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## **Going to College: Why Black Lives Matter Too**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I share why centering Blackness is critical in implementing college readiness for all. By utilizing the practices of high school leaders, counselors, and teachers at five predominantly Black college readiness for all high schools, I explore key activities, instructional approaches, and support systems that are integral to Black students' college readiness. I present two themes: mission intentionality and doing whatever it takes. These findings are also coupled with lessons learned from existing scholarship on non-selective college preparatory schools and college readiness issues in urban communities. Lastly, in reflecting upon the qualitative findings from the five high schools and existing scholarship, I offer four ways to help center Black students' college readiness.

### **Introduction**

In Fall 2015, Michelle Obama convened K-12 and higher education scholars and practitioners to launch her "Reach Higher" initiative, which is designed to increase the messaging around college readiness and access by using social media and popular culture (Waxman, 2015; The White House, 2015). In a December 2015 YouTube video, she explicitly linked her South Side of Chicago background to her transition to and through higher education in order to encourage more students to consider going to college (College Humor, 2015). This is an example of a narrative that college is accessible to all students; specifically, it is a narrative that growing up in a Black community can lead to the fulfillment of one's college aspirations and degree attainment. This narrative is one that counters the long-standing narrative in the U.S. that college is only for certain students (Armstrong, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Peshkin, 2001; Powell, 1996; Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2006).

Interestingly, within a few days of Michelle Obama's attempt to demystify college accessibility for all students – and, by implication, Black students like her who are under-represented in higher education, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia made the following controversial remarks:

There are those who contend that it does not benefit African-Americans to get them into the University of Texas where they do not do well, as opposed to having them go to a less-advanced school, a less -- a slower-track school where they do well (Kopan, 2015).

Scalia's remarks reflect past, and current, deficit narratives that have shaped Black students' unequal access to the opportunity to prepare for and transition to college, even though there are no racial disparities in students' aspirations to attend college (Knight & Marciano, 2013; McDonough, 2004; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Allensworth, 2006;

Venezia, Kirst & Antonio, 2003).

This illustration of Michelle Obama's initiative juxtaposed to Justice Scalia's comments reflects an interesting moment in educational reform: a college readiness for all movement that is only 10-15 years old (Carneval, 2008; Conley, 2007, 2011; Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; McDonough, 2004). By utilizing the practices of high school leaders, counselors, and teachers at five predominantly Black college readiness for all high schools, I will explore key activities, instructional approaches, and support systems that are integral to Black students' college readiness. Additionally, I will use these staff members' experiences, my research experiences within nonselective college preparatory schools and on college readiness issues in urban communities from over the last 15 years (Farmer-Hinton, 2002, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2012; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2008, 2016a, 2016b; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009), other scholarship, and the tenets of Black Lives Matter, in order to outline critical reasons to center Black students' college readiness within "college readiness for all" reforms.

### **Critical Race Theory, Black Lives Matter, and College Readiness for All**

"...high schools must shift from being last stop destinations for students on their education journey to being launching pads for further growth and lifelong learning for all students....

The mission of high schools can no longer be to simply get students to graduate. Their expanded mission ... must also be to ready students for careers and college--and without the need for remediation." Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education (as cited in Roderick, Coca, Moeller & Kelley-Kemple, 2013)

In the following discussion, I will use Critical Race Theory (CRT) to assess the reason race is important in understanding why the college readiness for all movement is in its infancy. Additionally, the tenets of Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrate the urgency in prioritizing race while advocating for and mobilizing toward equity. Embedded within the discussion are examples explicating the extent to which college readiness for all could increase opportunities or reproduce existing disparities for Black students.

As noted earlier, the college readiness for all movement is only 10-15 years old (Carneval, 2008; Conley, 2007, 2011; Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; McDonough, 2004). We are witnessing policy changes, philanthropic investments, and community engagement, which impact college preparation, access, and completion for students under-represented in higher education (see, for example, Harris, 2013; Kelchen & Goldrick-Rab, 2014; Lobosco, 2015, 2017; Lowery & Hoyler, 2009; Miller-Adams, 2009; Mulhere, 2017; New York City Department of Education, 2016). While this shift is noteworthy, there are also embedded challenges if we fail to center race while re-conceptualizing our values, systems, processes, and practices toward college readiness for all.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a theoretical frame to center race in our understandings of school systems and practices (Ladson Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, CRT allows us to understand the role of race in educational inequality, such as current and vestigial deficit narratives and segregationist tactics used in U.S. school systems, as well as current and vestigial racial stratification in education due to inequitable school funding structures (Farmer-Hinton, 2002, 2006b; Ferguson, 1991; Hanushek, 2003; Hyman, 2017; Kozol, 1991). CRT also allows us to understand how college preparation has been a tool to maintain white supremacy in the U.S. (Armstrong, 1990, Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Peshkin, 2001; Powell, 1996; Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2006). For instance, CRT provides a frame for understanding how the construct of "college prep" was/is based upon college preparation for Whites, males, and/or affluent families preparing for admission to selective universities; and how "college prep" schools ensure the reproduction of wealth/privilege through elite school networks and their courses, resources and college counseling systems (Cookson & Persell, 1985; Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Khan, 2012; Peshkin, 2001; Powell, 1996). Lastly, CRT provides a frame for understanding how our racial hierarchy impacts our conceptualization of college readiness. For example, selecting and sorting talented and gifted students into postsecondary pathways is a foundation of U.S. educational practices, despite the documented racial and class biases and disparities, which are often couched in socially-constructed notions of talent and meritocracy (Ford, 2014; Oakes, 1985). Without challenging the dominant narratives, values, systems, processes, and practices related to college preparation, our college readiness for all movement could reproduce stratification by race, such as current specifications that students meet merit requirements to demonstrate their deservedness of publicly-funded, "free" college scholarships (Harris, 2013; Kelchen & Goldrick-Rab, 2014; Lobosco, 2015, 2017; Mulhere, 2017).

CRT also offers a conceptualization of *interest convergence*, suggesting that movements and policy prescriptives geared toward equality have the potential to be diluted (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Lipman, 2004). For example, interest convergence suggests that current "free" college and college readiness for all policies are more than policies designed to increase college access for all students; they are also policies designed to spur economic development (e.g., increasing college affordability, improving labor force skill sets, improving community market value) (Lipman, 2004; Miller-Adams, 2009). Without centering race, these policies could reproduce or maintain existing inequitable systems, structures, and processes. As an illustration, college readiness for all could be conceptualized in terms of checklists and benchmarks (e.g., graduating with college-ready high school courses, taking the ACT/SAT, applying to a set number of colleges, and completing the FAFSA application). Yet, conceptualizing college readiness in the aforementioned ways does not address the historical and racialized systems that created and sustained contemporary disparities in college readiness (Ladson Billings, 2006). Instead, college readiness should be conceptualized as an extended, culturally affirming, and comprehensive process (e.g., capitalizing on students' college aspirations early and often, designing systems and processes for students to accumulate college knowledge over time, using cultural wealth as a form of capital, arranging opportunities for college and career exploration, structuring college-ready courses with built-in supports, structuring school and community networks for student mentoring and guidance, and offering personalized support systems for college and career decision-making during K-12 and beyond).

While CRT offers a frame for understanding the challenges of college readiness for all for Black students, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement offers a frame to advocate and mobilize toward equity in college readiness for all (Garza, 2014). First, BLM is unapologetically Black because of the racialized structures and processes that put Black people at a disadvantage. Therefore, policies and practices should be challenged and reformed in order to honor the dignity, humanity, and culture of Black people. For instance, as noted earlier, college preparation is a long-held tool of the elite that reproduces inequalities through racialized structures and processes, which, if not corrected, could generate a seemingly generous (at best) or benign (at worst) policy toward college readiness for all. This could place the onus on Black students and their behaviors rather than the contexts in which they should receive access to college knowledge (J. Diamond, personal communication, October 19, 2017). BLM is also unapologetically Black in order to lay bare cursory or marginal changes in our policies and practices under the ruse of equity. For example, college readiness for all could be empowering to Black communities if college readiness is framed to be transformative. Stanton-Salazar (2011), for example, uses the phrase "empowerment agents" to refer to counselors who not only share postsecondary planning information, but also those "who are motivated to go against the grain, and to enable the empowerment" of their students by mobilizing personal networks, enhancing students' critical consciousness, and sharing skills to work against oppressive structures (p. 1087). College readiness for all could also be framed to be intersectional, so that we meet the collective needs of Black students while also prioritizing students' class, gender, and family's/community's educational histories (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, Ocen, Nanda, 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Farmer-Hinton, 2008a; Freeman, 2005; Kiyama, 2010; Knight & Marciano, 2013; Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2013).

BLM also values community networks which enable Black people to gain cultural wealth from being embedded in affirming and resourceful relationships (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Moreover, BLM empowers communities by documenting and mobilizing against harmful policies and practices. College readiness for all could be framed to prioritize Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model in order to prioritize the manner in which the resources of a student's home, school, and neighborhood networks offer forms of capital, such as *aspirational capital* (e.g., "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" [p. 77]), *familial capital* (e.g., family, extended family, and kinships that "carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" [p. 79]), and *resistant capital* (e.g., "cultural knowledge of the structures of racism and motivation to transform such oppressive structures" [p. 81]).

In this discussion, I have outlined why centering Blackness is critical in implementing college readiness for all. Without centering race, we fail to remember why college readiness for all is in its infancy and how the subjugation of Black students has limited/limits their participation in postsecondary education. Without centering race, we fail to acknowledge how white supremacy was/is reinforced by "college prep" models and schools. Without centering race, we fail to understand how this neophyte movement is ripe to be absorbed by policymakers and practitioners who have alternative priorities. In addition to the larger discussion on race and

college readiness for all, I also provided a rationale to center race in our practices so that we do not confuse high school staff helping students meet college readiness benchmarks and checklists as the fulfillment of a college readiness for all movement. Instead, we should understand college readiness for all must be spearheaded by empowerment-driven staff members who provide extended, culturally affirming, and comprehensive processes that can transform Black students and communities.

## **Learning Lessons on College Readiness for All**

### **Mission Intentionality**

In this article, I will share the practices of schools that engage in the mission of college readiness for all. The local district had over 100 high schools, with close to 40 high schools having the following three characteristics: 1) a mission related to college readiness; 2) an open admissions policy or a lottery system for enrollment, and 3) a student population of students who were mostly low income, minority, below grade level in reading, and/or first-generation college-bound. Seven school leaders agreed to participate in the study, leading to the completion of 21 semi-structured interviews of a lead teacher, a lead administrator or principal, and a counselor from each school from 2011-2012. Each interview lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours and covered the following topics: 1) the successes and challenges of implementing their school missions; 2) the educational identity and college aspirations of their students; 3) the formal and informal practices used to cultivate and support college aspirations; 4) the formal and informal college counseling methods used to prepare students academically, socially, and financially for college; 5) the successes and challenges of their instructional strategies; and 6) the status of their alumni community and types of on-going support systems. Data were analyzed qualitatively by coding within the overall topical areas covered in the interview protocol, examining trends to discover key categories that emerged, re-coding transcripts within these key categories, and formulating themes (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In the following two sections, I will highlight two themes, which represent the practices of five of the seven schools that enrolled predominantly Black student populations: mission intentionality and doing whatever it takes. In the last section, I will draw upon lessons learned from 15 years of prior research on non-selective college preparatory schools and college readiness issues in urban communities (see Farmer-Hinton, 2002, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b, 2011, 2012; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2008, 2016a, 2016b; Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008; Farmer-Hinton & Rifej, 2015; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009), others' research and scholarship, and the tenets of Black Lives Matter in order to outline some emerging principles of college readiness for all that is centered on Black students.

The principals, teachers, and counselors that I interviewed noted that they have school missions that are intentional in preparing their students for college. The language of those missions includes ideals such that all students will attain the skills and dispositions to make them

college ready and that all students in their respective school buildings will succeed. Since these schools are nonselective schools, staff members also share their mission in the context of their students' demographics and academic backgrounds because students enroll with the varied backgrounds and educational levels that students in the local, selective, college preparatory high schools do not have. A few respondents also mentioned the need to distinguish themselves from the growing field of schools with similar missions by focusing less on college entry and more on college graduation.

*...we are not selective enrollment... [students] come to us as they are and it is our job to figure all of them out and get them all to college... College for all. The way I interpret that though is at the college level. So it is not enough just to get them there because if they are there, they are going to spend their first year taking remedial courses. And possibly drop out or what have you. But it is college readiness with habits that will be successful in that environment.*

A few staff members conceptualize their missions as transformative, not just for individual students who would be the first in their families to attend or graduate from college, but also for the local and larger community.

*Our mission, point blank, is to prepare young people to graduate from college, not to get accepted into college but to graduate from college, not high school graduation because college graduation has to create leaders....*

While all of these schools have missions pertaining to college readiness for all, it is also important to note that the intentionality of their missions varies (Hill, 2008). For instance, schools undergoing organizational transitions do not have the organizational capacity to fully focus on the mission, as those school communities that are more organizationally stable.

*...I just sort of put it [the mission] on the backburner and said I need to get this school under control because behavior was out of control, the scheduling was improperly done when I arrived. As people say, there were a lot of fires to put out. There were a lot of operational and instructional things that needed attention. Departments weren't meeting, or the ones that were meeting, were meeting and having [expletive] sessions. That to me is not a productive, instructionally focused, collaborative time, which is what I think a department or grade level meeting should be. So, there was just a lot of work to be done. So, until recently, I haven't been thinking much about the vision or mission at all.*

*...with all of the transitions that have happened ... there is just times when I feel I college prep is an afterthought.*

Additional examples of how intentionality varies include when staff members grapple with new staff placements and/or school growth (e.g., new junior and senior cohorts active in the college search and choice process). Among these staff members, there was expression of how

overwhelming it is to start fresh and create new protocols in order to meet the mission.

*...I wanted to get to know them on a certain level, so I just—I asked them, “What college did you apply for?” “What financial—“um...--“What college did you apply for?” Most of the kids did not prefer any of the colleges, so I just dragged them along, came in here, taught them what’s the college process. They didn’t know anything about the college process or what undergraduate meant or what Bachelor’s degree meant...*

Another example of how the intentionality of the mission varies is in identifying that which the college preparation process entails. Some staff members talk more about the mechanics of and deadlines for college acceptances and entry, focusing much of their efforts around late junior year and early senior year (e.g., number of completed college applications per student and the completion of FAFSA forms). On the other hand, some schools talk about their missions holistically, in that they believe they are developing their students into college-bound students with good experiences for their college applications. For these schools, they discuss beginning the process with their ninth graders and scaffolding up to senior year with the kind of enrichment experiences (e.g., summer courses and programs on college campuses, internships), curricular requirements (e.g., college preparatory courses, advisory curricula on postsecondary preparation including cognitive skills and non-cognitive dispositions, graduation requirements related to the college search and choice process), informal interactions (e.g., college talk and messaging), and extra-curricular activities (e.g., student leadership experiences, after-school programs), that will make them college ready.

*I take [the job responsibility as] not just facilitating the application process, but really trying to build the applicants, and I feel like that is—that’s my mantra.... We do not just help students with applications. .... We are building applicants, so it starts with freshman year....help a ninth grader understand [that] your college application process starts now. You are now having the experiences you’re going to tell the college about in four years. You don’t wait till 12<sup>th</sup> grade to apply, essentially, so you’re building your application right now.*

To sum, each school has a college for all mission and promotes the college preparatory mission listed on their respective websites. Yet, the intentionality surrounding these schools' missions varies based upon the schools' organizational contexts and staff members' perception of how to implement relevant and appropriate practices.

## **Doing Whatever It Takes**

Across all of the schools, staff members list some combination of academic and social support in their buildings. Some schools use more academic and social support than others, and some schools integrate and align academic and social support more than others. All of them use



any and/or all of the following in their school buildings: college preparatory course sequences including AP courses, scaffolding within grades and across content areas, college counseling, experiential college-related activities, enrichment programs, college visits, after-school tutoring, and the like. Staff members note that the process of making sure their students are college-ready is not seamless due to student demographics, prior schooling, and community contexts. Respondents are also clear that organizational instabilities and school climate issues contribute to how students behave in ways seemingly contradictory to archetypal images of college-bound youth. Many of the respondents and their schools ground the kinds of aforementioned academic and social supports into a methodology of *doing whatever it takes* to make sure their students are on the pathway to college:

*It's like an experiment every day to kinda see what sticks and what doesn't stick. You gotta kinda come up with your main lesson that you're going with, and then pick it apart so that you can break down the higher-level skills and push those to the side so that your lower-functioning students can be successful in the class. Then, you have to build off and add more for your higher-functioning students to make sure that you're pushing them and not letting them just settle through the basic curriculum. So, it's kind of like a juggling act every day, trying to, you know, "I'm going to give this person this, I'm going to give this person this, this person, I'm not sure yet. We'll kind of start him off in the middle." It's a lot of that.*

Yet, some respondents share that *doing whatever it takes* is not a universal principle among all of their colleagues. Staff members openly express their colleagues' concerns about a fine line between helping and hurting. For example, respondents who talk about their school's use of differentiated instruction also talk about the fear of providing so much support that students are only getting the breadth, and not the depth, of the courses listed on their high school transcripts:

*So, that's one of the challenges we've gotten into as far as the teachers are very open with differentiating their curriculum to work with the kids' different needs and abilities, but then, to what extent do we differentiate and still keep the fidelity of this course as far as this being a college-preparatory course. So, I think that's kind of a philosophical thing that we're dealing with right now in that a diploma from [school] does stand for this high rigor and this excellence of coursework, and we need to maintain that. But, we also need to make sure that we are differentiating student needs, so when I say that I've looked at a kid's transcript and seen that they've taken [course], I know that they have a general knowledge of trigonometric functions and know what a logarithm is.*

In addition to internal philosophical conversations about how to best help their student demographic, a few respondents also discuss how some of their building colleagues forego the *whatever it takes* mantra because they have associated race and class with students' inability to transition to and graduate from college.

*...people did not believe in the intelligence of Black and Brown students. They think that we are wild, stupid, you know, inarticulate or cannot do certain things. So it was very clear for me... that we had to establish the belief that our young people are extremely intelligent. .... Everybody says that they believe that Black children are smart but they have seen so many negative images of Black children, they can't possibly actually believe it. They are not going to put it in action.... Some people had to be asked to leave, we didn't offer certain people contracts back...*

In addition to larger discussions around practices and racial/class biases, there were also cases shared in which respondents' colleagues were resistant to change, particularly in organizational climates undergoing reform efforts. Staff members talk about colleagues who are resistant to change the way they have always taught, even if their instructional strategies did not align with their students' needs. Respondents also talk about some of their colleagues' unwillingness to take risks with their instructional approaches. Respondents suggest that risks are not taken due to several factors, such as a lack of leadership, a lack of collegiality, and/or a climate where risks do not carry great rewards (e.g., yearly contractual arrangements for school staff inhibit risks):

*Every teacher here is supposed to be doing [----]. .... So, I mean, in my opinion, no one's checking on them because they're all afraid of getting fired. That's the one, number one thing we talked about in [----], being fired. Let's make sure we don't get fired. But getting fired does not include doing your job to me. ...my biggest thing is, are you a teacher who responds to data? All my kids fail a test. Do you move on? Some do. You can tell in the grade book. Right? You give a test, average is 20% of the whole class. It's at chapter one. Next thing you know, you see it's at chapter two. There's no chapter one review, no chapter one review of skills. Some teachers are doing that, and grades are going up; kids are doing better. But I don't believe they're one, being monitored and two, they don't care. If you care, you'll do it whether you're monitored or not.*

*Well, I kinda feel like some teachers are very stuck in doing whatever they've done in the past, and even though whatever test scores, whatever they've done hasn't shown necessarily that it's working for them on these skill developments, they'll still go back to doing the same things they've been doing in their classes, whether it's teaching things a certain way or doing projects or assignments with the students that are, you know, exactly the same thing as they've always done. And I've encountered resistance when presenting new ideas or projects that don't involve some of those same things that they were doing before or that kind of ask them to create something that's new and to step out of their comfort zones. So, that comes into play a lot.*

In other instances, respondents rehash their building-level conversations about school practices that are not working and school practices that are not grounded in the cultural knowledge of the communities they serve. For instance, respondents talk openly about how they initially conceptualized aspects of their support system, but soon learned how those support

systems became a "crutch." Therefore, these schools had to revise their practices and programs so as to not disenfranchise their student population with a support system that only *appears* to meet their needs (e.g., credit recovery programs with limited rigor).

*...in the beginning, we had some ideas about what that would look like, and now, it's changed on the best ways to do that. The goal has always been very clear, but the methodologies have—and we're still hammering it out, figuring it out, because getting to college is not our mission. We don't want our students dropping out, coming home and transferring a million times. We want to see them with their college degree. How exactly do we do that, I think that is still--we're learning as we go, still figuring it out, still trying to try this, try that.*

Respondents also share the many invisible interventions that are not part of their school's formal missions or curricula. According to the literature, some staff members engage in aspects of critical care by using their own racialized experiences to mentor students past theirs (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006). For example, when some respondents feel that their students are not using their backgrounds and experiences as a form of capital (see Yosso, 2005) and/or to foster resiliency (see Nagoaka et al., 2013), they directly discuss it:

*So, what we are moving to is that in order to make it here, you really have to have some serious grit. You really have to know your stuff and you have to be willing to do a nice amount of work. You have to be willing to practice and you have to be willing to take your experiences and put them back in your pocket.... There is nothing any student here can tell me that they had to go through that I have not been through.... So, [I'm] not very friendly to excuses. So, they are going to have to realize that life is rough.... There is no spot on the application that says was your mother this? Was your father this? Did you come from a disadvantaged this? So once you reach adulthood, you are responsible for yourself. So, it is during that time when you are young you kind of have to learn how to deal with it.*

Staff members also talk about how notions of critical care have grounded their instructional interactions with students.

*So, my F student who doesn't do any work but was engaged in a conversation, says I want to create [--]. How can I not engage him? Most teachers would say, "Alright, I'm through with you. I don't wanna hear from you." That's bad to me.... He's reading now. It's late in the game; he has a [failing percentage]. It went up. I congratulated him .... He may not pass, but he's moving up. He saw the progress.*

Lastly, respondents share examples of students and/or families who, on the days leading up to their departure for college, are complicating students' college entry. For some staff members, the summer after graduation requires staff to engage in follow-through processes toward the transition to college (see also Castleman & Page, 2013). Respondents provide

examples of hands-on support to make sure that students are prepared to depart for college, including providing pseudo-familial support for the transition.

*I had a student one year that was going to school... Because we're building strong applicants, [we] got [the student] an internship at [company name], got him some mentors that were [occupational title]; they helped [the student] ....., and [the student] got into [college name] ... but the chaos that surrounded the student's life was just so crazy...[description of what took place causing staff to intervene in the students' transition to college for that fall]....*

Ultimately, all of the respondents mention dissatisfaction with building-level leadership, dissatisfaction with the uniformity in their colleagues' efficacy about their mission, and/or dissatisfaction with their colleagues' willingness to take risks to improve the fidelity of their schools' offerings. Some also mentioned *doing whatever it takes*, but also having conversations with their colleagues on when *whatever it takes* is helpful versus harmful, and noting when their colleagues cannot do *whatever it takes* due to preconceived biases of whether their investment in students will pay off. Ultimately, *doing whatever it takes* is used as a frame to help students transition to college when their school's organizational climate and students' demographics provide barriers to their college admission and entry.

### **Centering Black Students in "College Readiness for All"**

The "college readiness for all" movement is fraught with complexities. The movement is only 10-15 years old, immature, and under-theorized, leaving many school communities to build the proverbial plane while flying it (Farmer-Hinton, 2006a, 2011; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Griffin & Wohlstetter, 2001). Further, college readiness processes and frameworks were not initially conceptualized for nor normed against Black students who are disproportionately first-generation college-bound, and who disproportionately live in poor communities (Cookson & Persell, 1985; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2004; Perna, 2006; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Additionally, since college readiness is associated with archetypal images of White and affluent students transitioning to elite institutions of higher education, many schools clarify *college readiness for all* on their own terms without templates to use and best practices to follow (Farmer-Hinton, 2006a, 2011). All of this is particularly problematic when "college readiness for all" is used within urban contexts where racialized school policies and practices as well as deficit discourses about Black students and low income students already exist, leaving such students to unfairly wrestle with immature and under-theorized reforms, many times on their own (Carnevale, 2008; Farmer-Hinton, 2002, 2006a, 2011; Knight & Marciano, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2006; O'Connor, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

From the interviews shared, staff members' responses illustrate that these schools exist in different places on the "college readiness for all" continuum illustrated earlier with Obama's and Scalia's narratives. Some of these schools are admittedly new to college readiness for all, evidenced by their colleagues' or their own grappling with hegemonic paradigms and staff mindsets about what college-bound youth look like and act like; some of these schools are relatively stronger in one aspect of college readiness or another (e.g., support systems, curricular improvements, alumni support, internal and external college-related programming, and school-family partnerships). Yet, none of the respondents admit that they are strong in all the areas that matter for Black students, leading me to conclude that the higher end of the *college readiness for all* continuum has yet to be realized.

In the pages that follow, I suggest that these staff members' challenges and trials are embedded in a college readiness for all framework that has not fully centered Black students; thus, the continuum needs to be expanded (Freeman, 1997, 1999, 2005; Hooker & Brand, 2009; Knight & Marciano, 2013; O'Connor, 2000; Tierney & Jun, 2001). The combination of Black students with diverse backgrounds and learning abilities, along with school contexts operating within a college readiness for all paradigm, makes for an interesting line of inquiry at a time when more U.S. schools may also be re-conceptualizing a more inclusive college readiness reform mission and agenda (see Achievement First, n.d.; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Boo, 2004; Common Core State Standards, n.d.; Harlem Children's Zone, n.d.; Kipp, n.d.; Network for College Success, n.d., New York City Department of Education, 2016; Robinson-English, 2006; The Cesar Chavez Public Charter Schools for Public Policy, n.d.). As noted earlier in the paper, without centering Black students, there are *dangers seen and un-seen* in the policies and practices that develop (Milner, 2007). For example, college readiness for all, thus far, prioritizes best-noted practices, such as cognitive and non-cognitive personalization, differentiation, standards, and checklists (see Conley 2007, 2011; Farmer-Hinton, 2008a; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Knight & Marciano, 2013; Nagoaka et al., 2013) as well as the importance of college match and fit (versus valuing marquee colleges based on those colleges' marketing efforts and reputations) (Roderick et al., 2011). These changes in best practices have been important to building-level interactions generally. But, these changes are also important because we are able to fully theorize *college readiness for all*, and extend the continuum by centering Black students. In other words, without instructional reforms such as detracking, scaffolding and differentiation (see Gamoran, 1997; Gamoran & Hannigan, 2000; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Watanabe, Nunes, Mebane, Scalise, & Claesgens, 2007), we would not know that, in order to center Black students, we must value how they thrive in rigorous courses with personalized supports (Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Burris, et al., 2008; Farmer-Hinton, 2011, 2012; Knight & Marciano, 2013).

From the staff interviews, we know there are dangers if college readiness for all is not explicitly stated and intentionally implemented for Black students who may come from families who have been denied the opportunity to pursue college aspirations due to racialized divestments of Black communities. Intentionality is also critical since college readiness for all is a construct at risk of being co-opted through standardization and/or deficit-based practices inherent in racialized school communities. Many staff members shared that their missions framed the messaging around college through both formal programs and curricula (e.g., college visits,

summer programming on college campuses, linking graduation requirements to college readiness) or informal interactions (e.g., college talk, intervening informally but strategically) (see also Farmer-Hinton, 2006a, 2008a; Knight & Marciano, 2013; McClafferty et al., 2002). There are also dangers when staff are not willing to do *whatever it takes*. Doing whatever it takes presumes that Black students, with the social support and academic rigor of strong and intentional school networks, can access and persist in college. The intentional match between social support and academic rigor has to be explicitly pursued in our school buildings so that our students' college readiness experiences are cumulative with intersecting dosages of college readiness academics and support over time (Farmer-Hinton, 2008a, 2012). For example, scaffolding and differentiation helps students to navigate skill gaps from prior poor schooling, but schools must offer these instructional elements early and often enough in high schools for an impact (Farmer-Hinton, 2006a, 2011, 2012). We must also interrogate the degree to which the same support systems exist for others, but have to be fought for (or their validity questioned) for Black students, while it is given freely to others (N. Holland, personal communication, November 16, 2016). Most importantly and critically, *doing whatever it takes* can flourish best in schools that are organizationally stable and filled with colleagues who trust, collaborate, and take informed risks (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Farmer-Hinton, 2006a, 2011; Payne, 2008; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

In addition to lessons from these staff members, I will now share how the Black Lives Matter movement, along with existing scholarship, provides a template for additional tools to help us center Black students:

**Challenge Archetypes of College Readiness.** We must recognize how our contemporary understanding of college and who deserves to go to college is rooted into the social construction of talent, which often masks how some students are intentionally developed into college bound students and others are not (see, for example, Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2016a, 2016b; Armstrong, 1990; Cookson & Persell, 1985; Freeman 1997, 1999; Khan, 2012; McDonough, 1997; Peshkin, 2001; Powell, 1996; Stevens, 2007). Challenging these archetypes allows school staff to interrogate: 1) how college readiness and access have been used as tools of the elite to maintain power; 2) how affluent students are prepared for college in selective school or selective school-like contexts that mask their structured supports; and 3) how Black students, under the guise of our college readiness for all era, are often prepared for college using whole school models and/or supplemental programs derived from the schooling experiences of the elite (see, for example, Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Coats, 2004; Farmer-Hinton, 2011; Lack, 2009; Tough, 2008; see, also, Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Hossler et al., 1999; Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). We must dismantle archetypes so that Black students, particularly those living in divested contexts, are exposed to culturally-infused curricula, activities, and mentors, in order to help them embrace the long legacy of African Americans' college participation (Anderson, 1988; Billingsley, 1991; Brown, 1999; Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2016a, 2016b; Hochschild, 1995, Siddle-Walker, 1996). We must also dismantle archetypes in both mindsets and practices that force all students into one way of becoming college-bound and one way of making postsecondary transitions. For example, even though our economy requires college ready skills and dispositions for jobs that pay well (see Yellen, 2016), a college readiness for all

paradigm in our schools should empower students to choose a postsecondary path of their own making - even if it means apprenticeships, entrepreneurship, careers, or the military, before college – or even no college completion at all. Most importantly, we must dismantle such archetypes by focusing on the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexual identity so that we do not assume, for example, that we should invest in Black males' college readiness over that of Black females, nor should we unfairly interpret students' gendered behaviors and attributes with our preconceived notions (Brown & Donnor, 2011; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2016a, 2016b; Morris, 2007; Pratt-Clarke, 2012).

**Understand the Vestiges of Inequality on Current Practices.** We must understand the past and current impact of the gate keeping functions of school staff (see, for example, Boesel & Fredland, 1999; Bryan et al., 2011; Ceja, 2000; González et al., 2003; Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 1985; Rosenbaum, et al., 1996) and the gateway functions of school curricula (e.g., Algebra) and testing on students' differential outcomes (see for instance, Gamoran, 2009, 1997; Gamoran & Hannigan, 2000; NACAC, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Rooney & Schaeffer, 1998; Watanabe, et al., 2007; Yun & Moreno, 2006). Understanding these vestiges helps schools to know 1) how we moved away from selecting and sorting into detracking and differentiation and 2) what happens when such methods and support systems are and are not utilized for our students (Allensworth et al., 2009; Alvarez & Mehan, 2006; Burris, et al., 2008; Farmer-Hinton, 2008a; Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2008; Gamoran, 1997, Gamoran & Hannigan, 2000; Gándara et al., 1998; Hill, 2008; Martinez & Kloplott, 2005; Mazzeo, 2010; Mehan, et al., 1996; Miller & Mittleman, 2012; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Perna et al., 2008; Roderick et al., 2006; Watanabe, et al., 2007). Understanding these vestiges is also important for our students so they are able to generate their own counter-narratives (e.g., such as writing assignments, journal entries) as students; this sort of cultural knowledge would be needed as students transition to college contexts where their merit could be questioned based on their ascribed characteristics alone (Farmer-Hinton, Lewis, Patton & Rivers, 2013; Banks, 2006; Bloom, 2007; Byrd & McDonald, 2005; Collins, 2000; Yosso, 2005). Students need this information as cultural knowledge in order to understand how their families and ancestors endured and thrived within oppressive educational structures, as well as how generations of racialized divestment affect their current social networks of adults with and without college degrees (Anderson, 1988; Billingsley, 1991; Brown, 1999; Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2016a, 2016b; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Hochschild, 1995, Siddle-Walker, 1996). Further, schools should be contexts in which adults are transparent about the impact of racialized experiences on educational outcomes and the extent to which students should learn to protest against and/or navigate within these contexts (Farmer-Hinton et al., 2013; Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2016a, 2016b; Nagoaka, et al., 2013; Yosso, 2005).

**Focus on Seamless Processes and Experiences.** There are many policies and programs that have contributed to the concept of *college readiness for all*, such as; 1) the literature on Upward Bound, Gear Up, TRIO, AVID, and early college/dual enrollment programs (see, for instance, Bailey & Karp, 2003; Martinez & Kloplott, 2005; Sefor et al., 2009; Watt et al., 2007); and, 2) the literature on financial aid programs, particularly the growing use of early commitment

or promise scholarship programs as a method of increasing college access for all (see, for example, Deming & Dynarski, 2009; Harris, 2013; Kelchen & Goldrick-Rab, 2014; Scott-Clayton, 2011). Yet, what we have learned is that we must build coalitions, because programming disconnected from students' social networks at home, school, and in their communities, is not as impactful as when college readiness is seamless, particularly for students who have been denied access to quality schooling for generations (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013; Choy et al., 2000; Farmer-Hinton, 2008a; Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Freeman, 2005; Gándara, 2002; Gándara et al., 1998; Knight & Marciano, 2013; O'Connor, 2000; Perna, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Sander, 2006; Stillisano, Brown, Alford, & Waxman, 2013; Swail & Perna, 2002; Tierney, et al., 2009; Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz, 2010). In addition to building structural coalitions so students' experiences are seamless, we must also build coalitions between adults and students in our schools. For students, these staff-student relationships and alliances amount to concrete and sustained messaging about college readiness as well as important ways to build trust (see Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2016a, 2016b), serving as fertile ground for the kind of "lived experiences" (see Collins, 2000) that counter contradictory messaging about their postsecondary selves and identities (Banks, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

**Accountability and Data Gathering Matters.** Much of what we have learned and are learning about the importance of a seamless college readiness for all pipeline has developed from the data systems and partnerships that emerged from the corporate philanthropy and standardization of the accountability era (Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Hess, 2005; Lowery & Hoyler, 2009; Martinez & Klopplott, 2005; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Roderick et al., 2006; Watkins, 2012). These developments, and subsequent public reporting, show how the remedy for inequality in college readiness is grounded not only in changes to our belief systems and paradigms but also changes in the way we integrate policies and programs to make college readiness seamless (Farmer-Hinton & Rifelj, 2015; Roderick et al., 2006). The ideal scenario is that we will be able to use accountability efforts and data gathering to evaluate how we provide our students with contexts that intentionally implement curricular improvements, enhance student support services, and pursue external partnerships, to provide the foundation for the kinds of building level, personalized interactions students need in order to navigate cognitive and non-cognitive barriers to college readiness and access (Burriss & Wehlner, 2005; Burriss, et al., 2008; Castleman & Page, 2013; Dougherty & Zavadsky, 2007; Duffy & Darwin, 2013; Network for College Success, n.d.; Stillisano, et al., 2013; Venezia, et al., 2003; see also Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001a; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001b; Nagaoka, et al., 2013). This accountability and data gathering should be used to *benefit students directly*. The process of creating accountable benchmarks and analyzing progress on such benchmarks is important for high school students, who will need to assess their own trajectories as college students and adults and use such information to self-advocate (Farmer-Hinton & Holland, 2016a, 2016b). For example, learning academic content is important, but knowing how one uses his or her own academic behaviors to best digest academic content is empowering towards college readiness (Allensworth et al., 2014; Nagaoka, et al., 2013).



## Conclusion

In this paper, I have shared the existing and emerging practices of schools that engage in the mission of college readiness for all in order to inform other teachers, counselors, principals, policymakers, and scholars of the pitfalls and opportunities of college readiness for all. This paper highlights the complexities of the college readiness for all movement such that schools can reproduce existing inequalities if school communities simply attend to the "college prep" archetype versus the transformative empowerment of what college readiness could be. By centering blackness, we uncover the complex ways in which there are various barriers that we do not account for in our efforts to prepare Black students for college. We challenge socially-constructed definitions of what it means to be college-bound so that we can be *intentional* about the policies, programs and practices toward college readiness for all. By centering blackness, we value, never question, the mantra of *doing whatever it takes* to promote academic and social support systems that work for Black students. Interestingly, we also deconstruct and demystify college readiness so that other students, who are represented and under-represented in higher education, can find more varied ways to create or navigate their postsecondary pathways (Banks, 2006; Garza, 2014).

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