university] everyday or anything. But when we started talking about what we would be doing after high school, it was always part of the conversation. We were trying to figure out if we could go together. I remember one of my friends telling me that he told his parents he might not want to go [to university] and they told him he didn’t have a choice (laughter). (Dionne)

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Dionne underscored the important role parent(s) played in her friends' considerations for university. She also made it clear that as a peer group, her friends considered going to school together. Ultimately many of the friends did not end up applying to all of the same schools, and Dionne ended up at a school that none of her friends attended; however, Dionne's peer group were involved in discussions about university and specific schools well before grade 12. This was echoed by Chris during his interview.

As we got closer to Grade 12, talks started heating up you know, in terms of what schools we were going to go to. When it really came down to deciding, where my friends were going didn't really make me want to go there. I was thinking about what was best for me and my future. If my friends went here, that is just a bonus. Most of us were nervous about what it [university] would be like and I think it kind of helped to be able to talk about it with everybody. One of the crew wasn't going because his marks weren't there [good enough]. I think he was kind of bummed when we would talk about it. (Chris)

Although where his friends went did not ultimately determine where Chris would enroll, the ability to discuss university education with his peers certainly helped him in term of making him calmer about the process. I was left with the impression that these discussions were very important to Chris in terms of making him more comfortable with university in general, and more confident in the decisions that he made about his future.

Tiana indicated that conversations with her peers about university began as early as Grade 9.

In my first year of high school, I think it was Geography class or something, I was doing a group project and my best friend was in my group. The assignment had something to do with where we were going to live in the future. I don't know why I remembered, but we

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said we were going to go to the same university and live with each other (laughter).

(Tiana)

Given the early nature of when deliberations about whether to go to university started in grade nine, I prompted Tiana further in why this conversation stood out for her. “To be honest, I’m not sure (laughter). I think maybe it just came to mind because you asked me, but yeah, we always thought university was the way to go. I guess that’s why I started to question it later on, like, should I really go, since I had never really questioned it before. It was just a given.” Tiana’s comments reinforced her feeling that university was an inevitable aspect of her life. She also indicated that this was the same for her friends. Questions did arise, eventually, particularly around whether university was the best option, but it was always an option – a point that Tiana drove home throughout her interview.

Participants suggested that conversations with peers around university, gained momentum in their Grade 12 year. Celia recounted a conversation with her peer group that involved discussing specific aspects of universities they were considering.

We had a few group chats about universities in terms of their pluses and minuses. One time as we were getting closer to having to get our applications in, me and two of my closest friends talked about our top three choices. At that point we had all sent in our applications and we were waiting to hear back from the schools. A couple of the options were common to the three of us. I went in leaning towards one school, but some of the things my friends told me about the school got me thinking. It was mostly about visiting the campus and not really seeing much diversity. I hadn’t gone on any visits, so when I got into all three schools, that conversation stayed with me, and I went another way. I was really happy to have friends who were going through the same things I was, and who I trusted. (Celia)

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Not only did Celia have very detailed conversations about university with her friends, she also found solace in the opportunity to discuss these issues with a group of people she trusted. Celia felt excluded by the staff and administration at her high school. Consequently her friends were a significant source of information and support when it came to thinking about and planning for university.

Peer groups played a significant role in their lives during the consideration, enrolment and application phases of university education. Some of the most impactful conversations that participants could recall, came as early as Grade 9 or as late as the latter half of their Grade 12 year. In either case, what friends discussed and how they discussed it, mattered.

### **Finding 5: “Smart” Black students without a network of support**

Outside of their individual peer groups, all of the participants discussed the fact that there were a number of Black students who they felt had the ability to attend university, but for whom university was not an option. They identified several reasons for this, including: lack of parental motivation; low self-esteem; and low teacher expectations.

Participants felt that with the right support, more Black students from their schools would have been in a position to apply to universities. Keon in particular felt that he personally knew of a number of individuals who, but for some bad choices and bad direction, may have been in university with him.

There were some cats [Black guys] who just didn't care about school. I tried to talk to them when I could, but they just were stuck in this belief that school was for White folks, especially like trying to get good marks. It kind of changed a bit closer to the end [graduation], but it was too late for them then. The ones that stuck it out barely graduated. A few dropped out. One guy though, his name was Shane, he really hurt me man. This

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dude was smart...I mean really smart. He got caught up though. He didn't have direction from jump [the beginning], got hooked up with the wrong group of friends. The day I heard he got arrested, that was a tough day for me. My mom and I talked about it for a long time. I don't know why it hit me so hard, but I just wished it could be different for him, you know? (Keon)

I was left with the impression that Keon still felt impacted by Shane's story. He seemed to carry it with him as an example of what could happen without appropriate direction. It became clear that part of Keon's appreciation of his mother was directly related to the way she ensured he kept on track. Stories like the one Keon told, of capable Black students not aspiring to university, were provided by a number of participants. Carmen discussed an instance in which she noticed how high school experiences impacted a student's motivation.

There was one student I remember who was a bit rough around the edges, but he was good at Math. We were in class and the teacher was looking for volunteers to participate in a Math contest. Normally this student wouldn't put his hand up for anything, but for some reason that day he wanted to participate. The teacher looked at him, chuckled, turned to the class and said, 'I'm looking for people who are actually serious about this.' She then proceeded to select two other students to participate in the contest. He played it off like it didn't bother him, but I could see that he was crushed.

Carmen seemed troubled by this incident. She was able to see the way an interaction with a teacher could demotivate a student. This anecdote was reflective of the informal and formal experiences of discrimination or marginalization that racialized students in particular, experience in school. The student described in the above story was labelled as unmotivated and unworthy to participate in the math activity, based on prior behaviour and/or experiences. Many of the



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participants in this study made the case that for Black students there seemed to be less opportunity to change the minds of school personnel, when their reputation had been established.

This incident reminded me of Chad's conflict with his Vice-Principal, and I was left with a number of questions. Had this student been able to tell his parents about what happened in class, could their involvement make a difference for him? Did his parents know and not get involved? Carmen's recognition that incidents like these over time could work to limit a student's aspirations and make it less likely that they consider university-level study. Carmen's story made me think about the power that educators can wield in the lives of their students and made me remember why I decided to get into education as a career in the first place.

Brandon told a few similar stories about students who had academic potential, but not the support from parents, peers and school personnel, necessary to make it to university:

The thing I couldn't figure out was how everybody around could see what was happening and not do anything about it. I'm not a trained educator. I'm not a parent. But I could see my peers who I knew were smart enough, start to slip through the cracks. What mom or dad leaves their kid out to dry? How does a Principal see that happening and not do something? It's like everybody just saw it as normal. I can't see how there is anything normal about that. And we go to school and we're all just doing our thing, watching these smart people fall away.

Brandon expressed frustration with the ways some Black youth were dissuaded from pursuing university-level study by parent(s) and/or the education system that failed them. He could not understand how people could watch youth with the ability, not make it, and not do anything about it. Brandon's assertions as well as those of other participants suggested to me that these students felt a level of responsibility to achieve both for their families, but also for the

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Black students who didn't make it. I was left with the impression after a number of the interviews that these students placed an additional pressure on themselves to be representatives of the whole, and to achieve on behalf of those who did not have the opportunity.

Brandon's story also speaks to the dominant norms and discourses that play out in schools - that it is the exception that a Black student strive for university. Rather than advocating for the child who clearly has potential, but may not have the support networks surrounding them, some schools do not provide that necessary guidance or foster the self efficacy that could assist that child to strive for university.

When I got in [to university], I was happy of course, but I was sad too, because I thought of Shane and the cats that he rolled with and how they weren't coming with me.

Seriously man, I couldn't shake it. Every now and again, I think about him and how he should be here. (Keon)

Keon articulated what was inherent in most of the interviews – a recognition that but for a few key players in their story, these Black students may not be in the positions that they currently occupy in universities. This particular portion of the interview with Keon brings much of what has been discussed previously in this chapter, full circle. Despite their demotivating experiences in school and community, the participants in this study were able to make it into university. I was often left asking myself what happened to the others who may not have had the supports. It became clear that many of the “others” did not make it to university, although they may have been smart enough. Whatever the combination of lack of direction, support, motivation or all of the above, many continue to slip through the cracks.

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### **Finding 6: financial considerations**

The majority of participants indicated that financial considerations did impact the universities to which they decided to apply. In many cases, participants applied to schools within close proximity to where they lived largely due to the costs associated with student housing. Participants also indicated that they thoroughly investigated potential costs for books, equipment and materials associated with their programs before applying. Most of the respondents suggested that they were currently working or looking for work, to have money available for current and future costs associated with their education and/or considering applying through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) for funds. Dionne explains:

My parents never directly came out and told me, but I know that money was a factor in choosing the schools that I would apply to. When we looked through the options that were a distance from our house and saw the money that you needed for residence and meal plans and stuff, my folks always gave each other this look, you know? (smiling) Like, I'm not so sure about this. Part of it was me sleeping away, but part of it was definitely the money.

Dionne's sentiments about the financial realities of living on campus were a common theme among research participants. Most felt that finances limited their school choices.

There is no way I could have lived on campus. Things are tight right now and I'm not paying residence. And I'm working. I didn't really even buy any books (laughter). I just hit the library and read what I have to read. (Ken)

Ken and Dionne both articulated participants' concerns around managing the expenses associated with their schooling. It became clear that finances were a significant consideration in terms of school choice, but not demotivating in terms of applying to university at all. None of the

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respondents considered not applying to university. Instead, participants reported working part-time or seeking work, as well as other opportunities to augment finances.

I participated in a program in Rexdale that provided a scholarship that would go towards my first-year tuition. Without that scholarship, I probably would not have been able to put together enough for this year. I'm working now, but I couldn't get the job fast enough to feel comfortable for next year. I will probably apply for OSAP. I heard the rules are changing and I can probably get more. (Linda)

Like many of the participants, Linda, expressed some concern about paying for future years of university education. This was indicative of another pressure on participants – the angst associated with financing the full four-year university experience. Only one of the respondents indicated that their parents had a savings plan that ensured coverage for all four years of study. The remaining participants discussed worrying about money; none of these, however, thought there would be any interruption to their studies because of finances.

Whenever anything pops off [an argument starts] with my mom now, the first thing she says is 'we are paying for your university...' or some variation of that (laughter). I'm on permanent lock. I have nothing to say after that. I know she's stressing about money all the time. It is a constant preoccupation. That's why I've been working as much as I can. I mean, I'm worried too. Like I don't want to burden her so much. I know we are going to be cool, it's just tight man. (Sam)

Sam's worry about paying for school, but more importantly, the impact it was having on his family was echoed by a number of participants. Most respondents expressed concerns about impacting the family's finances and were ceased with identifying ways to augment their income in order to assist. This included applying to OSAP, scholarships and bursaries where available.

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I know my schooling and all of the stuff I do outside of that costs my parents a lot of money. That's why I applied for a bunch of scholarships, and I keep looking for more.

That's also why I'm determined to graduate Summa Cum Laude. I am going to make the most of this investment. I have to. (Brittany)

Brittany clearly understood the impact her education was having on her family's finances and was determined to help, and to make sure she did well enough to justify the expense.

Brittany's assertions were common among participants, who all discussed doing well in order to make sure the money was well spent. What was clear is that for the participants in this study, finances were both a concern and a consideration around school choice.

### **Finding 7: Unsure of Place in University**

As the conversations ensued, participants were asked to comment on their experiences on campus and in the classroom at their respective institutions. While this line of questioning was initially to ascertain whether they were happy with the school choices they made, the responses produced some interesting results. Most participants reported feeling unsure about their place in university at some point(s) during their first year. Some of these moments occurred in classes and some in common areas around the campus. What became evident is a similar experience of feeling like they may not belong in their school.

I am the only Black girl in my dance program, so I immediately felt like an outsider. One of my professors seems to favour the girls with the really slim figures and I guess I have a few more curves than she is used to. I have been dancing all my life, and most of the time I am one of very few Black girls, but this is the first time I've felt so out of place. (Sasha)

While Sasha's concerns seemed unique to her program, the feeling of being out of place was common among participants. A number of participants discussed the lack of diversity in

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their lecture halls, on campus in general and among their professors as contributing to these feelings. They also mentioned specific incidents that brought these feelings to the fore.

So we're sitting in the Students' Centre late one night. We were studying, but laughing and enjoying ourselves. Then campus security comes by and asks us for our student ID. We kept telling the guy, look, we are students here. Things were getting heated, because we weren't showing him sh-t. One of his fellow security guys came by and encouraged him to let it go. Like, this is my school man. (Keon)

Keon's story was eerily similar to an incident that occurred when I was going to university, ironically at the same institution. During my time there, the police were called on a group of Black students studying on the third floor of the Students' Centre. The incident resulted in protests and media coverage. It was disappointing to hear that Black students continued to experience this treatment. What Keon and Brittany's contributions exemplified was the various ways that Black students feel marginalized in the university setting.

These feelings of marginalization also caused participants to regard their universities as 'White institutions'. Even in the case of campuses that the participants themselves regarded as 'more diverse', there was agreement that the universities themselves were the domain of White students, administrators and professors. Little details such as the background colour used for student ID photos, to more profound observations like the lack of culturally representative course materials, courses and programs, all contributed to participants feeling like outsiders on their campuses.

The residence parties, the few fraternities and sororities, most of the clubs that exist, they all seem to me to be pretty homogenous. The university is making an effort though, but it's not translating down to the everyday life here. They make all these announcements

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about protecting the rights of these folks and hearing the concerns of these folks...but when it comes down to it, all of my profs are White, all of them. I have seen *two* other Black folks in my program. I just wonder how much effort is being put in. (Brandon)

Brandon's assertions suggest that despite the purported efforts of his institution, the reality on the ground is that Black students continue to feel marginalized, and for him, he continues to feel culturally isolated in his program and on campus. It is important to consider how previous experiences in high school, families and communities, contribute to Black students entering into university, already perceiving themselves to be "unwelcome", while considering whether or not universities attempt to be welcoming to Black students.

### **Summary of Chapter Four**

This chapter presented the seven findings uncovered by the 15 semi-structured interviews and 15 surveys administered as part of this study. Data from individual interviews, surveys and the researcher's field notes, revealed participants' perceptions and experiences during the university application and enrolment process. Extensive samples of quotations from participants are included in the report, in order to accurately represent their feelings and experiences as well as the observations of the researcher.

The first significant finding of this study was that parental influence is a prominent contributing factor in the decision to attend university and/or the decision to attend a particular institution. This manifested itself in a few ways: parent(s) encouraging the attainment of a university degree as an expectation; parent(s) indicating that a university degree is a requirement to help combat the racism that exists in society; and/or parent(s) being directly involved in the choice of school. Participants were clear that the influence of their parent(s) was a significant

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motivating factor in the decision to attend university in general as well as in the identification of their university of choice.

The second significant finding of this research study was that ‘institutional fit’ played an important role in each participants’ selection process, meaning those schools that they perceived made an effort to communicate with them, ones that demonstrated a commitment to diversity - through campus visits and diverse representation in images and personnel, and those schools that students felt had a diverse student body. Participants reported changing their school choice based on the level of, and commitment to, communication by the receiving institution. They also suggested that universities need to be more conscious of the recruitment teams that are sent out to school visits and the marketing materials they distribute to ensure they represent the diversity that exists in Ontario.

The third significant finding of this research study was that high school personnel, including guidance counsellors, administrators and /or teachers, provided little or no support to participants, specific to encouragement to attend university. Some participants indicated that high school personnel dissuaded them from attending university. Participants reported experiencing and witnessing incidents that made thinking about university more difficult and that demotivated students from considering university-level study. Participants clearly identified the barriers that high school personnel can create, including not providing access to necessary information, discouraging students from considering university and punishing students for past mistakes.

The fourth significant finding of this research study was that participants’ circle of friends, or individual peer groups, also considered university a viable option and had expectations to attend. The responses suggest that these friends also had parent(s) who set this



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level of expectation. Within these peer groups, participants reported discussing and thinking about marks for university from as early as grade 9 and specifically identifying universities that they might apply to, in grades 11 and 12. It became clear that university was a part of the regular vernacular amongst these peer groups.

The fifth significant finding of this research study was that there were a number of Black students, outside of participants' individual peer groups, who had the ability to attend university, but who did not consider university an option, and were not expected to attend by all parties in the process. They identified several reasons for this, including: lack of parental motivation; low self-esteem; and low teacher expectations. Participants felt that with the right support, more Black students from their schools would have been in a position to apply to universities.

The sixth finding of this research study was that financial considerations were a significant determinant of school choice, particularly concerning proximity, in terms of the necessity not to incur fees for student housing. Participants also indicated that they thoroughly investigated potential costs for books, equipment and materials associated with their programs before applying. Most of the respondents suggested that they were currently working or looking for work, to have money available for current and future costs associated with their education and/or considering applying through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) for funds.

The seventh significant finding of this research study was that, once enrolled and matriculated, the majority of participants found themselves feeling marginalized by their university campus and classroom experiences. These perceptions of being "unwelcome" in university were noted in both covert and overt, smaller and more profound instances on campus and in lecture halls. Participants discussed experiencing feelings of not belonging in university in

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general, and being treated as such, as well as regarding their specific university as a ‘white institution’.

## CHAPTER 5 – ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION & SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

### Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore factors contributing to Black students' decisions to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution. It was hoped that this information could be then used to inform university admissions and enrolment processes, and the ways in which these could be used to target and recruit Black students. It was also hoped that the results of the study might also assist in identifying strategies to improve the numbers of Black applicants and enrollees to universities in Canada.

This research used a qualitative case study methodology, including semi-structured, one-on-one interviews as well as a short demographic survey to understand the lived experiences of Black undergraduate participants. Participants in this study consisted of fifteen (15) Black undergraduate students, in their first year of study in university in Ontario. In seeking to investigate their lived experiences, the study addressed two research questions: a) What factors influenced Black students' decisions to enrol in university? b) What factors contributed to Black students' choice of institution? These research questions were largely satisfied by the findings presented in chapter 4.

Seven major findings emerged from this study: First, parental influence was a significant contributing factor in the decision to attend university and/or the decision to attend a particular institution. Second, 'institutional fit' played an important role in participants' choice decisions, meaning those schools that they perceived made an effort to communicate with them, ones that demonstrated a commitment to diversity - through campus visits and diverse representation in images and personnel, and those schools that students felt had a diverse student body. Third, high school personnel, including guidance counsellors, administrators and /or teachers, provided little

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or no support to participants, specific to encouragement to attend university. Some participants indicated that high school personnel dissuaded them from attending university. Fourth, the participants' circle of friends, or individual peer groups, also considered university a viable option and had expectations to attend. Fifth, all participants suggested that there were a number of Black students, outside of their individual peer groups, who had the ability to attend university, but who did not consider university an option, and were not expected to attend by all parties in the process. Sixth, financial considerations were a significant determinant of school choice, particularly concerning proximity, in terms of the necessity not to incur fees for student housing. Seventh, issues around identity and belonging as it relates to university education were difficult for the majority of participants to manage. These issues began at various points in their early schooling and continued into their first-year experiences in university.

What became clear upon analyzing the findings outlined in Chapter 4, is that participants articulated factors impacting their choice decisions related to university, that fit within the broader themes that contextualize the historical sojourn of Black communities in Canada and their interactions with systems of education. Consequently, this chapter analyzes, interprets, and synthesizes the findings, and considers how they fit within these following analytic categories:

- Access to university spaces
- Considerations of institutional fit
- Establishing independence within the school context

The following discussion takes into consideration the literature on the formation of Black identities in Canada and the experiences of Black Canadian communities in education. The implications of these findings are intended to provide some insight into the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students and how those narratives fit within these larger contexts.

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### **Access to University Spaces**

This study sought to determine what factors influenced Black students' decisions to apply and enrol in university; and, what factors impacted their decisions to select a particular institution into which they would matriculate. In doing so, the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students during these phenomena, would emerge. It became clear throughout the interviews that these decisions were significantly impacted by the level of support and encouragement participants received from parties including parents (primarily), other relatives, and their peers. One of the participants, Keon, reflected this view when he said: "If it wasn't for my mom, I know I would not be here. She wouldn't let me think that university wasn't for me." Taken at its face, Keon's statement clearly articulates the importance of his mother's support and encouragement in ensuring he attended university; however, the second half of the statement suggests that Keon would not have imagined university to be an option had it not been for his mother, that he originally or innately believed that university spaces would not be welcoming to him.

When I went back and re-read the transcripts, it became clear that for the majority of participants, there seemed to be a common conception that university would not have been a consideration were it not for the convincing from their circle of support. What this suggests is that at some point in the schooling of Black children, they begin to consider school as unwelcoming and a place where they do not belong, and it also makes it clear that parental and other supports can help to change this perspective.

The tenuous relationship between education systems in Canada and Black communities has been well documented, (see among others: Cooper, 2016; James, 2012; Sefa-Dei, 2008; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Curtis, Livingstone, & Smaller 1992; Coehlo, 1988). They bear out

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that historically, the first struggle with respect to education and Black communities has been one of gaining physical access to educational spaces. By relating these feelings of a lack of belonging in university, participants embodied a struggle for psychological or mental “access” to university spaces that mirrored the struggles for physical access dotting the histories of Black communities and education in Canada.

These considerations were also articulated by Brandon, when he said (in speaking about his conflicts with one teacher in particular), “I argued with her. I knew she thought I wasn’t university material. But neither did I to be real. My parents (pause) I have to give them credit boy, they really helped me open my eyes.” Brandon expressed internalizing what he thought his teacher felt about him, that he was not “university material”, that university was not his space.

It is difficult to determine when and why these notions of not belonging in educational spaces begin for Black students, particularly for those who have grown up without having had the necessity to fight for physical access. Canadian researchers have considered the phenomenon of ‘disengagement’ from schooling among Black children, which implies their physical presence, but an absence in mind and soul (James, 2012; Sefa-Dei, 2008). Certainly there are a number of contributing factors related to Black youth disengagement from schooling, loosely categorized under the heading ‘differential treatment’, including: labeling and stereotyping, sorting and streaming of students, low expectations, lack of curricular sophistication, the lack of diversity in staff representation, and Black overrepresentation in suspensions and expulsions (James & Turner, 2017; Sefa-Dei, 2008).

Streaming Black students into applied versus academic courses for example, is an issue that James & Turner (2017) identify as prevalent for Black students across the Greater Toronto Area. They suggest that Black students are encouraged and, in some cases, actually pressured by

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teachers and guidance counsellors to take applied rather than academic courses. This was echoed by Brandon, with his consideration of not being treated nor regarded as ‘university material’ by high school personnel. Their research suggests that students who take applied courses in high school are less likely to apply and matriculate into university. It follows then, that if Black students are streamed into applied courses, they will have a significantly lower chance of considering university a viable option – a view that will be shared by the teachers and administrators they encounter in school.

Taken together, these realities foment disengagement, and a sense of not belonging in school. Participants indicated that consistent support from parents played a significant role in ensuring that university was considered an option, despite the potential discouraging forces of school personnel, media, and systemic discrimination inherent within the system. One parental practice that seemed to be effective in fostering a desire for a university education was continual and regular discussion about post-secondary education. Whether a university degree was presented as optional or mandatory, the consideration of university helped to solidify a vision for post-secondary pursuits. As Sandra stated: “She [my mom] was relentless. I knew that she expected me to keep going in my education after high school, and I could tell that she was pushing for university.” Sandra was clear that she was expected to continue her education beyond secondary school and attributed that to the regular discussions she had with her mom.

Parental involvement remained a vital theme throughout much of the literature surrounding Black student post-secondary choice processes, particularly in the United States. Existing research around this involvement included extended familial structures, friends, and community members who play large roles in the lives of students in communities of color (Bergerson 2009). Involvement from community members and organizations, in addition to

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parents, was particularly salient for African American students who decided to pursue higher education at an historically Black college or university (Freeman 1997; Freeman & Thomas 2002). Specifically, parent interactions with their children around issues of educational attainment played a role in the college-going behavior of African American students (Perna & Titus 2005). Perna & Titus (2005) found a positive correlation between college-going behaviour for African American students and parent-student discussions around education. Taken together, these studies, indicate that aspiration for university can be impacted by the level, consistency and nature of the support provided by family. This includes specific discussion pertaining to university and university attendance. It is important to note, as indicated by study participants, that while family supports are important, they do not represent a panacea in terms of ensuring university attendance for Black students, particularly for those that find themselves in educational situations that are demotivating and limiting. This is important to note, while recognizing that discussions around university and education in general can and do have impact.

The nature of these “discussions around education” were different for many of the participants. While Brandon described the approach of his parents as university being part of the “armour” for the battles he would engage in, living in a “racist society”, Brittany regarded her discussions with her parents as the opportunities for them to extoll the economic virtues of obtaining a university degree. As Brittany indicated: “From when I was young, my parents talked about going to university and getting a good job.” Brittany was able to recount a number of instances during which one or both of her parents brought up university, sometimes in humorous contexts. “...things like me not eating my dinner and my dad saying, ‘*When you leave university and you can pay to live, then you can decide what you eat.*’” For Brittany, it was clear that



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university was a logical and required step towards economic success, due in large part to the continuous and relentless discussion about it with her parents.

Brittany's contributions also echo the prevailing research around immigrant communities and their aspirations related to education. First and second-generation families regard education as "the great equalizer", providing individuals with knowledge and skills, but also guaranteeing more life opportunities, fuller participation in society, and upward social mobility (James & Taylor, 2008; Lopez, 2002). As immigrants from the Caribbean, Brittany's parents expected her to go to university, as a route towards making her life better. It is important to note that the intersection of race and immigrant status does have impact on schooling and aspiration. Lopez, 2002 indicates that the ways in which a given immigrant group are assigned racial meaning, have important consequences for the life chances of the second generation in terms of housing, schooling and labour market participation. What this suggests is that the solutions that are considered in order to address a lack of representation in university among Black communities, has to consider the impacts of race in concert with their intersecting identities. To be Black, to be an immigrant, to be poor, to be gay, to be a woman, can each have influence on university aspiration and requires a complex consideration of options to counteract or bolster that influence.

Aspirations of Black students themselves, as well as expectations of educational personnel for their Black students, is shaped by negative imagery, and as such, operates as a significant barrier to transition. These images at once, both reflect and help to shape the inequity in the larger society, for Black students. This can manifest itself in three ways: a) Black students buy into the notion that Black people have not contributed to Canadian prosperity and the growth of the nation – this can lead to a lack of motivation concerning school and/or feelings of inadequacy or the lowering of personal expectations for academic success; b) Teachers,

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guidance counsellors, school administrators are all impacted by: a curriculum that is most certainly not inclusive, a barrage of negative media imagery pertaining to the Black community, and experiences with Black students who are searching for an identity. This results in lowered expectations, higher suspension rates and alarming dropout rates for Black children in high school; and c) Black children, growing up without a racial and cultural grounding from home, when they have recognized differential treatment and cannot find the answers to ‘why?’ from school, will find those answers in other places, i.e. media, music, movies, etc. The nature of these images can contribute to negative self-perception and then difficulties in school and in the larger society (James, 2005, 2012; Sefa-Dei, 2016).

It is little wonder that participants indicated how important support from parent(s) and others is, in aspiring to, and choosing to pursue, a university education. The relentless, regular discussion around university assisted participants in the struggle to close the gap between belief and aspiration as it pertains to the struggle for mental “access” to university spaces. As was the case with participants in this study, prevailing research indicates that young, Black high-achievers do not consider themselves special or smarter than their less accomplished, disengaged same-race peers. Instead, they point to parental or other familial intervention, and/or other culturally-enriching experiences, as making the transition from high school to post-secondary easier (Ibrahim & Abdi, 2016; Harper, S., 2012; Wood, J.L., 2011; Codjoe, 2001). This was certainly the case for study participants, the majority of whom recounted personal anecdotes of “people they knew” who were certainly smart enough for university, but just never got it together.

### **Considerations of institutional fit**

In the historical sojourn that has marked the interaction between Black communities and education systems in Canada, after having gained physical access to educational spaces, the next

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stage of the struggle was often waged in wrestling control or influence over the ‘apparatus’ of education – in short, demanding ‘quality’ in, and not just access to, education. This included the curriculum, demographic complement of teachers and administrators, etc. In exercising their right to choose a particular institution to apply to and matriculate into, participants indicated that their decisions included a consideration of this apparatus. More plainly, participants regarded “institutional fit”, in terms of schools that they perceived made an effort to communicate with them, ones that demonstrated a commitment to diversity - through campus visits and diverse representation in images and personnel, and those schools that students felt had a diverse student body, as having impacted their choice decisions. In doing so, participants engaged in this second wave of the historical struggle by Black communities for quality educational experiences in Canada.

One of the consideration of ‘fit’ that many of the participants discussed, related to the demographic makeup of the recruiting teams that the universities sent out to visit their high schools, as well as the diversity represented in the marketing materials that were distributed in those sessions. As Carmen indicated: “How do you send out an all-White recruiting team and then tell me you want me to come to your school?” What was clear from Carmen and many of the other participants, was their recognition that representation matters, and that it would influence their choice decisions. The considerations of factors that influenced the choice decisions of Black undergraduates in Canada, is not a well-studied phenomenon. Consequently, there does not exist a body of research on which to compare these specific findings from this study. Universities in Canada have historically managed to detach themselves from the social factors that have pushed for greater representation in management and in recruiting. In the late 1990s, a growing push for representation in universities, resulted in some research focussing on

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anti-racism, and for a recognition that both educators and students alike, bring to the construction of knowledge, complex and conflictive criteria shaped by their own cultural, racial and social identities and influenced by conditions outside the boundaries of academia (James, 2012; Pollock, et al., 2009; Henry & Tator, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990). In so doing, researchers have laid the foundation for greater scrutiny on representation in university administration.

Some research exists pertaining to the efficacy of utilizing diverse recruitment teams in other industries. To this point, however, no empirically-based approach to recruit underrepresented communities exists, and certainly not in university education. This includes no empirically-based understanding of the ways in which diversity in university recruitment efforts in Canada, translate, or not, into a greater diversity among the student population or within the applicant pools of specific institutions. Research that does exist, is focused primarily on international recruiting efforts and the ways in which Canadian universities can be 'internationalized'. The responses of this study's participants seem to suggest that the demographic composition of the recruitment teams that visited their high schools, were noted. These observations were then part of the body of information used to evaluate universities. The same can be said for the marketing materials and diversity present on campus.

Representation among university personnel, materials and student body, were not the only considerations that impacted school choice decisions for study participants. Parents often, intentionally or unintentionally, encouraged them to attend universities closer to home for safety and financial reasons. While this did not seem to contribute an overly negative experience in the participants, it did contribute to efforts to lessen their parent(s)' financial and emotional strain as well as their feelings of responsibility and accountability to their university success. One

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participant, Dionne expressed this sentiment well: "...so I knew they would be struggling to keep me here. That's why I'm going to make sure I do well. And I have to make sure I get a job this summer." In some cases, participants' university selection was influenced by the fact that it was their parents' alma mater and therefore, a way to get closer to them. Overall, the students' parents comfort with their university selection, for financial, social or safety reasons were clearly considered in the students' process.

While the participants' friends may not have been the catalyzing agent in their choice to attend a particular university, being involved with like-minded individuals aided in continually reinforcing the concept of going to university in general, and seemed to help participants gain more knowledge of and information for their university selection process, particularly when high school and university personnel were not forthcoming. Celia summed this up when she said, "We [group of friends] talked about universities pretty often, especially in grade 11 and 12. We didn't all end up going the same place, but we knew why we all made the choices we did." Using peer group, and also extended family, to fill in gaps in information related to universities, the application process and other associated factors, was something that was discussed by a number of participants. It is clear that information gathered from these sources, in addition to university websites, marketing materials and recruiters, contributed to participants' discerning of 'quality'. Participants used their choice decisions as the currency with which they could obtain some control over the apparatus of the system. This is an important point to underscore, as even in grappling with a system that they may not see themselves as part of, the Black students in this study, used choice decisions, to exercise some control. Even when participants had already decided not to attend a particular school, some still raised questions with recruiters about their lack of diversity. It is unclear whether this was a conscious attempt to move the needle forward

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on representation, but certainly functions as one way of addressing an issue that participants deemed important.

One of the more surprising and related findings in this study, was the lack of support participants reported receiving from high school personnel, be they teachers, guidance counsellors and/or administrators. According to the accounts of the participants, high school personnel played a limited and often discouraging role in their choice to attend university. This perspective was highlighted during Chad's interview, when he said, "It was brutal man. Like, I wasn't even a bad kid or anything. They [school personnel] just didn't seem to want to spend any time with me." Chad's perspectives were echoed by other participants, some of whom drew comparisons to the ways other students were treated and regarded, and how that reflected a systemic and institutional issue with Black students in the system. Carmen summed this up when she said, "We [my friends] talked about it all the time. Even brought it up to the Principal. It was clear. If you were Black, you weren't getting the red carpet rolled out, when it came to attention." Many school personnel seemed to make almost no impact on the participants' decision to attend university other than to discourage or intentionally prevent it. While some of these negative experiences may have given participants a "prove-them-wrong" motivation, they clearly could have been a key contributor in keeping other Black students from pursuing university studies. With respect to university selection in particular, if participants received any form of guidance or encouragement it seemed to be less sincere and given with less effort than they witnessed for other students. Accordingly, many participants engaged in the university selection process without the aid of high school personnel. It is important to note that the considerations of their peers with respect to the level of support received from high school personnel was not gathered. Further, it is unclear whether Black students have higher

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expectations of support from school personnel. What is identified in the literature, however, is that school personnel have an inadequate understanding of the lived experiences of Black students, and the ways those experiences can impact schooling (Henfield, Washington & Byrd, 2014; Zhang & Smith, 2011). This suggests that a better understanding of the ways in which race impacts schooling experiences, can potentially improve the relationships between Black students and school counselors, and thereby positively impact transition opportunities for Black students, to university.

Another consideration of ‘institutional fit’ that was identified by participants related to the level and consistency of communication with university personnel during the application process. Participants indicated that when a school made regular contact, and when a person was available to answer questions that arose, they felt like the school wanted them to be there. Sandra articulated this perspective well, when she said, “Show me you want me to be there. You know? The whole thing, applying and waiting to hear back and everything is stressful enough. Make me feel like I’m special.” Taken together with many of the responses related to parental support, it is clear that the level and quality of communication between an institution and a potential applicant can impact the choice process. This can potentially be even more impactful with Black students, as participants in this study clearly appreciated feeling welcomed by an institution. If a student already feels like they don’t belong, making them feel like they do, can be an effective marketing tool. This aligns with industry best practices in strategic enrolment management in post-secondary institutions (Bontrager, 2004). What this suggests is that Black enrolment in a specific university could be increased by an adherence to a consistent communications regimen, that is designed in a way as to foster a relationship with students.

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When considering the notions of “institutional fit” that came across in the responses of research participants, through the lens of their perceptions of the lack of attention, motivation and support from people at school from whom they expected it, it is clear why exercising some control over the apparatus of education is important. It is clear that participants’ high school experiences galvanized a desire to ensure that the “ivory tower” that they would one day inhabit, looked a bit more like them and felt a bit more welcoming.

### **Establishing independence within the school context**

Sometimes during and after gaining physical access to educational spaces and grappling for control of educational apparatus, Black communities have considered independent Black alternatives to the status quo. Whether these have been required due to overtly racist legislation or legislative practices, or the result of frustration with the resistance to change that exists within education systems, or the belief that in order to best prepare Black students, an exclusively Black-focused environment is ideal; independent Black alternatives have been a regular aspect of the relationship between Black communities in Canada and prevailing education systems. This particular struggle is made manifest in participant responses throughout the chronology of their path to university education. I will consider the development of a Black alternative in this regard, not as a physical space, but as a conflict in identity formation, that requires Black students to determine who they will be in various contexts, and how that satisfies their definition of Blackness. As previously noted, Black communities, among other immigrant populations, identify school as “the great equalizer” in terms of its ability to not only provide individuals with knowledge and skills, but also guarantee more life opportunities, fuller participation in society, and upward social mobility (Forcese, 1997; Lessard, 1995; Lopez, 2002). If Black students feel



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disengaged from school, and school is seen as the place for social uplift, then how do Black students navigate being Black and going to university?

Participants expressed how this conflict is embodied in a variety of ways. Some participants indicated that they would choose between being 'Black' and being smart. This meant occupying spaces and engaging with new groups of people than their current peer group. Brittany articulated this perspective well when she discussed being labelled "whitewashed" for wanting to do well in school. Brittany was prepared to forge relationships with a new and different peer group in order to maintain what she perceived to be the path to "doing well". For Brittany, there could be no middle ground, her new identity would be designed by her new environment and she was open to being different and being around different people. Scholarly literature is divided on this concept, e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer, 2006, suggest that there is indeed an association with 'Whiteness' and doing well in school, in Black communities. Fordham & Ogbu, 1986 suggest that Black students frame their relationship to schooling through the lens of their historic marginalization and systemic disenfranchisement. Out of this understanding, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, suggest, Black students develop theories that contradict dominant notions of status attainment and produce disillusionment about the instrumental value of school. Further, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986 suggest that Black students develop substantial distrust for school and its agents which then suppresses commitment to school norms, and actively put pressure on their Black peers not to work hard in school lest they be accused of "acting White." Others, (e.g., Lewis, 2013; Tyson, 2011), who do concede that these opposing ideologies exist, suggest that equating 'Whiteness' with smartness is not borne of Black cultures or communities, but rather of Black experiences in education systems. More plainly, the contention is that Black students begin to believe that being smart and being in school is not "for

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them”. Other researchers, e.g., Toldson & Owens, 2010; Harris, 2011, suggest that students of all racial categories would be ‘proud’ to do well in school, and there is little to no difference in their considerations of smartness being ‘cool’. There continues to be a discussion about whether being Black and being smart is an expectation or an exception, both within Black communities and without. Participant responses in this study, bear this out. It is therefore incumbent upon those who, in word and deed, purport to have Black students’ interests at heart, to move that needle towards expectation.

Other participants indicated that they were conscious of the fact that they would be required to be different in different contexts. These participants perceived a need to fit into two worlds, the one at school and the one at home. One of Linda’s responses exemplified this perspective: “When I am at school, I don’t let my guard down. I am really serious. I don’t want anybody to think I don’t belong here. I’m much more relaxed at home, around my people, as you can see. (laughter) And I criticize the sh-t out of my Professors.” For Linda, and for some other participants, it was required that she change her ways of doing things based on her environment. This line of discussion was reminiscent of notions of Black communities in Canada feeling a sense of un-Canadianness. As indicated previously, part of the roots of Black Canadian identity lies in the experience of being regarded as “un-Canadian”. When it comes to systems of education, and universities in particular, this can manifest itself in the necessity to *betray* pieces of identity in settings deemed inhospitable to Blackness, or ‘code-switching’. This phenomenon has roots in the marginalization of Black bodies in the West, both during and after enslavement, as articulated by Alexander (2004):

For historically, when speaking to Whites, Black slaves were forced to sublimate their passion and channel their intention into carefully crafted verbiage that revealed a

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restrained temperament and an articulate discourse—doting, if not sycophantic behavior, to avoid being perceived as out of control, insolent, disrespectful or worse yet, rebellious. It is this historical reality that in part gave birth to the code-switching double voice and the signifying practices of Black discourse (p. 3)

In the vein of ‘surviving’ “White institutions” in systems of education in Canada, Black students sometimes find themselves ‘code-switching’, being different in different settings. This has deep historical roots in Black communities as they interact with Western institutions, articulated in DuBois (1989): “to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face”. Dubois’ assertion is that Black ‘folks’ must navigate between two often opposing cultures in order to survive. This sentiment was espoused by some of the research participants in their considerations of ‘surviving’ school. This suggests an opportunity for universities to demonstrate their openness to different identities, Black identities, by incorporating the voices of Black students in policy and procedure, teaching and learning and planning and activity.

The last, smaller group of participants, expressed a desire not to change at all. For these participants it was a way of challenging the system by defining their Blackness by what they perceived to be, their own rules. Keon was particularly vocal about his desire to never change: “I am always going to check for my bredrens [good friends]. I don’t care where they are and where I am. And I wear my same clothes. And I speak my same way. That’s not going to change.” For Keon, and other participants it was important to protect his identity against what he considered to be strange and enemy combatants.

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Prevailing literature comes at this notion of being Black and being in school, in distinct ways. Educational researchers tend towards the consideration of opposing ideologies, borne from Black students' interactions with school systems (see James 2012; Harper, 2012; Noguera, 2002; Henry & Tator, 1994). They describe Black students as existing in a conflict between wanting to do well and to fit in, in what appears to be two worlds – their peer group and academic success. In this way, some Black students choose to adopt a new identity in school, some attempt to fit into both by being different in different settings, some challenge this oppositional viewpoint by being who they are and being proud of who they are and find peace in that struggle (James 2012; Harper, 2012; Noguera, 2002; Henry & Tator, 1994). Social science researchers (see: Ogbu, 2004; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Yosso, 2005) discuss collective identities that are shaped in Black communities – as a people's sense of who they are and how they belong to one another (Ogbu, 2004); as well as 'community cultural wealth' described as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Specific to this study, this research suggests that Black students navigate through an array of identities, collective and individual and are able to bring with them a set of cultural tools to bear on university spaces.

Taken together, the research communities depict what was articulated by participants in this study, as it pertains to their struggles with, or considerations of, asserting their Black identities in university settings. Brittany indicated she would adopt a new identity, defined by her new environment. Linda suggested she would act differently in different contexts. Keon indicated he would continue being "who he was". Clearly some of these are reactions to the experiences these individual students have had during their interactions with school spaces; however, it can also be argued that parts of their identity are defined by their collective

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experiences as Black people in Canada. It is also clear that the ability to choose an identity, or to act “one way” in one context, and “another way” in another context, and to be in university in general, is a component of their community cultural wealth – the aspirational and resistant capital that has been able to hold on to hope in the face of structured inequality.

### **A note on choice models**

As indicated in Chapter 2, conceptually, students’ college choice behaviour has been profiled in three types of models, each specifying factors that affect the choice process. These three models include: econometric, sociological, and combined (Jackson, 1982; Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit and Vesper, 1999; Chapman, 1984). Econometric models are characterized by a student striving to maximize the expected utility or investment-like benefit derived from his or her college choice. The selection of a particular institution is dependent on the perceived benefits of attendance at the selected institution outweighing the perceived benefits of another institution (Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989). In the sociological models of college choice, the formation of college-going aspirations is considered part of a general status attainment process, and the focus is on the identification and interrelationship of factors which influence aspirations of college choice attendance (Paulsen, 1990). Combined models provide the opportunity to choose variables from either domain: econometric or sociological. In other words, combined models allow researchers to concentrate on the sociological aspects of college choice as a process, while maintaining the decision making perspectives of economics (Lang, 1999).

Combined models are then further sub-divided into two streams. The first seeks to understand the college decision process using the student as the unit of analysis, i.e. how they develop a college choice set, decide where to apply, consider admission criteria, and make their

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enrollment decisions. The second focuses on institutional characteristics as the unit of analysis, such as cost, size, distance, the quality of programs, and availability of financial aid. Regardless of stream, within combined models, the ‘college choice’ decision-making process is divided into stages that can be summarized under three headings: predisposition/attributes/aspirations; search/gathering information/application; and choice/enrollment.

Considering the study findings through the lens of the prevailing models of college choice indicates that participants utilized a variety of decision-making criteria to ultimately make their matriculation choices. This is indicative of combined models as both econometric and sociological factors were considered and lent weight to the ultimate school choice. Participants highlighted the importance of the costs and benefits of schools as well as the factors that contributed to their aspirations related to university, as both informing and impacting the choice process. The challenge, however, in identifying which of the combined models was most prevalent, is that the narratives provided by study participants did not fit neatly into sequential stages as described in the prevailing models.

Chapter 2 also presented critiques of prevailing college choice models as providing a linear framework for the choice process in which students neatly move from one stage to the next, with no consideration given to the possibility that students may move back and forth between the stages as they finalize their college choice decisions. They do not account for individuals moving between stages, returning back to search and/or questioning their aspirations for college. The impression left is that each stage of the process follows the other in sequence. This approach to considering college choice does not capture the essence of the experience in a way that translates the messiness, confusion and non-linear nature of the phenomenon. This is particularly important for marginalized groups, as a ‘one size fits all’ approach to educational

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research and development often does not include their voices. So, while these models can provide some information about the factors that influence school choice for non-traditional or marginalized groups, they shed very little light on the choice experiences of Black students.

As indicated previously, the lived experiences of the participants in this study provided stories that did not fit neatly into the stages outlined by prevailing college choice models. Participants described developing aspiration for university at various points in their lives, sometimes influenced by family, other times experiencing a waning of this aspiration due to a combination of bad school experiences, low expectations from school personnel or crises of identity. This suggests that the prevailing models of ‘college choice’ are too linear to account for the real-life lived experiences of students, particularly from communities whose voices are often lost in the national surveys that inform the model’s development.

Some participants also recounted not engaging in a search or having very little information or choice related to the institution they matriculated into, due to financial limitations, a lack of support and a paucity of avenues to gather information. What this suggests is that the critique of the prevailing ‘college choice’ models not appropriately incorporating the voices of marginalized students, appears accurate.

### **Summary of Chapter 5**

This chapter presented an analysis of the findings outlined in Chapter 4, specific to the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students during the university application and enrolment processes. The discussion in this chapter reveals the ways these experiences fit within the larger context of being Black, being Black in Canada and the historical sojourn of Black communities in their interactions with educational systems.

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Having analyzed the findings, it became clear that as Black communities struggled first for physical access to educational spaces, then control over the apparatus of education within those spaces, then for the development of independent Black alternatives; the lived experiences of the participants in this study, all Black undergraduate students, mirrors this trajectory. First struggling for access to the mental space for consideration of university as an option; then enacting their choice decisions to exercise control over the apparatus of university education, then attempting to forge an independent Black identity within the context of status quo university culture; participants through their interview responses, when woven together, told a story that would be familiar to students of educational histories pertaining to Black communities and those with the lived experience of interacting with educational spaces as Black people.

Presenting an analysis of the findings uncovered in this study warrants a degree of caution. The research sample was small, comprising interview data from only 15 interviews with Black undergraduate students in Ontario, studying a variety of disciplines and coming from varied cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Second, the experiences of these Black students were not compared to students of other racial categories, or to Black students outside of Ontario, so there is no way to confirm whether the described experiences are unique. For these reasons, it must be stressed that the implications that can be drawn are specific to the experiences of the sample group under study.



## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore, with a sample of Black undergraduate students in Ontario, their considerations of the factors that contributed to their decisions, first to attend university, and second to attend a particular institution. This is particularly important in Ontario, in light of the demographic changes afoot in the Province. It is incumbent upon universities in Ontario, and in the rest of Canada, to consider the recruitment and retention of ‘non-traditional’ groups of university students. Part of that process can be informed by understanding the factors that influence the university choice process for Black undergraduate students. Further, it is my hope that the information gleaned from this study can help to link, in a more complete fashion, some of the research that has already been done on the aspirational and academic readiness for university, of high school-aged and younger Black students, and can add to the canon of texts describing the lived experiences of Blacks in Canada and their sojourn in educational spaces.

The lived experiences of Black undergraduate students in Canadian universities is an under-researched area. What is clear from the research that does exist, are the ways in which the struggle for access to university education in Canada is a continuation of an historical and ongoing struggle for access to quality education for Black communities across the country. Establishing a physical presence on campus and ensuring a representative curriculum, faculty and staff complement are hallmarks of the struggles in public education that have been waged pre- and post-emancipation. The current literature pertaining to student ‘college choice’ indicates several influential factors, and in some instances, contradictory findings. The relative impact of many of the identified factors is less understood as is the duration of their effect during the

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college selection process. Several background characteristics including socioeconomic status, academic ability, and parental influence are shown in the literature to have a significant impact on college choice, especially in the early or predisposition phase. The impact of institutional attributes is less understood, with college recruiting efforts difficult to understand when the cumulative effects of information are considered. The impact of other institutional attributes such as financial aid is also not completely understood. The issue of student-institution fit is important to the college choice process, as students are involved in the matching of their individual attributes and values with those of the institutions they are considering, and the one they ultimately choose. Students are required to synthesize information about institutions, together with their own needs, values and interests, to make college choices.

Researchers have identified econometric, sociological and combined models to explain the choice process, utilizing quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods approaches therein, but have not been able to determine the most important factors inherent in the choice process. Further, little research has been done to determine the factors influencing the choice process for specific populations, i.e. racial and ethnic groups as well as the intersectionalities of those characteristics with gender, socioeconomic status, etc.

The limited data available concerning the university choice process for Black students in Canada, makes it difficult to identify specific factors that would impact this process for Black students in a different way than other students. This is particularly the case when considering the choice process for Black undergraduate students in Ontario.

Qualitative case study methodology was employed to shed light on the factors that influenced the decision to enroll in university for Black undergraduate students. The participant sample was made up of 15 purposefully selected individuals. Two data-collection methods were

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utilized, including a survey questionnaire and individual interviews. The data was reviewed against literature as well as emergent themes.

Data from individual interviews, surveys and the researcher's field notes, revealed participants' perceptions and experiences during the university application and enrolment process. Extensive samples of quotations from participants were included in the report, in order to accurately represent their feelings and experiences as well as the observations of the researcher. Seven major findings emerged from this study: First, parental influence was a significant contributing factor in the decision to attend university and/or the decision to attend a particular institution. Second, 'institutional fit' played an important role in participants' choice decisions, meaning those schools that they perceived made an effort to communicate with them, ones that demonstrated a commitment to diversity - through campus visits and diverse representation in images and personnel, and those schools that students felt had a diverse student body. Third, high school personnel, including guidance counsellors, administrators and /or teachers, provided little or no support to participants, specific to encouragement to attend university. Some participants indicated that high school personnel dissuaded them from attending university. Fourth, the participants' circle of friends, or individual peer groups, also considered university a viable option and had expectations to attend. Fifth, all participants suggested that there were a number of Black students, outside of their individual peer groups, who had the ability to attend university, but who did not consider university an option, and were not expected to attend by all parties in the process. Sixth, financial considerations were a significant determinant of school choice, particularly concerning proximity, in terms of the necessity not to incur fees for student housing. Seventh, issues around identity and belonging as it relates to university education were difficult for the majority of participants to manage. These issues began

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at various points in their early schooling and continued into their first-year experiences in university.

As was the case throughout their historical sojourn in education in Canada, Black communities struggled first for physical access to educational spaces, then control over the apparatus of education within those spaces, then for the development of independent Black alternatives; the lived experiences of the participants in this study, all Black undergraduate students, mirrored this trajectory. First struggling for access to the mental space for consideration of university as an option; then enacting their choice decisions to exercise control over the apparatus of university education, then attempting to forge an independent Black identity within the context of status quo university culture; participants through their interview responses, when woven together, told a story that would be familiar to students of educational histories pertaining to Black communities and those with the lived experience of interacting with educational spaces as Black people.

The conclusions from this study flow from the research questions and the findings and therefore are categorized under the following: (a) developing the mental space for consideration of university as an option; (b) finding institutional fit; and (c) forging an independent Black identity in university. What follows is a discussion of the major findings and conclusions drawn from this research. This discussion is followed by the researcher's recommendations and a final reflection on this study.

The participants in this study articulated a number of intersecting challenges that impacted their transition from high school to university. As the interviews wore on, it became clear that the lived experiences of the participants in this study, all Black undergraduate students, were indicative of the historical struggles of Black communities in education in Canada. It is

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important, then to first detail these findings and then consider ways to address them, in an attempt to forge a new reality for Black communities in Canada in their interactions with educational spaces.

### **Developing the mental space for consideration of university as an option**

The pre-application to university, lived experiences of participants included periods of disengagement from school, and more specifically, from the notion that university was an option for them. With the support of parent(s) and others, participants were able to manage this disengagement and ultimately apply and matriculate into university. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that with the right supports, periods of disengagement, specific to university aspiration among Black students, can be lessened. It is difficult to determine when this disengagement first manifests itself, or pinpoint the reason why, but there is a connection, both historical and contemporary, between Canadian education systems and Black student disengagement. In this regard, it can also be concluded that a change in curricular design and delivery can help to address periods of this disengagement as well. Further, Black communities, like other immigrant communities, consider education to be the path towards upward social mobility. It follows then that Black disengagement from school, contributes to negative self and peer perception and is demotivating as it pertains to university aspiration. A further and related conclusion that can be drawn is that systems of education may not be adequately addressing the issue of disengagement among Black communities, and/or reinforcing the importance of education.

### **Finding ‘institutional fit’**

Having entered the exploratory phase of university selection, participants considered ways of exercising control over the apparatus of university spaces, specifically concerning those

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aspects relating to “institutional fit” – demographic makeup of recruiters, administrators, marketing materials and student body. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that some universities are doing a better job than others in reflecting the communities they serve. A second and related conclusion that can be drawn from this is that optics, in terms of the demographic constitution of university personnel and materials, mattered to study participants. Participant responses pertaining to the lack of concern exhibited by high school personnel in providing university application-related information was glaring. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that the current guidance department model may not be serving the interests of Black students seeking university information. Further, there may be a number of Black students who do not have appropriate home supports and therefore are not moving on to university as a result of that, and the lack of a supportive infrastructure in high school.

The experiences of the participants in this study during the university application and enrolment processes, and then into their first year of study, exposed a tension between being Black and being in university. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that Black students may be getting information to suggest that university is not a place for them. Where this information is coming from and when it comes is unclear. The process of identity formation is one that includes both personal and collective inputs and is steeped in history and tradition. A related conclusion that can be drawn is that parental and familial intervention helps to manage this tension and the high school experience seems to exacerbate it.

Having considered these lived experiences and named some of the challenges, it is important to identify next steps in addressing them; in short, recognizing where to go from here. The information gleaned from this study, delineates a complex, multi-layered set of circumstances that can slow or muddy the transition from high school to university for Black

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students. Taken together, these circumstances suggest a need for: the establishment or proliferation of alternative networks of support for Black students; the development of novel training and evaluation programs aimed at addressing anti-Black racism, both at the personal and systemic levels; consideration of more thoughtful and inclusive marketing and communications plans at the university level; a better understanding of the thoughts, wants and needs of Black students in both secondary and post-secondary education; and a recognition that optics matter in consideration of curricular and human resources in schools.

### **Recommendations**

These recommendations are offered based on the findings, analysis, and conclusions of this study. The recommendations that follow are for: (a) university personnel, (b) high school personnel, (c) Black students, parent(s), and caregivers (and other supporters of Black students in education), and (d) researchers.

University administrators and other staff responsible for student services, outreach and marketing, should consider establishing a peer support network matching upper year Black students with Black undergraduates. This can help Black undergraduates to re-imagine university as a welcoming space and help to assuage feelings of ‘un-belonging’ on campus. This can also help mitigate the perception of the university as a ‘White’ campus with little representation – a contrast to their initial perceptions upon application. Lastly, it can provide opportunities for mentorship, perhaps contributing to student retention.

Further, university personnel should consider asking Black undergraduate students about their experiences in applying, matriculating and existing within university, in order to ensure that their voices inform decision-making in a variety of institutional capacities. Incorporating the voices of Black students in this way, may lead to different ways of doing things that can have a

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positive impact on Black enrolment numbers. This may include targeted approaches to academic counselling and other student services functions, provide information pertinent to the training of faculty and staff and can help to improve Black students' affinity towards the institution.

The development of targeted recruiting campaigns for Black students represents another opportunity for university personnel to potentially impact Black enrolment. These campaigns can address issues such as: diversity on campus, culturally appropriate services available on campus, the Black student experience, etc., in order to address the importance placed on these considerations by participants in this study as well as indicated in the prevailing literature. University registrars and their staffs can identify ways to ensure consistency of communication and to help potential applicants feel as though they are wanted and will be welcomed. This can positively impact Black enrolment. By providing a more targeted approach, universities can, in perception and practice, position themselves as a safe space for Black students, and better understanding of their concerns.

This can be further addressed by reviewing the complement of faculty and senior staff, and where possible, implementing processes to increase applicant pools among underrepresented groups, as well as reviewing all marketing materials that are public facing, all displays on the university campus and all internal messaging, to ensure that they are culturally representative of the communities the university serves.

The contributions of participants and the review of literature, also provided some recommendations for secondary school administrators, teachers and guidance counsellors, in the hopes of improving the transition between high school and university for Black students. High school personnel should consider reviewing the guidance counsellor position to ensure that appropriate time is spent with students requiring university-specific information. Whether Black



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students expect more from guidance counsellors, or guidance counsellors demonstrate bias in their dealings with Black students, or both, it is important that there be some consideration paid to this relationship. This can include asking Black students about their experiences in school and where school personnel might serve them better.

It is also clear that using culture and identity as part of curricula to cultivate a sense of community and social responsibility, can have positive impact on Black students' aspirations for university and their sense of belonging in educational spaces. This can be further impacted by conducting implicit-bias or anti-Black racism training to ensure personnel are conscious of some of the ways their actions are regarded by others and reviewing the complement of faculty and staff and identifying ways to increase applicant pools for these positions from underrepresented communities. Participant responses and existing scholarship suggest that optics matter in this regard.

Black students, their parent(s), friends, family and all interested in the success of Black students in school, should consider identifying avenues outside of school to provide culturally-focused education to Black students. This can be done in parallel with demanding better representation in school curricula. The importance of associating being smart with being Black has been demonstrated in literature as well as in participant responses in this study. Culturally-focused programming can assist in this regard.

Having identified home support as a significant influence on university aspiration and enrolment, creating webs of support with other community members to assist those young people who do not have the support at home, should be a consideration for individuals seeking to make positive impact on Black university enrolment. This can include organizing community-led

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information sessions with Black professionals and university representatives and/or looking for opportunities to act as a mentor to Black students.

It is important to reiterate the complexity of the issues that intersect to confuse the transition between high school and university for Black students in Canada. It is equally important to recognize the various intersectional identities that come together to constitute what are referred to as Black communities and Black people. The recognition of these realities requires that the response is also multi-layered and complex. None of the recommendations discussed above, on their own, ‘solves’ the issues described. They could all be part of a more comprehensive and broad-based effort to make change.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

There are a number of areas where further research could provide more information pertinent to the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students. In light of this, the following should be considered:

Based on the limitations of the current study and to correct for researcher’s bias, a more comprehensive, but similar study should be conducted, including a greater representation of Black students in Ontario and/or in other Provinces to expand the pool of information relative to the lived experiences of Black undergraduate students.

A study in which all students who have graduated from the same high school provide feedback about their expectations and then experiences with school personnel relative to getting information about post-secondary options. This could help identify whether Black students have different expectations of school personnel and/or if there is indeed differential treatment.

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It is important to note that the collection and disaggregation of race-based data in education would provide significant opportunities for further research and decision-making in education, specific to the experiences of Black students.

### **Researcher Reflections**

The lives of Black Canadian children matter, both inside and outside of the classroom. When it comes to systems of education in Canada, specifically concerning the transition between secondary school and university, the participants in this study have demonstrated that despite their ability to persevere, there are significant challenges that exist for Black Canadian students. Whether these challenges reflect larger societal concerns related to socio-economics or family dynamics; or they reflect systemic barriers, including anti-Black racism, low teacher expectations and a lack of representation in curricular and human resources; or they reflect motivation and drive associated with recognizing university as an option; or they are a toxic mixture of all combined; it is clear that some things need to change. The struggles that Black children encounter in school in Canada in 2018 are eerily similar to that of Black children in school in Canada in 1918; consequently, it is clear that despite the best efforts of those engaged in improving the circumstances for Black children, the system remains inaccessible for many. Black students continue to experience instances of demotivation from inside and outside of the system, continue to question their ‘fit’ in university spaces through questions of representation in curricular and human resources and continue to struggle with issues of identity related to the broader notion of where Black people and Black communities stand in relationship to education in Canada. If we, who are involved in education, demonstrate an unwillingness to address this inaccessibility then we will be complicit in the continued marginalization of Black children.

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The participants in this study clearly articulated their challenges and the ways in which they found alternative networks of support among their families, friends and communities. The impacts of those closest to Black children, cannot be understated. So what of the Black children who are unable to access these alternative networks of support? How do they manage within a system of education that has demonstrated an aversion to change? The results of this study suggest that they don't make it to university, even when they have the academic ability, or they are unable to develop in their academics to the point that they have the option. These Black children 'fall through the cracks'. Purposeful and targeted, but small changes, can yield big results. This begins, with the recognition of the humanity within Black communities - that Black children are children; and prospers, when we extend to Black children in education, opportunities unencumbered by the roadblocks that are currently erected on their paths. To do so is essential. To do so is required. University is not the panacea for Black communities in Canada, to suggest that would be to overly simplify a complex and multi-layered reality; however, the opportunity to go to university and/or the recognition that it could be a possibility, is a minimal and attainable objective for the Canadian education system and society at large.

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## CHOICE FACTORS IMPACTING BLACK CANADIAN STUDENTS

### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Where were you born?
2. Where did you go to high school? What was your high school experience like?
3. What was your experience like when you were getting ready to apply to universities?
4. What kind of supports were available to you during this time?
5. What are some of the obstacles that you faced during this time?
6. When you faced obstacles, who did you go to for help?
7. Was university always a consideration or did you ever think you would do something else?
8. Why do you think university was an option for you?
9. Do you think the experiences of black students differ from other students when they are thinking about university? Or applying?
10. Are there specific barriers black students face in high school? What about in university? Do you feel that these barriers are made more difficult or easier being that you live in the Greater Toronto Area?
11. Why did you ultimately decide to attend this university?
12. Are there characteristics about this school that make it difficult to be a Black student here? Were these things you thought about during your application process?
13. How did your family react when you told them you were applying to university? When you picked three? When you got in and chose this one?
14. Are you happy with the decision you made to go to university? To go to this one?
15. What are you studying? Did you investigate the program at this school before applying?
16. Are there specific services that exist at this school or in Toronto or on the web, that have helped you as a prospective/current student?

## CHOICE FACTORS IMPACTING BLACK CANADIAN STUDENTS

17. Are there any specific services that you would like to see offered that could encourage more Black students to attend university?