

## CHAPTER 1

# The Influence of Family

Wrongly, African American families are often accused of not being involved or interested in the outcome or the educational process of their children. Whether it is participating in a Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meeting at the elementary and secondary level or assisting students in the transition to higher education institutions, African American parents are depicted as uncaring. In fact, a whole body of literature has sprung up to demonstrate the linkages between community and school, often targeting African American children as not being successful because their parents are not actively participating in the activities of the school.

While no one would doubt or question the importance of parental involvement in the schooling process, the findings regarding many African Americans' participation are often skewed or distorted. Many prominent African American historians and sociologists who have written about the African American family have discussed the belief of these families in the role and power of education (Anderson, 1988; Billingsley, 1992; Franklin & Lightfoot, 1989). Perhaps the more recent assessment of findings related to a lack of African American family involvement in their children's schooling points to both a lack of understanding as to how the African American family interprets its role and involvement and a conflict between the values of the family and the school. Vernon Feagans (1997) discusses some of these conflicts, such as style of

punishment, in her book, *The Perils of School: Cultural Clashes in Communities and Classroom*.

While some may argue that it is not essential to understand the content of the debate surrounding the involvement of African American parents in their children's schooling in elementary and secondary schools to understand college choice, I would suggest that it is crucial to do so because college choice theorists recognize the hugely important role that the family plays in influencing students' postsecondary plans (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). The questions underlying both debates, although often unspoken and unwritten, are: Do African American families value education? Do they perceive a return on their investment in higher education? If so, how do they impart this value of education to their children, that is, do their children perceive the same value? In order to understand the context of how African American families influence the college choice process of their children, it is important to first review the value that these families have placed on education over time and in what ways they have passed on their value of education, particularly higher education, to their children. Without such a context, it is difficult to understand the African American family's role in the college choice process.

### **Overview of African American Families' Belief in Education**

Sociologist Billingsley (1992) addressed the quest of African Americans for education often through his writings. As he indicates, "Education is the traditional opportunity through which Black families find their place in life. And having found it, they replicate their experience again and again through their children" (p. 172). Education, in the broadest sense, is fundamental to being able to communicate and to participate in the affairs of society. When any group of people has been denied the right to read and write, as was historically the case with African Americans when their ancestors came to this country, instinctively, they will come to attach a high premium on those skills (Anderson, 1988).

First of all, early on African Americans recognized that they were locked out of the flow of information—there was no way they could adequately navigate their surroundings without the

necessary communication skills. As such, learning the basics of reading and writing became not only a priority but a necessity. Literacy was so important to African Americans that many actually lost their lives when their surreptitious efforts to learn to read and write were discovered. For example, in their report prepared for the Joint Center for Political Studies in 1989, Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot and John Hope Franklin noted, "The desire to learn to read and to write was keen in the Black communities of antebellum America... Even in the dilapidated log cabins of the slave quarters the desire for education was nurtured and strengthened as an integral part of the socialization patterns and kinship networks of Black men and women held in bondage" (p. ix). The historic commitment African American families had toward education has continued in various ways since slavery. For example, African Americans have continued their fight for education throughout the courts—most notably with the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decree.

Additionally, the way in which families historically have been involved in their children's education is noteworthy. Education has always been a matter of interest for the entire family and community. The church, the extended family (including grandparents and other relatives), and the immediate family have always been involved in the education of African American children. The idea continues to be that each generation is to have more opportunities than the generation before it. For example, it is not unusual today to find African American churches "passing the hat" to help with the education of college students. It is not unusual to hear the value of education being discussed in various venues. For instance, a grandmother recently brought her grandson to my barber shop for a haircut. While we were waiting to get our hair cut, several other young African American men came in. The latest drug bust was being discussed on the evening news on television. The grandmother started to lecture the young men. She said, "You see, our future is left to you boys, and in order to make it, you're going to need education. It's the only way."

However, when researchers write about the education of African American students and their families today, they most often point to decaying families. The Lightfoot panel addressed this issue in 1989 by stating the following: "What we must demand

is this: that the schools shift their focus from the supposed deficiencies of the Black child—from the alleged inadequacies of Black family life—to the barriers that stand in the way of academic success” (p. ix).

While committed early on to the basics of education, African American families have nonetheless been interested in their children’s involvement in higher education, as seen in the establishment of HBCUs, which were founded between 1830 and 1900 with the very mission of educating African Americans. Since many HBCUs, such as Fisk University, were extension schools, it was not unusual to find entire family members studying side by side. The story of Booker T. Washington stands as an example of African Americans’ desire for higher education. He walked to school, slept outside at night, and cleaned a floor with a handkerchief to pay for his schooling (Washington, 1989). While today more African Americans attend PWIs, HBCUs are still producing a disproportionate number of graduates. In sum, as Billingsley stated, African Americans have always had “a deep historical and cultural belief in the efficacy of education. Blacks have sought education in every conceivable manner and at every level” (p. 181). What has not been understood is the way African American families have influenced their children’s college choice process.

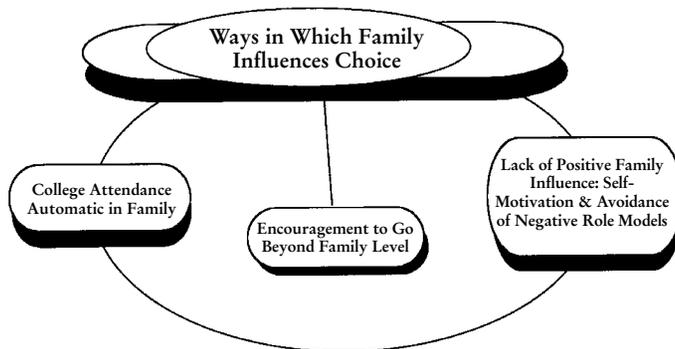
### **Factors that Influence the College Choice Process**

Although in phase one (predisposition) of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model the influence of family is discussed, it is submerged under “significant others.” Because the influence of the family differs within each cultural group, there is a need to explicate this role as it relates to African Americans. Although, as Hossler and Gallagher indicate, parents “play an important role in shaping attitudes toward higher education and action toward college choice” (p. 211), how that influence is shaped based on different cultural characteristics needs greater understanding. The way in which African American families value education has everything to do with the way they influence their children’s college choice process.

While maintaining vestiges from the past and combining elements of a larger middle class, the way in which African American

families influence their children's college choice is noteworthy. As Levine and Nidiffer (1996) state about the findings from their student subjects, "[W]hen asked how they came to attend college, each of them told almost the same story" (p. 65). Although the students I interviewed were in different school types and geographic regions, their responses to my questions about college attendance varied little. For these students, across school types, the influence of family often took on an additional dimension. That is, they were influenced by family members not necessarily because a family member had attended college or received a degree, as this literature supports, but because the family wanted the student to achieve beyond the level of other family members. Additionally, students often mentioned themselves as their own motivators. Therefore students identified three factors that influenced their decision to attend college: (1) an automatic expectation in their family; (2) influences beyond the family level; and (3) self-motivation and avoidance of "what I do not want to be" (see figure 1.1). These will be described in the next sections.

**Figure 1.1. The Influence of Family on Students' College Choice**



#### *Automatic College Attendance Expectations within the Family*

Some students enjoyed automatic support of their educational goals within their family. They were more likely to be students whose parents or some family members were college graduates. One student in a suburban school in Atlanta explained to me, "I

didn't even think about not going to college. I knew it was automatic with my family."

A student attending a private school in Chicago had this to say:

I mean for me, my parents, there was never really a choice for me. I just kind of had to go, and I never really thought about not going, and so going here was just part of the whole thing in going to college.

At another private school in Los Angeles, a student explained,

It's just been that's what you're supposed to do in my family. I've just been raised on it. My mom has always told me that you go to elementary school, go through junior high and high school, go to college, and pursue your career.

A student at an inner-city school in New York stated,

[My] family [influenced me]. In my situation I have to live up to expectations. Family members have gone to college, and so it's like, go on and follow the family trend. Just keep going.

This is the category of students that college choice theorists are most familiar with and have written the most about. Theorists have studied students in two categories—those who are high socioeconomic status (SES) and those who are low SES. Presumably, those who are high SES are children of college graduates and are more likely to make college choice automatic. Noteworthy, however, is that students in this category, including those in inner-city schools, can have extended family members who have not attended college and who so influence students' choices that they cannot remember when the desire began.

The ideal scenario for students who are underrepresented in higher education is for there to be a larger number who fall into this category where the idea of choosing higher education is automatic. Unfortunately, the largest number of African Americans participating in higher education are still first-generation college goers and higher education is not automatic. However, with African American families, the value of higher education is often instilled even when family members have not participated in higher education.

*Encouragement to Go Beyond the Family's Level of Education*

Some African American students reported that their parents or extended family encouraged them (implicitly or explicitly) to go beyond their own level of schooling. Understandably, the responses in this category typically came from students whose parents or family members had not attended college.

For example, a student attending an inner-city school in Chicago said, "My family wants me to go to college because, in my family, I'll be the first one to graduate from high school and also to go to college." Another student attending the same school said, "My grandma is depending on me going on to school." A student attending a private school in Chicago stated,

Whenever I think about college it's like, my parents, they always wanted me to do better than they did; so ... I'll probably be the first one in a long time that ever went to college so I would be something like a role model for my family. That's why I think they want me to go to school—so I'll be able to come out better than how they came out.

At an inner-city school in Washington, D.C., a student explained her mother's influence: "She just talks about how she didn't go and how she couldn't go when she was my age."

The majority of African American students reside in families where there is interest in their participation in and benefitting from higher education. However, students whose parents desire for their children to go beyond their level of schooling because they did not attend college are often limited in their ability to navigate the college choice process. Therefore, substantial resources (financial, informational, and personal) would yield great benefits to this group of students and parents. While college choice theorists would include these parents in the low SES group, the students interviewed made it clear that their parents wanted them to go to college. In order to build on the desires of these parents and students, it is crucial that students in this category of families be provided with appropriate information early so that they do not lose the desire to continue their education. It is logical that this group be targeted for resources since it comprises the largest group of African American families.

*Self-Motivation and Avoidance of Negative Role Models*

Another theme that could be considered internal to the home is students' indication of themselves as the influence on their perception of the value of higher education. Students in this category usually perceived that there was no family they could rely on for assistance. A student at an inner-city school in New York explained, "I just do everything for myself. Nobody has influenced me." A student at a private school in Los Angeles echoed that response:

For me, I was my own self motivator because of the area I live in. ...I told myself, "Man, you're going to go to high school and you're going to finish it. You're going to go to a university, not city college, and you're going to make something of yourself so you will have something to show for it."

A student at a private school in Chicago responded similarly:

For me, one of the reasons why I want to go to college is because I don't have a lot of money without having to go to sell drugs, you know, or do the typical whatever, so that I want to support my family.

At a magnet school in Chicago, a student said,

My father just sits around the house. I don't want to be like him because he'll have a job and get paid, but all he does is waste his money on things he doesn't need when he could put it back to get another house or things that he really does need. It's wrong.

A student at a suburban school said something similar: "My uncle is a bar room bum. I don't want to be like that."

These responses, while focusing on students' perceptions that the influence on their decision to go to college comes from themselves, also provide a different example of how the family impacts students choosing higher education. That is, even though a family member has not gone to college or does not indicate a desire for a younger family member to go beyond the level of schooling achieved by other family members, this does not mean that these potential students should be written off. On the contrary, these students' responses indicate that they can be motivated to choose higher education in seemingly negative home environments; and in fact, these negative influences can

cause them to desire higher education more profoundly than those who take the choice for granted.

Self-motivation is an area that needs greater exploration. The self-motivated students receive the least amount of attention, particularly from a research perspective, and yet could demonstrate the greatest potential. Usually, models to increase participation in higher education for students who are in this category have been based on research in the two previously discussed categories. It is obvious why those models have had minimal effect: the family structures and desires are quite different.

### **The Influence of Family Beyond Socioeconomic Status**

There is no denying the influence of the family on students' college choice. In fact, in the Bateman and Hossler (1996) article, three of the five correlates that they indicate relate to predisposition (students choosing higher education) are familial. Two of the three correlates are socioeconomic factors (family income and parental levels of education) and the third factor is parental encouragement. This chapter demonstrates the importance of going beyond socioeconomic status when examining and understanding the influence of African American families on their children's college choice process.

As indicated in this chapter, there are families across the socioeconomic spectrum that influence their children to pursue postsecondary education. In order to influence the students in homes where parents are not educated or are not financially well off, a more in-depth understanding of the ways these families influence their children is necessary. Given the fact that there are still many African American first-generation college-goers, programs and models should be developed especially for these potential students. The necessary programs cannot be developed based on merely understanding the families' socioeconomic differences. We need to know a great deal more about *how* the families in the lower socioeconomic group influence their children.

This chapter, hopefully, has begun the process of probing more deeply into understanding that process. Chapter 2 further expands on when students begin to make their choices and how the family influences them from the start.