

**“Our Own Little Club”: Opportunities, Identity, and Relationships in a Youth
Achievement Program**

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study looks at the experiences of past students and current staff members of the academic support program Bold Achievers. Programs such as Bold Achievers seek to remediate gaps in educational attainment between students of different social classes across the United States. The perspectives of participants regarding their experiences in the program and beyond were explored through a semi-structured interview design. Themes that emerged from the interviews included the importance of exposure to and support for different academic, social and recreational experiences. Other important themes drew attention to the ways in which student beliefs, felt sense of obligation, and expectations with regard to academic success were influenced by significant relationships within the organization to other students and staff members. As these relationships were seen as key by both staff and students to student success, the role of longevity in programming that follows a student throughout primary and secondary education with remarkable consistency in staff is pointed to as an important component to achieving stated outcomes for these programs.

Key Words: Education, Inequality, Relationships, Academic Support, Identity

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The “American Dream” holds the ideal that if one works hard enough and has enough talent, anyone can hurdle over inequality and be successful (McNamee and Miller 2009), that people are rewarded based on their individual talent and hard work, creating a meritocracy where differences are due to individual characteristics rather than structural inequalities (McIntosh 1988). Even though ability and a solid work ethic are helpful in the process, they may not be sufficient to achieve the “American Dream” (McNamee et al 2009; Stuber 2016). Likelihood of upward mobility strongly correlates with race, family background, and educational attainment (Ryan and Bauman 2016; Lee and Bowen 2006; McNamee and Miller 2009). This is in contrast with the ideal of living in an individually based meritocracy as believed by many in our society (Kerbo 2012). In the United States, there is large value placed on values of individualism and equality of opportunity, yet this is not shown to be represented in the stark inequalities shown within the reality of the institution of education (Skolnik 1990).

Education can be used as a path to success as it has been correlated with individuals’ future economic and social well-being (Stuber 2016; Skolnik 1990). Higher educational attainment, measured by the highest level of education reached, has been shown to correlate with a higher median income (Stuber 2016). Per a 2011 report, a person with a bachelor’s degree had a median weekly income of \$1,050 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). This is nearly double the \$638 median weekly income of a person with only a high school degree. The median weekly income for those who do not have a high school diploma dips even lower to \$451 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

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While education is a step towards future success, as exemplified by averages in weekly income, “schools often replicate existing social and economic inequality present in the larger society and culture” (Conchas 2001: 502). Factors such as race, documentation status, income level, and parental education level all impact one’s access to education, making it easier for some to achieve higher educational attainment than others (Ryan and Bauman 2016; Lee and Bowen 2006; McNamee and Miller 2009). According to a report on United States educational attainment, 93% of non-Hispanic, White adults reported at least a high school education (Ryan and Bauman 2016). On the opposite end of the spectrum, only 67% of Hispanic adults reported completing high school or more (Ryan and Bauman 2016). While educational attainment levels for all races have increased since the 1980s, proportionally less than half the number of Hispanic adults have completed a bachelor’s degree or higher (15%) in comparison with their non-Hispanic white counterparts (36%) (Ryan and Bauman 2016). The size of this gap has remained relatively consistent over time, despite the increase in overall educational attainment levels (Ryan and Bauman 2016). This education gap cannot be explained by individual characteristics or poor life choices, and so we must look to structural causes and solutions if we want to live up to the “American Ideal” of equality of opportunity (Mills 1959; Skolnik 1990).

In an affluent county in the Rocky Mountain state where I conducted my research, one third of residents live within 200% of the federal poverty guidelines (“I Have a Dream” Foundation 2015). Within the schools in this county, 25% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch (“I Have a Dream” Foundation 2015). As of 2015, 21% of the

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state's population was Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau 2016). The median income for Hispanic households in 2012 was only 64% that of white households in the state ("I Have a Dream" Foundation 2015). In 2014, 75% of low-income students in a school district in a less affluent nearby county graduated from high school, compared to a graduation rate of 87.05% for all students in both districts. While these may seem like "pretty good" numbers to many, a class gap remains and increases dramatically as this number drops to 21% of low-income student graduating from post-secondary education ("I Have a Dream" Foundation 2015).

These gaps in educational attainment between non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics, as well as between higher and lower income students demonstrate inequality in educational outcomes that may explain, at least in part, income inequalities. More broadly, social inequality can be defined as "unequal access to valued resources, services, and positions" within society (Kerbo 2012:9). It has been argued that "children receive education in direct proportion to their social-class standing" (McNamee and Miller 2009:107). By looking specifically at education inequality, a contradiction is revealed between popular American values relating to equality of opportunity and the reality of the unequal outcomes of education (Skolnik 1990). This is in addition to inequality of educational resources, at the basic level of building and teacher quality, as well as tutoring, academic support, and attention from teachers. While everyone has access to education, the outcomes of the education system and the quality of the education received varies greatly. Our existing education system allows some students to work and benefit from the system more than others. Education dually plays roles in reinforcing individual merit and

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“reproducing existing inequalities” (McNamee and Miller 2009:119). It appears that there are two options to solve the problem of who benefits from our education system and who does not. One option is changing the system as a whole, so more students could benefit from it. The other is to support the students who are not gaining the same benefits in how to navigate the rigged system. This paradox opens opportunities for different organizations, through private philanthropy and non-profits, to attempt to solve this problem of inequality reproduction in the very system intended and proclaimed to even out inequalities. In organizations, they typically approached this dilemma by fostering study skills, time management, and other characteristics thought of as a “work ethic” and making educational resources more broadly available to students from all backgrounds (McNamee and Miller 2009). The goal of these organizations seems to be to help students from various backgrounds conform to the values of the United States education system in order to increase their life chances of greater success.

In May of 2016, I began volunteering with The Bold Achievers Foundation. Bold Achievers (BA)¹ is a national organization that strives to address the social problem of opportunity and social inequality seen in the educational attainment gap between students from low-income backgrounds and those students who come from backgrounds with more economic resources. Any student who is deemed eligible for federal free or reduced lunch programs and/or who lives in low-income housing is eligible to participate in this program. These students are put into “Achiever Classes” starting in about the second

¹ Name of organization changed to preserve anonymity.

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grade and remain in the program through high school graduation, with support continuing financially and otherwise through their post-secondary education. The study focuses on the local Mountain County² affiliate of this national organization whose demographic composition of population served reflects larger state demographics regarding ethnicity and income distribution. As a result, most participants in the Mountain County affiliate of BA are Hispanic or Latino.

The educational attainment statistics for those students involved in programs like BA look very different than those of the students at the same income level who do not participate, with 90% of those involved graduating from high school and 60% graduating from post-secondary education.³ According to their website, BA's goal is to provide impoverished youth across the nation with the support of a variety of resources and trusting relationships that they need to close the achievement gap, and to complete high school prepared for higher education and fulfilling careers. They seek to address the condition of unequal educational outcomes that contribute to larger inequalities by leveling the playing field of support and opportunity structures. By hearing the perspectives and experiences of those who have been a part of the program, insight can be gained into the ways that BA impacts the students involved.

This research while exploratory in nature, asks participants and staff about their experiences with Bold Achievers, seeking to discover possible ways in which the Bold

² Name of location changed to preserve anonymity.

³ Source omitted to preserve anonymity of organization.

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Achiever program impacts students experience and what mechanisms may be at play in the causal relationship between program participation and later educational achievement. Although demonstrating causal relationships is beyond the scope of this study, it is hopeful that insights may point to possible future research. Since a fully controlled experiment was out of the question, interviews with participants and staff sought the insider perspective on these questions.

METHODS

This study arose out of participant observation as a volunteer with the Bold Achievers starting in May of 2016. In this capacity, I observed students and staff, involved with the program as they interacted and went about their typical days. As a volunteer, I was fully immersed in the daily interactions and would be considered a full member of the setting (Warren and Karner 2005). Participant observation allowed me to gain a baseline understanding of the everyday functioning of the organization without interference or artificiality of setting as can be the case with experimental design or structured interviews (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). Naturalism is the idea that “researchers should examine events as they occur in natural, every day, ongoing social settings,” which can only be achieved through observation (Neuman 1997). By starting with the organization as a volunteer, not as a researcher, I mediated the issue of gaining *entrée*, typically a complicated process (Bailey 2007).

Through my role as a volunteer I formed relationships with the participants, therefore I could observe, ask questions, and gain easy access to the daily activities and conversations among participants of Bold Achievers (hereafter referred to as BA)

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(Chambliss and Schutt 2016; Bailey 2007). Obviously, due to the age requirements for student participation in BA, this role was impossible for me to fill as a college student. Although had I used a covert, deceptive role I could have gotten more direct observations of the student experience in BA. However, the ethical violations of such a role precluded even considering such a tactic.

Out of my observations and secondary research on educational inequality and the effectiveness of this and similar programs, I began to wonder just how this program produces the results that it does. I also noticed a lack of students' voices about their experiences in the program. What they and staff, those most involved in the day-to-day workings of the program, have to say about their experiences and the impact of participation seemed a promising way to explore the question of possible mechanisms and effective aspects of the BA experience. With this research question and intention in mind, I chose in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants including program alumni and staff. By conducting interviews with key informants, I could investigate and check out my initial understandings gained from participant observation, and was better able to mediate the risk of selective observation (Bailey 2007; Chambliss and Schutt 2016). In-depth interviews allow for more complete understandings of the topics being explored, the inclusion of multiple and possibly conflicting views of a situation, and the introduction of new topics or areas of investigation (Bailey 2007; Warren et al 2005). The loose structure of these conversations provided guiding topics, opportunities for probing further into neglected or intriguing areas, and time to explore whatever may arise as important to the participant (Warren et al 2005).

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Capturing one's experience of BA, even if the interview participant is currently involved, is necessarily a reflective process. As such, it is subject to the wanderings of memory and often unfolds in opportunities to reflect and ponder in conversation.

Interviews "offer researchers access to people's ideas, through memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz 1991: 19). The interview can be the very place where the participant's "experience of their experience" takes shape (Walden 2003). In comparison, observation most often involves in the moment actions without much time or opportunity for reflection, and surveys may limit the topics or depth of answers in their structure (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). Interviews create opportunities for clarification and discussion between the participants and researcher, opening to meanings of actions and answers to questions in addition to the more straightforward data of other methods (Reinharz 1992).

Even though the original research question involved a possible cause and effect mechanism of participation in academic support programs and educational outcomes, an experimental design was not possible for this study (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). Experiments require at least two comparison groups, including a control group and the experimental group (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). It would not be possible for me to create a controlled experiment with comparison groups because the organization is an active program. Ethically I could not enter this ongoing program and randomly assign students to either get programming support or not. This would introduce potential risks to the subjects for the purposes of the study (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). By not granting some students access to the resources of the program I could have effected participant's

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educational attainment and success. Conducting an experiment would have also been futile because I would not have been able to control for outside confounds, such as income, household composition, etc. that may impact participants educational experience (Manza et al 2013).

This study, due to time and IRB approval constraints, is limited to participants over the age of 18. For this reason, only adult staff members and former students who were over 18 at the time of the interview are included. This decision considers weighing the costs and benefits of achieving valid results while protecting the subjects (Chambliss and Schutt 2016). While this certainly is a limitation to be assessed in future research, what may be missed in the fresh memories of current participants may be offset by the more reflective observations of alumni.

Sampling for respondents took place through a convenience sample. Filling the role of program volunteer established my legitimacy to ask directors within the organization to help me contact potential participants. Because of the trusting relationships established with staff and directors during my time as a volunteer, I was able to secure their support in generating lists of past participants and posting a recruitment notice on the BA alumni Facebook page. I was not directly given the list of past participants therefore my contact within the organization was the one to share my recruitment messages with alumni. Emails for current staff and volunteers were also provided via the organizations website and a recruitment email was also sent to those who have worked or are currently working/volunteering with the program (*see Appendix A*). Interviews were scheduled with those individuals that responded via email showing

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interest in participation in the study. After each interview was completed I employed snowball sampling (also called network, chain referral, reputational, and respondent-driven sampling). I asked the participants if they knew of others interested in participating in the study and asked them to give contact information to them (Neuman 1997; Warren et al 2005). Initially I believed that snowball sampling would yield an abundance of possible participants, but this did not prove to be the case. Thus, the small sample of this study is a serious limitation. With more time to follow leads and more freedom to recruit directly among alumni and current students it is likely that a larger sample could be secured. Frequently participants would say that they had some friends who would be interested and they would pass along my information, but this only resulted in responses and interviews in a very few cases. Another limiting factor in recruiting past participants was that the organization did not have up-to-date contact information for each alumnus, therefore it was not possible to reach out to the entire population. This led to a large non-response bias in my study, where individuals who did not stay in contact with the organization may not have seen the recruitment and therefore were not able to share their experiences if they would have wished to. While low follow through may be predictable in this age group with diverse interests and busy lives, the ability to reach out to potential interviewees may have increased sample, along with allowing for more time to collect interviews.

The sample used in this study has the common features of convenience samples as all subjects self-selected to be a part of the study (Plaud et al 1999; Wiederman 1999; Chambliss and Schutt 2016). Self-selection by participants is a serious limitation in my

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study. This led to a selection bias as those who showed interest were those who had stayed in contact with the organization, indicating some amount of affinity for BA. Those who were willing to share about their experiences with the organization may have done so either because they had a particularly positive or negative experience in the program. Therefore, they may not represent the “average” participant. I cannot claim that the results found in this study are representative of everyone’s experience in BA. With more time and resources the sample could have been larger, but would still be limited in the ability to generalize beyond this group (Chambliss and Schutt 2016).

The sample included a total number of four alumni and five staff/volunteers. 44% identified as men, 55% as women. Race/ethnicity was determined by self-identification with the following results: 33% Hispanic/Latino, 33% White/Caucasian, and 33% bi-racial. Two staff members had received graduate level degrees and the other three had completed bachelor’s degrees. Of the alumni participants, half had completed bachelor’s degrees and the other half were enrolled in four year universities at the time of the study. The average age for past participants was 23.25 years old and the average age for staff members was 32.4 years old.

Once participants responded to recruitment contact, I set up a time and place at their convenience to meet them for an in-depth interview. They decided whether this is a more public or private location. Interviewing locations ranged from schools, coffee shops, to offices and one interview via Skype video calling. Before the formal interview process began I introduced myself to the subject and engaged in some small talk in order to build rapport (Warren et al 2005). There were some interviews where affinities were

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recognized and discussed to build trust. Others we looked for shared experiences and interest and talked about those. By establishing this trust early on, I was more likely to receive the participants' honest responses (Warren et al 2005). This rapport building continued throughout the interview process through active listening and thoughtful follow up questions (Warren et al 2005; Bailey 2007). It is important to note my status as a researcher, other identifiable status characteristics such as gender and ethnicity, and personality styles of all impact the way relationships are formed and rapport is built (Bailey 2007). Significant status characteristics, discussed in methodology literature include "gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, educational status, and so on" (Bailey 2007:107). I appear young, am easily identifiable as a White woman, identify as Jewish (which came up in one interview) and have a typically warm personality. Each of these characteristics came into play while building rapport with participants. As a young White woman, there may have been topics that the participants did not discuss with me.

Although my age did not differ greatly from most the alumni, I was younger than the staff members I interviewed. In both situations, it was important for me to show respect to all participants, building the rapport and the trust between us (Warren et al 2005). I worked to mediate differences in identity between myself and participants by findings and recognizing affinities that "close[d] the social distance..." and gave us "... a better chance of understanding each other" (Bailey 2007:108; Warren et al 2005).

I explained the consent form (*See Appendix B*) to participants with specific emphasis put on the voluntary nature of participation and that they could withdraw from the study at any point with no negative consequences. Subjects were also asked if they

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approved of the interview being audio recorded. Recording was not required, but helped me make sure that I was able to recall their responses correctly. Interview recordings were used as a reliable source of data to be used for analysis, but were not relied on fully as I continued to take detailed notes throughout each interview (Saldaña and Ormasta 2017). I explained to the participants that I was taking notes to ensure that I would have accurate data, especially if something were to go wrong with my recording device, as happened in one of my interviews (Saldaña et al 2017; Warren et al 2005).

Interview lengths ranges from 24-38 minutes in length. The only data collected was based on their responses to basic demographic questions and their answers to the interview questions and follow-ups or probes. This focuses the data and allows for deeper reflection and answers, as interviews are used to gain insight into the perspective about relevant experiences from the participant (Warren et al 2005). My participant observation and background reading informed my construction of the interview schedule (*See Appendix C*). During my time as a participant observer I was enrolled in the sociology internship course. For this course, we had to write a paper relating to our observations on site. It was at this time that I did my preliminary research and began to concretely develop my research questions and begin to think about what I might ask in interviews.

The semi-structured interview design is perfect for exploratory studies because follow up questions can be asked to investigate new topics as unexpected patterns emerge (Reinhartz 1992:21; Warren et al 2005; Chambliss and Schutt 2016; Bailey 2007). In semi-structured interviews “researchers must be active listeners and co-participants in the process” (Saldaña et al 2017:92). Making the interview into a conversation improves the

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flow of the interview, preventing the disruption of the conversational flow that occurs moving from question to question in structured interviews (Saldaña et al 2017).

Throughout each interview, I used both verbal and nonverbal encouragements which showed participants that I was interested in what they were saying and respected their responses, further developing rapport (Warren et al 2007). By actively listening to respondents' answers to questions, I was able to respond accordingly, producing follow up or probing questions when necessary. Probe and follow up questions are important tools used to clarify and receive further details on previous responses (Warren et al 2005). During one of my interviews with a staff member who used to be the leader of a class of Bold Achievers, they discussed the importance of not giving up on students. Through the semi-structured interview format I was able to create a follow up question during the interview asking for more details into what this changed for students. This was an example of my role as a researcher being to "analyze information as it is received and to guide the interview in a way that best serves the overall research question of the project" (Saldaña et al 2017:112).

One issue with probes and follow up questions is that at times it took me a long time to formulate a question, thus disrupting the flow of the conversation (Saldaña et al 2017). In contrast, by my taking time with my thought process I encouraged respondents to do the same with their responses, giving the opportunity for deeper reflection. Probing also gave me the opportunity to show the participants that their responses were valuable for my research, which may lead participants to share more details about their experience (Saldaña et al 2017). Another problem with probing questions is that subjects are not

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always asked the same exact questions so different topics may be discussed in individual interviews. This may impact the reliability of the interview findings (Manza et al 2016).

Data Analysis

Once interviews were completed, I transcribed each interview myself, which gave me the opportunity to gain better familiarity with my data (Warren et al 2005). The transcription process “initiates deep cognitive understanding of [the] data” (Saldaña et al 2017). Accurately transcribing the interviews is key to the data analysis process. This is important since interviews are types of speech events and social interactions where key data might have been overlooked or forgotten without such details being recorded (Warren et al 2005). To ensure accuracy, I used my interview notes to add non-verbal details into my transcriptions, including body language and setting context (Saldaña et al 2017). Through listening to interviews while transcribing and after completion of each transcript I engaged in re-listening and re-reading. Through this iterative process, I was able to increase my familiarity with my data and begin to develop and recognize analytical patterns (Warren et al 2005).

From there I began to code my interviews. Coding is a technique used to organize high quantities of data into smaller, more manageable segments by recognizing key concepts and categories (Bailey 2007; Manza et al 2013). The first step I took was to do open coding, also known as initial coding (Warren et al 2005; Bailey 2005; Neuman 2011). During open coding, I marked initial insights by using highlighters and making margin notes and memos through analytic descriptions (Warren et al 2005). At this stage I focused on broad patterns and ideas that seemed intriguing or significant to my original

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research questions and existing sociological theories or concepts. Open coding gave me a better understanding of the “big picture” of my data (Warren et al 2005). Once I had completed open coding of each interview I went back through each of them in order to decide on what themes and concepts emerged as most salient for my research.

The next step was to begin focused/axial coding. At this stage repeated patterns were the focus, with emphasis on my main themes and subthemes that may be important, but not developed enough to warrant their own section (Warren et al 2005; Bailey 2007; Neuman 2011; Saldaña et al 2017). This differed from the first round of open coding in that I developed, in outline fashion, different levels within each theme. I then made more succinct groupings for different patterns that had appeared in the interviews (Bailey 2007). This refines the original theme or pattern and works out the nuances of similarity and difference between specific quotes from respondents and related ideas or concepts. For axial coding, I again utilized different colored highlighters as this made for ease in overview and moving data and quotes under headings and subheadings as necessary. I included margin notations and memos that were representative of each of the subsequent levels in relation to the main theme (Warren et al 2005). Throughout the coding process I kept an up-to-date coding scheme of which colors represented which concepts or categories. I used inductive analysis, generalizing to sociological concepts and literature, connecting the specific and detailed data to existing theoretical explanations to further deepen my understanding (Bailey 2005). A limitation of axial coding is the possibility of missing subsequent themes as the focus narrows to some data and ideas at the exclusion of others (Bailey 2005). I attempted to mediate this possibility by keeping the first stage

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of open coding as broad as possible, in an attempt to identify all possible themes present in my data. My findings and conclusion are what Wiseman (1970) termed “a total pattern.” Total patterns “reflect the expressed sentiments, experiences, and beliefs of the group as a whole” (Wiseman in Walden 2003), although they are illustrated with key quotes from individuals and this sample cannot be generalized to the larger BA group. This method also attempts to account for and represent responses that may fall outside of the overall pattern and the individuality of each participant (Walden 2003) by noting exceptions to the overall pattern at this stage of analysis.

While making decisions on how to group my different findings into themes, I continued reading previous studies and theoretical literature. This iterative process utilizing literature to inform my analysis and my analysis to inform where I looked next in the literature led to settling on final themes and subthemes that will be discussed in depth later (Warren et al 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the experience of participants and the mechanisms by which academic support programs, such as Bold Achievers, may impact the students can be best gained by learning the perspectives of those directly involved. Placing that knowledge in a thorough understanding of previous research on the topic and sociological theories can offer plausible explanations for the results and experience of these programs. For this study, I examined existing studies on similar programs and did reading in the fields of deviance and social control, stratification, the sociology of education, and social psychology. Very quickly, connections and possible explanations emerged in the literature.

Academic Support Programs in the United States

Bold Achievers is not unprecedented in its mission, being one of many organizations throughout the United States aimed at mediating the issue of education inequality. Previous studies have focused on intentions, possible mechanisms, and outcomes of these programs.

Longitudinal field research and/or large samples of in-depth interviews were most frequently utilized to study such programs (Kahne and Bailey 1999; Gambone and Arebreton 1997; Heath and Milbrey 1994; Swanson et al 1993). Due to time constraints, such large sample sizes and longitudinal designs were not possible for my study. While many previous studies occurred in large urban settings, my study will address the impacts of academic support programs on low-income students in an affluent, mountain college city.

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Over five years of field research in various community based organizations that support youth, Heath and McLaughlin (1994) concluded that organizations supporting students outside of school should collaborate with the schools to give an option for “all-day, all-year learning,” where academic support continues outside of the traditional school day. The authors came to that conclusion after hearing from students that they did not feel supported or connected within the school system (Heath and McLaughlin 1994). It is now standard practice for organizations such as BA and others to work with the schools to create this “all-day, all-year learning” (Heath and McLaughlin 1994; Kahn and Bailey 1999; Swanson, Mehan and Hubbard 1993; Llamas, Lopez and Quirk 2014). By offering consistent programming, centered on academic support, these organizations are attempting to mediate the problem of education inequality (Heath and McLaughlin 1994; Kahn and Bailey 1999; Swanson, Mehan and Hubbard 1993; Llamas, Lopez and Quirk 2014). This structure of programming allows for more time to be spent with students and used productively by the organizations. This time can be used to implement programmatic features that have been found to be impactful on the population of students that they are working with by seeing results such as lower drop-out rates and higher educational attainment (Heath and McLaughlin 1994; Kahn and Bailey 1999; Swanson, Mehan and Hubbard 1993; Llamas, Lopez and Quirk 2014).

Mechanisms

One consistent finding points to the importance of perceived support by students (Kahn and Bailey 1991; Llamas et al 2014; Swanson et al 1993; Gabone and Arebreton 1997). Support can be defined broadly as the “relationships and connections with peers,

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teachers and program staff, which helped the students” (Llamas et al 2014: 205).

Relationships created over longer periods of time that fostered deeper trust, specifically with adults within the organization were found to be influential in predicting later positive outcomes (Kahn and Bailey 1999; Gambone and Arebreton 1997).

The longevity of intervention was also an important part of the possible success of each program. Like BA, other programs run over the course of years, not just one summer or academic year. Because of the amount of time spent together, students are able to form lasting friendships and positive relationships with others in the program, both staff and students (Kahn and Bailey 1999; Swanson et al; Gambone and Arebreton 1997). The length of the programs, with returning staff members, can also provide consistency for students in the academic setting, which has been found to strengthen the bonds and trust between students and program staff (Llamas et al 2014). It has also been found that consistency and stronger bonds positively impacts the students involved, measured by different types of achievement such as high school graduation and college attendance rates (Llamas et al 2014; Kahne and Bailey 1999).

In addition to academic support and care, these organizations can also serve as sources of important information and resources for students and their families. Examples include access to community resources like homeless shelters (Kahne and Bailey 1999) or information about college scholarships and campus tours (Swanson et al 1993). Without the ease of access that daily contact with staff provides many students and their families may be less likely to seek assistance when it is necessary and available (Kahne and Bailey 1999). Keeping a student’s family from slipping into long term homelessness

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or food scarcity, or introducing that student to the experience of being on a college campus and familiarizing them with the availability and processes of securing financial aid can make a significant difference at a critical point in that student's life.

Possible Contributions of this Research to Existing Studies

Many of the previous studies on academic support programs occurred in major urban locations, such as in Chicago and San Diego (Kahne and Bailey 1999; Swanson et al 1993; Heath and McLaughlin 1994). Limitations of the findings from these studies include lack of generalizability to low-income students in academic support programs outside of larger cities. My study aims to fill this gap by focusing on a less urban, more affluent location that still serves the low-income student population.

Studies that included the perspectives of students who had been involved in the program, as well as staff members, gave a more complete picture of the programs functionality (Kahne and Bailey 1999; Gambone and Arebreton 1997). This research project replicates that strength, focusing exclusively on these insider perspectives. However, this was not the case in all studies. Some excluded staff, which may have resulted in missing data regarding functions and activities of the organization that may not have been apparent to student participants (Llamas et al 2014; Swanson et al 1993; Heath and McLaughlin 1994).

Possible Theoretical Explanations for Program Outcomes

Educators are concerned with maximizing students' educational experience. Therefore, key questions include: Why do students stay in school and why do they leave, what keeps them in school through the challenging years leading up to high school

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graduation, and what has them aspire toward a college degree? Relevant literature points to the idea that bonds to social institutions affects individuals' behavior (Peguero, Ovink and Li 2015). These bonds may be to family members, peers, religious institutions, schools and so on (Peguero et al 2015). Control theory is used to explain why individuals conform to societal expectations or deviate from them (Pratt, Gau and Franklin 2010).

Key Components of Control/Social Bond Theory

Control Theory, as introduced by Travis Hirschi (1969), focuses on delinquency in youth. Hirschi (1969) concentrated on the individual's connection with society (Adler and Adler 2016). Control Theory, also known as Social Bond Theory in various forms, (Pratt et al 2010) has four central components summarized by Peguero, Ovink, and Li (2015) and based on Hirschi (1969) and Gary G. Wehlage and colleague's (1989) deductions about social bonds. The four central components are key to predicting conformity. The four components are:

- 1) *attachment*, the social and emotional ties with others that embody normative expectations;
- (2) *commitment*, the investment of time, energy, and self in a certain line of activity with deviation from that activity being a rational calculation of the consequences;
- (3) *involvement*, the engrossment in conventional activities, which leaves no time for engagement in behavior that contradicts the institution's goals;
- and (4) *belief* in some legitimate value system within society that the deviant violates. (Peguero et al 2015: 318-319)

These components of social bonds have been shown in other research to be related to educational attainment and drop-out rates (Peguero et al 2015; DeLamater,

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Meyers, and Collett 2014; Wehlage et al 1989). When students have stronger relational attachments to school and individuals associated with academics, such as teachers and afterschool program staff, they are surrounded by people who believe in education as a positive catalyst for change (Skolnik 1990; Wehlage et al 1989). Education is highly valued and viewed as a predictor of future social and economic success (Kozol 1991; Peguero et al 2015). Through contact and forming trusting relationships with those who share this value and expectation of education, students then become obligated to meet the expectations of those they are attached to and tend to develop the same beliefs (Peguero et al 2015; Adler and Adler 2016; Wehlage 1989). This then impacts behaviors such as working toward succeeding in school and attending college.

Limitations of Control/Social Bond Theory

While Control Theory does a sufficient job at explaining conformity and deviance, without placing fault on intrinsic parts of the individual or society (Pratt et al 2015), it is limited by a lack of generalizability across various contexts and identity groups as discussed by Peguero and colleagues (2015). Further exploration of this issue found that social bonds do have an impact on drop out risk for different ethnic/racial groups (Peguero et al 2015). A gap remains in understanding the complexity of these bonds, particularly in relation to Hispanic/Latino, first generation youth. My study aims to fill this gap by delving deeper into the formation of bonds between these students and adults in the academic setting. This was done by exploring the perspectives of both students who had been involved in academic support programming and the adults who are in the roles to create these bonds.

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Identity

Identity work, according to Sveningsson and Alvesson emphasizes “dynamic aspects and on-going struggles around creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the question ‘who am I’ (or ‘who are we’) and what do I (we) stand for?” (2003:1164). Identity includes “the meanings we give to ourselves and announce to others,” and allows us to construe ourselves to others quickly (Schwalbe 2008:83). As stated earlier, Sveningsson and Alvesson give a succinct definition of “identity work” that focuses on an individual’s development of a sense of self and the conflicts that ensue while doing so (2003:1164). It is important to understand that identity work is not a stagnant concept, but “an ongoing cycle” that is intricate and erratic, making it difficult to predict the patterns and outcomes in each individual and/or group (Musson and Duberley 2006:147; Pullen 2005:25). Within identity work there are aspects of creating both the ‘external’ and ‘internal’ identities of an individual’s self (Watson 2008:127).

Group Identity

The groups that one immerses in and/or reference when thinking about self, contribute greatly to the formation of identity. As individuals, we “identify ourselves, but we also identify others and are identified by them in turn,” this exemplifies the sometimes cooperative and sometimes conflictual relationship between the internal and external self (Jenkins 2000:8). Therefore, the creation and maintenance of one’s identity is a complex interaction between the self and others. This idea is further exemplified by Cooley’s theory of the “Looking-Glass Self.” This theory posits that the creation of an individual’s perception of self is dependent on perceived reactions of others based upon

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our interactions with them. Cooley states that one's definition of self includes "definite imagination of how one's self appears in a particular mind" (Cooley 1902:189).

Taking these concepts and applying them back to identity work involves recognizing the varying salience of different parts of one's identity. DeLamater et al. introduce the idea of "The Hierarchy of Identities," which describes how as individuals we organize different aspects of our identities according to the usefulness, importance or relevance of each specific to any situation (2014:133). Many times, the social networks and groups that one interacts with will influence the salience of an identity. Consistent with Cooley's theory of "The Looking-Glass Self," we as individuals employ self-verification strategies. One such strategy is "self-confirming feedback from others," where individuals tend to surround themselves with those "who share our view of self" (DeLamater et al 2014:136). Continuing with these strategies, individuals engage in behavior that presents identity cues and provoke "identity-confirming behavior from others" (DeLamater et al 2014:136). Mowen and Stansfield deliberate on the idea that through identification with categories such as race/ethnicity and class, social identities are created through group characteristics identified within them. As this positive identification with others is recognized, an increased sense of belonging is established (Mowen and Stansfield 2015). Wray and Lamont (2013) take the ideas of race and class further and argue how race and class are entangled structural constraints that further categorize people and leave some at a disadvantage. Specifics of these concepts will be explored in the "Findings and Discussion" chapter.

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Reference Groups and Differential Association

Reference groups and the Theory of Differential Association both focus on the ways in which relations and perceptions of others impacts individual's behavior and beliefs (Richer 1976; Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckenbill 1934). The concept of reference groups has been around since the 1940s and has been developed and changed since its inception (Richer 1976). Critics of the concept cite it being too broad, used too frequently, and in too many varying contexts (Richer 1976). Richer (1976) argues that the concept of reference groups can be organized theoretically and thus continue to be applied in different research settings. It is from Richer's conceptualization of reference groups that I have based my use of the concept for this study.

Reference groups require a "reference other" that influences the individual (Richer 1976; Schmitt 1972). Schmitt defines "reference other" as "any actual or imaginary individual, group, social category, norm or object that influences the individual's covert or overt behavior" (Schmitt 1972:4). Richer posits that the main components of reference groups are that they are cognitive and that they rely on how visible and meaningful the group is for the individual (Richer 1976; Schmitt 1972; Merton 1957; Kelley 1955; Stratton 1968). The cognitive component refers to the idea that the influence of the "reference other" affects the individual through being thought about and therefore the extent of influence can only fully be determined "*from the point of view of the actor*" (Richer 1976: 66). My study attempts to understand the influence of "reference others" such as staff, peers, and family members through the experiences as

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described by key actors in the program, revealing the salience of these “others” per the perspectives of these key actors.

Differential Association Theory relates to reference groups as it focuses on how behavior is learned through relations with others (Adler and Adler 2016). Sutherland and colleagues (1938) argue that individuals learn deviant behavior by watching and accepting the rational of behavior of those that they are the closest to, including family and peer groups (Adler and Alder 2016; Sutherland et al 1938). As discussed earlier, previous studies on academic support programs exhibit that relationships with individuals within the organization are impactful on the students involved (Kahn and Bailey 1991; Llamas et al 2014; Swanson et al 1993; Gabone and Arebreton 1997). For the purposes of my study, I will use the idea that behavior is learned by others to apply to non-deviant and goal oriented behaviors, such as those related to educational attainment.

Social Capital

The idea of social capital is very broad and understood differently throughout the sociological community. One relevant use of social capital comes from Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995): “social capital refers to social relationships from which an individual is potentially able to derive institutional support, particularly support that includes the delivery of knowledge-based resource” (116). While this definition informed my understanding of the concept, the framework that I will be using for social capital was selected because it is well defined and has previously been related to academic support programs. Kahne and Bailey (1999) introduce the concept of social capital using these three social structure components: social trust, social networks, and community norms.

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They build on Coleman's (1988) theoretical model of social capital. Coleman (1988) stresses that social capital is typically a part of the interactions and relations between actors. According to Coleman, social capital comes in three forms, those relating to obligations, expectations and trustworthiness, those relating to information channels, and those relating to norms and effective sanctions (Coleman 1988). Kahne and Bailey (1999) define their three different components of social capital (social trust, social networks, and community norms) based off those introduced by Coleman.

Through the three different forms of social capital presented by Kahne and Bailey, a clearer operationalization of the concept emerges. Following these different forms, three ways of measuring social capital emerge. Social trust is based off the obligations and expectations demonstrated by community members (Kahne and Bailey 1999). Social networks refer to the amount to which these networks may facilitate the access to information available to individuals to aid in achieving their goals (Kahne and Bailey 1999). Community norms look at how different behaviors may be reinforced, rewarded, or sanctioned by community members (Kahne and Bailey 1999). Community norms, more broadly speaking, can be understood as the expectations of and normal behaviors for members within a community. These norms could be things such as completing high school, getting a summer job, or participating in sports as a child (Kahne and Bailey 1999).

Critiques of Social Capital

While social capital is clearly a valuable concept for the purposes of this study, it is important to recognize the limitations of the theory. Critics of social capital argue that

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the concept is ambiguous and ill-defined, leading it to be used in many ways throughout social science research (Durlauf 1999; Tzanakis 2013; Haynes 2009). The idea of social capital is used across many different disciplines, leading to a plethora of different definitions and uses of the concept (Tzanakis 2013). For the purposes of this study I have focused directly on the version of social capital as defined by Coleman (1987) and further developed by Kahn and Bailey (1999). By focusing on one version of the theory, I avoid the potential limitations introduced by the lack of a consistent definition of the unified concept.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

“More Than Money”: Opportunity, Information, and Support

The types of experiences and activities provided for the students in BA are chosen by staff with certain goals in mind. For example, these goals could offer students opportunities to engage in activities that students may not normally get within their family and community setting. Outdoor experiences such as snowboarding or backpacking, career exposure gained from shadowing lawyers and university tours may provide the opportunity to broaden certain lifestyle expectations and perhaps preferences. The voice of Kathy, a program alum, is an example of such opportunities:

Like I even learned how to snowboard with them. I wouldn't have done that with my parents because they don't really know anything about like, oh let's go watch a football game, or anything like that. I would have never had those experiences if it wasn't for [BA].

Many past participants discussed how they would not have partaken in such activities without the organization. A long time veteran female staff member, Jen, echoes responses by students and other staff noting the importance of these experiences as they contribute to the three main factors she believes make the program work. The first two factors she believes are building relationships and having “a positive, structured, consistent environment.” Jen explains the third factor as follows:

And then the third thing is to expose them to everything and anything. And that's what middle class America gets. It's like I got to go to things and see trips and see things and I've got people to take me seriously or like give me opportunities. And that is what [Bold Achievers] strives to provide for the [Achievers]. So just exposure.

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Throughout the interviews with both staff and alumni, they noted the opportunity to gain new experience and possible confidence with new academic, social and recreational experiences. For example, Kathy explained:

...I would not be in college if it weren't for them. They gave me a lot of new opportunities. They gave me so much help with building my resume, getting my experiences with internships, and just so much more than just money, honestly.

That students see BA as a resource not simply for educational support, but for everyday living support is key and related to other findings. Resources that were most frequently mentioned include the following: aiding parents and students in assimilating to the United States education system, college application support, academic tutoring and prepping, and financial aid. The program provides students with a scholarship towards post-secondary education, as well as aids them in the process of applying for financial aid. One alumni, Rob, whose family moved here from Mexico when he was young, discussed the role that BA played in his experience of the United States education system:

Prior to [Bold Achievers] I wouldn't say I didn't like school, but it was very confusing. It was a big struggle and I didn't know about what to expect or how to- how school works really. And neither did my parents. So, we were completely blind to the American education system. After, it was fun. [Bold Achievers] helped with the exposure to- to American schooling. Simple things like how you buy lunch in the cafeteria, we didn't know. And [Bold Achievers] played a role that closed the gap.

The importance of exposure to varied experiences and access to resources is consistent with key ideas of social capital. Kahne and Bailey (1999) discuss how social

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networks facilitate access to information that can be used to aid in goal achievement. As described by alumni Jack:

So, for me being a part of [Achievers] definitely made me very focused on what I want to do. And that is politics or law. And that's really because like it started like I guess in high school when Barack Obama got elected and the Dream Act in [my state]. There was like a lot of politics. And like every year [Achievers] always would go to the MLK day march [downtown] and that was just a huge like thing to open my mind and open my political viewings. And it really just made me really just made me really just invested in politics and that's where I really wanted to go. And luckily for me I got into [college], studied political science. And like it just kind of made me more and more like wanting to get into politics or study politics ya know?

BA plays the role of facilitating access to information, be it through less academic venues such as learning to snowboard or more specifically through helping students and families navigate through the school system and apply to college. These less academic activities can be seen through the component of social bond theory of involvement. By participating in such activities, the students are spending more time in program sanctioned activities leaving less time for behavior that contradicts the organizations goals (Peguero et al 2015). Alumni Jack described how the idea of “incentives” worked for his Achiever class:

Like you would set your own goals, something that you would accomplish. And if you accomplished these goals you would go on incentive trips. For example, if your GPA was a 3.0 you would be able to go to like Six Flags... or like cool things like indoor skydiving.

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It is important to note that according to most staff members and solidified by comments made by the past students, choice of engagement in the varied opportunities lies with the students and with their families. While homework time and academic support are more mandatory aspects of the program, participating in activities such as sports teams and other field trips, like snowboarding, tend to be optional or offered as incentives to achieve goals and encourage positive behavior in programming. The staff verbally and nonverbally set boundaries and make clear their intention to support the students and families in achieving self-declared goals, accessing necessary or requested resources, and aiding them through the process of academics in the United States. They are clear the students must do the work, rather than any staff.

Family involvement at BA occurs through two different avenues: monthly parent meetings and informal communication with program staff throughout a typical week. Staff, parents, or students themselves can initiate formal and informal conversations, which are eased by the relationships formed between families and the organization. One newer program director, Chelsea, explained the role of the organization in relationship to participants' interests and needs:

We are setting up a whole support system for them. We are getting to know [Achiever] families. And through the families we can figure out what the priorities are for the [Achiever], and what the priorities of the parents are for their child... We need to remember the limit of what we can know as outsiders. Alumni, [Achievers], and their families know best about what we need to know. We need to continue going to families to know how to support them and their students.

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Fostering the skills necessary for successfully navigating United States society and institutions is the main goal of BA for their students and their students' families. Many staff members discussed the idea that the students and families already have many strengths and resources, it is not the job of the organization to provide these things for them, but to help them figure out how to access such resources. One staff member, Candace, who works in the college department of BA described this idea:

[Achievers] already have everything they need inside. Inside of themselves, inside of their families. And it isn't our job to give them anything. It is our job to empower them to access the resources they already have... I think I'm a part of something that doesn't just aim to put a Band-Aid on a problem, but really empowers families and communities to find the strength that they have and really centers family and communities in the process.

Alumni Kathy, when asked how the organization affected her sense of self and what she was capable of, described the following:

...It's like they help you get internships right. So, it's like they get you ready to do interviews. And that's a huge thing ya know, 'cause when you are all by yourself you do interviews by yourself and it's like, it gives you confidence in, I don't know, being able to do things on your own, once you already did it with like a group of people, or when you practice a ton.

An interesting connection, that needs further research, is the idea of helping families and students assimilate to the United States education system. While these skills and experience do indeed impact future academic achievement and employment, this occurs within a system of "social reproduction" of classed and raced behaviors and values. While it is beyond the scope of this project, future studies should investigate how

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the ideals to which assimilation occurs are in line with the ideas of the White, middle and upper class and how this impacts the “whitewashing” of culture.

Group Affiliation and Identity

Individuals identity formation is greatly based in interactions with others (Jenkins 2000; Cooley 1902; DeLamater et al 2014; Mowen and Stansfield 2015). This idea was confirmed through the interviews conducted in this study. The main themes that emerged related to identity centered around group identity in relation to reference groups and ethnic identity. Group identity was based on their involvement in BA as well as to each other more directly. Students and staff alike discussed the strong in-group, membership identity that students developed as a part of the organization. One alumni talked about how he and his peers viewed BA as their “own little club.” Staff described their observations of students identifying with the program by talking about things like “[Achiever] pride” and hearing students talk about their “[Achiever] family.” One previous program director, Jen, related what she felt was one of the best parts of her involvement in the organization saying, “The family we created. I mean our [Martinez Achiever Nation], as we called it. We had our own lingo, we had our own games, we had our own jokes.” This exemplifies how strongly students bond to the organization.

Strong affiliation to the organization typically comes from identification with peers. As Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckenbill (1938) described in their theory of Differential Association, the context of an individual’s social interactions form their associations. Simply put, individuals form affiliations with those that they spend most

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their time with. Staff member Martha, exemplified this affiliation by saying of her students:

They are going through a lot of change right now, they are at a totally new high school, but I think that because they still have that [Achiever] community, they feel like they can get a break from that. From like the overwhelming newness of everything. They do totally just like flock together. They are totally bonded.

As a part of BA, these students spend upwards of ten years together. They begin to rely on each other and older students in the organization as their reference group, shaping their norms, values, behaviors, presentation of self, aspirations, and identity. Students and staff see the transmission of expectations, norms, and values amongst the students. This exemplifies conformity and avoidance of deviance amongst the students in the organization, per Hirschi's (1969) Control Theory. One recent program graduate, Johnny, summarized this nicely when he discussed his motivations for pursuing higher education:

And then there was also like the students at [Bold Achievers] also that were sharing the same experiences as me. They also helped. We kind of helped each other hold- kind of keep our head right where it needed to be for us to go to college.

Similarly, each of the alumni interviewed discussed how they continued to be involved with the organization once graduated from high school. They took on roles working or volunteering with younger Achiever classes, as well as students closer to their age. Johnny also discussed his experience coming back to help younger students in the program:

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I also got to do the pre-collegiate program as a peer counselor [at local university]. And that was, you know hanging out with those kids, and seeing them in the position that I was in a few years ago, was just, one of the coolest experiences that I have ever experienced... They still like- uh- contact me whenever they have a question about college, where they want to go, when they would apply, when they should get their FAFSA done. I've had a few of them just like keep constantly asking me questions... So I think that was probably one of the really special things that I got to see with the students there.

A staff member who works in the main office of BA, Candace, described this being one of the largest impacts she has seen in the organization:

The thing that come to mind first and foremost is generations of [Achievers] coming back to support other [Achievers]... I've seen a lot of them come back to volunteer with younger [Achiever] classes and even mentoring younger high school students who are just a few years behind them and saying, 'Look, I'm doing this, you can too.' And I think it is more than what any of us as staff or AmeriCorps members could do to encourage our students or to support them. But being someone who is in their family, maybe even like their cousin. But really a part of their community come back and show them exactly how it's done and show them the ropes, that is the coolest thing I have seen.

This highlights the core of reference groups, that individuals will compare themselves and emulate others (Richer 1976). Within BA these reference groups are formed through the attachment to members of the organization, including staff and alumni (Peguero et al 2015), and the aspect of social capital relating to social trust with others (Kahne and Bailey 2015). This can come through role models within the organization as well. Success of role models for positively impacting academic

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performance in minority students has been shown to be partially dependent on perception of the role model as a member of the in-group (Marx, Ko, and Friedman 2009). This in-group membership can be related to race as well as actual group membership (Marx et al 2009). Candace, talked about her experience as a women of color working with these students:

But sometimes students will say like, ‘You’re the first person of color I have ever met that has a PhD.’ Or ‘You’re the first person of color that I’ve really seen have success in the academic realm’...I think like coming from a similar background that [Achievers] come from has really been helpful to form those connections. And there is a certain level of authenticity or trust [Achievers] put in me because they, maybe wrongfully so, assume the things they think I have experienced.

This quote exemplifies both the attachment component of Social Bond Theory and the social trust aspect of social capital (Peguero et al 2015; Kahne and Bailey 1999). By describing how the students in the organization formed trust in her through assumed shared experiences, her career path and success in academics creates possible new expectations and goals for these students in academics.

Students in Bold Achievers look to each other as role models and points of influence on their behavioral expectations, norms, and values. Although not defined explicitly by participants, shared racial/ethnic identity seemed to be a large factor on group identity within Bold Achievers. This was exemplified by students who fit with the program majority as Latino/Hispanic, and by those who did not fit that identity group. One self-identified Hispanic student, Kathy, brought this up through describing a shared

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Latina experience as well as the intersectionality of class and migration status, without ever discussing this intersectionality directly:

Honestly, I think it's like knowing that they had the same experiences as you...I think that you get along with the people who are more similar to you, who have a similar social class, or a similar experience as you and like your parents. I think that was one of the same things. That most of the students were just like me. It was like, oh they understand what my parents went through, they understood what I went through. You feel like you belong there because it's like everyone else just knows you without even asking who you really are.

Bold Achievers offers most students a place to be around students of the same race and ethnicity. This finding is consistent with Salerno and Reynolds (2016) study which found “that Latino/a high school students benefit from school ethnic enclaves.” These “enclaves” are spaces where they can gain and give support to students of the same ethnicity (Salerno and Reynolds 2016). This finding was consistent among the Hispanic/Latino/a students. This space was not provided for a past student, Jack, who identified differently than his majority Hispanic/Latino/a Achiever peers.

Most [local] schools and districts with [BA] members, their populations are primarily Hispanic and Latino. And I was kind of the black sheep being the only Asian student, so I stood out a lot. And I guess in that aspect I was kind of like the “other” ... I was still in the same age range, I grew up with these kids and I have a lot of friends that I still kind of talk to occasionally.

Interestingly, although this student did not experience the co-ethnic enclave with his peers in BA, he was able to gain full benefits of the program. This may have been

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because his group identity became more linked to the organization itself, via staff and other adults, than to his peers. This is not to say that he did not form friendships, he stated that he did, but in contrast to the ways that other participants described sharing experiences with their BA peers.

Other benefits of co-ethnic enclaves for Latino/a students, as reported by Salerno and Reynolds (2016) include the development of a “positive ethnic self-image” and connecting their ethnicity and heritage with success. Salerno and Reynolds (2016) found this to be particularly true for Latino/a students. In contrast, Jack, who did not share the majority ethnicity, discussed how being surrounded by Latino/a students, in a majority white area (being a double minority), impacted him:

[This area] for example is not very diverse, but I was surrounded by people who were proud of their heritage and truly cared about their diversity and that really kind of helps me look back through my own history and my own identity and kind of helps shape that. Because I am really proud to be an American, but I’m also very proud to be an Asian-American...

It seems that Jack was able to benefit from the example set by his fellow Achievers and apply this to his own situation. Future studies should examine the experience of students in academic support programs paying attention to ethnic differences that may exist in the experience and effectiveness of the organization for all participants.

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Relationships

The theme of relationship came up frequently in all interviews. Important relationships were seen between students, between students and staff, and among staff members. Trust and support were key ingredients in these relationships discussed by students and staff alike. Students and staff mentioned the time involved in the creation of trusting and supportive relationships. Although staff almost universally mentioned the longevity and consistency of the relationships between students and specific staff members, students alluded to this idea as well.

The program is specifically designed to sustain these lasting bonds. Students will typically have the same program director who works closely with them and their family for the entirety of their participation. The length and consistency of the program is an integral piece of BA's model. Indeed, participants reflected the importance of this piece as well. One male staff member, Westin, shared a story about having a group of middle school girls in his program approach him to ask about how to navigate menstruation while playing on a sports team with a male coach:

I'm like just tell the coach it's not a big deal. And she is like "well I can't tell a guy about that kind of stuff" and I was like, "well you were telling me" and they were like "oh no we've known you since second grade, you don't matter!" and then we went into a ten-minute discussion on tampons and pads and what they use. So it is just kind of interesting to think that I've been with the kids, the girls long enough, that I don't know how they see me at all, but they, they have enough confidence in me and trust in me and not worried about me that they can talk about just about anything. I think it goes across with most of the [Achievers].

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This anecdotal quote shows how students form greater trust in staff members over time, such that they are comfortable seeking them out as resources for sensitive and personal matters. This finding is consistent with previous research on similar organizations to BA, which found that positive, trusting relationships with adults were beneficial to the students experience within the program and within academics (Llamas et al 2014; Kahne and Bailey 1999).

The relationships formed between students and staff members can develop at a very personal level with students referring to their program directors as “a father figure,” “Padrino” (Godfather in Spanish) or a “surrogate mother.” Examples were also given of students referring to other staff member by using familial terms such as “mom,” “abuelita” (term of endearment for Grandmother in Spanish), “tia” (aunt in Spanish), or “dad.” These close relationships should be predictive of conforming behavior according to Social Bond Theory (Peguero et al 2015; Hirschi 1969). According to Coleman’s (1988) and Kahne and Bailey’s (1999) take on social capital theory these bonds can influence the development in students of a sense of obligation and desire to please the important adults by meeting their expectations both socially and academically. The trust that is formed over time in these relationships is reflected in the obligations and attachment to important others, with expectations from the staff of the students and visa-versa. Jack gave this example in reference to his program director:

She was basically like a surrogate mother. Like when my parents were having a divorce, when it was really tough, she would always be there. She would give a lot of support, whether it be academic or emotional support, during hard times. And she was just always

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there. Like she really cared about us and she stayed with us for almost more than 10 years.

Trusting relationships between students and staff, allows for access to supportive adults outside of the home and within the school setting. These trusted adults can use their roles and age, class, ethnic, and/or status privilege to advocate for the student's needs and help them gain access to resources. More simply put, this is an Achiever's knowing that they have someone in their corner with access to resources, who is willing to help them. Alumni Johnny talked about how his program director was there for him:

And he is kind of like, pretty much, like a father figure to me. He kind of- he's kind of like my person who is always looking over me. He never let me slack off in school. He always made sure I was on top of things. At points, I was like- like didn't really think much of school and I had a very long talk with him [laughs] and I got my stuff together after that.

This was described by alumni Achievers and staff alike. For example, when Kathy, an alumni was asked what was one of the best parts of being in BA, she answered, "I learned many things with them too. I mean with their help, I got a lot of help with school, with life in general. Just very helpful to know someone is there wanting to help, ya know?" This exemplifies how students perceive the support given to them through the organization. Similarly, Johnny, another recent graduate talked about the reliability of the supportive relationships as an important aspect of his time in BA:

Just the fact that when they told us that we would always have someone there to support us and help us through rough times or, or whenever we needed them They really did stick

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their word and were there when I needed them or when others did need them. I think that's the thing that stuck with me the most.

This commitment seen by the students was echoed by staff members with comments such as “we won't give up on them.” One program director, Westin, discussed how his role allowed him to form these relationships and be more supportive for students, in a way that teachers could not, due to the longevity of the program: “If a kid is a pain in the butt for nine months, that's not much to me because I have ten years with them.”

This confidence and trust that students form over time with these adults, outside of the family proved to be important on a more serious level as well. For example, one past program director, Jen, shared a story about a teacher calling her over to talk to one of her Achiever students during the school day. The girl had been crying and after going to sit alone with the program director, told her “My dad beats me and you are the only one I can tell.” This student had enough trust in the staff member to tell her about the problem she was having, that she did not feel she could share with anyone else. The program director was then able to help this student and get her the support that she needed.

The combination of attachment, expectation, obligation, and support has been shown by previous research to lead to the formation of belief in the value system as presented by the organizations (Peguero et al 2015; Hirschi 1969). Alumni Rob described this through his experience with BA:

... We would have more likely than not, not been as positive. We would have gotten in more trouble, trouble with the law, trouble with the school, and because we wouldn't have had [BA], which was... I guess an analogy of when you go bowling you put up the little gutter rails up, that was [BA]. Where we were going into the gutter but they pushed

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us out of the gutter and kept us somewhat in a straight line. So yeah- we would have bonded and done stuff as a little club, but we would have ended up closer to the gutter than not. So [BA] helped us align a little better.

This value system focuses on education as a key to success. As described by a long-time staff member, while the program started as more of a drop-out prevention program, they are now focusing more on getting students “to and through college.” This focus on academic achievement has appeared in the students as well. A BA graduate, Johnny, who is currently enrolled in university, talked about how his perspective of who could go to college changed through the program. Johnny talked about how he saw college as an option for those who were “really smart and [had] really good grades and a lot of money,” but then realized that he “was very much capable of going to college” and “getting a good career...being able to support his family later in life.” This shows how the beliefs of the organization that anyone can go to college and that education is a key factor in future success has been adopted by the students over the many years they have spent in the program. While many students reported that their parents told them that going to college was a path to success, BA gave the extra incentive of obligation to adults outside of the family, as well as the financial ability to attend college through the scholarship given to those who pursue post-secondary education. This parental support and expectation may be a key component to students making it to college as the family is a primary reference group and source of identity. There is a possible ripple effect created by seeing the expectations of BA echoed within the family, strengthening and internalizing the obligation, belief, and expectations for the student to succeed

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academically. Alumni Jack talked about the ways that both his family and BA influenced his decision to go to college:

So, for me college was always a goal in mind. But my parents were very very supportive and they wanted me to go to college, they were first generation immigrants. They were refugees from [armed conflict in South East Asia]. And they basically said that to be successful in America you need to get a higher education, you need to go to a college and that is how you get a good job. And so again, both the family support and the [Achiever] support really pushed me into kind of that mindset that I need to graduate, I need to get into a good school, I need to get a good education.

The combination of family expectation and BA support, may lead to stronger identity and goal formation for the student involved, particularly in relation to their academic achievement goals. Having the values being taught by BA echoed by the family strengthens the belief in education, as per social bond theory suggests about belief formation (Peguero et al 2015; Hirschi 1969).

CONCLUSION

Key Findings

Understanding the experience of students and staff in BA can provide possible insight into how academic support programs such as Bold Achievers impact the students involved. This understanding is important for the development and refinement of these programs. While academic support programs aim to mediate some of the issues of education inequality such as performance gaps through structured offerings like homework time and tutoring, what students mentioned most often were the time spent and relationships formed through their participation. These may be the foundations of the ways that the organization impacts the experience of the students involved. These features provide an increase in opportunity through various activities, experiences and access to resources. The students also have the opportunity to form a group identity, based in conforming and succeeding roles and look to peers and staff to model those roles. However, most key to students' experience in the program, as mentioned time and time again in interviews, were the trusting and supportive relationships fostered over time. The long-term investment of staff and the organization in each student appears to be key to the students' participation and buy in. Future and current programs should make sure that each of these features is maintained through their programming model, as these are the factors revealed by key participants to be most important.

Limitations of Current Study

Design Limitations

Limitations of this study include the short amount of time available to complete it, having a small and biased sample, and the inability to make claims on causation. Many limitations arose due to the nature of a senior honors thesis being conducted over less than a year. A larger sample size may have been possible if there had been more time to recruit participants and collect data. Additionally, my sample was biased towards those who had had positive experiences with the organization. This may be because recruitment techniques did not reach those who had negative experiences and thus lost contact with the organization. I only received interest from alumni who had pursued higher education, leaving many questions and gaps as to the experience of program participants who did not go on to college.

It is impossible to make any casual claims due to the research design. There was no comparison group and therefore no way to speak to causation or explanatory findings of what mechanisms are at play within the organization. This was a purely exploratory study, but there were patterns discovered that reiterated some previous studies.

Analysis Limitations

As a new researcher, there was room for possible issues with reliability and consistency in my data analysis, interpretation, and application of theoretical concepts. It is possible that I have overlooked key patterns in the data and incorrectly interpreted the meaning of participants' statements. Although I would like to believe that this is not the case, it is important to recognize the possibility of such in my research. Due to the nuanced nature of theories on social bonds and social capital as produced through other

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qualitative studies, application of theory may not be correct. Indicators of social bond are up to the interpretation and conceptualization of the researcher, and thus may not be consistent throughout studies utilizing this theory or even in studies on similar organizations. Although social capital may be a useful way to conceptualize the patterns revealed through my interviews, this possibility of inconsistency in interpretation is also the case for social capital, which is already large and ill-defined as a unified theory. With a more thorough emersion in the literature, other connections and explanations may have arisen.

Future Directions

Future studies should address the methodological issues of this study. These limitations include having a small and biased sample, a short amount of time to conduct the study, and having no comparison group. The sample used for this study was biased towards reporting the success of the program as all alumni had pursued higher education and most staff members were bought into the ideals and values of the program. This is not to claim that the program is not successful in its mission, but to state that a more inclusive and generalizable understanding of the programs impacts could be discovered by including the perspectives of students who did not pursue higher education and why they did not. Given more time, future studies should be able to compile a larger sample size that is more representative of all involved in such programs.

If further questions were to be asked in similar interviews, I would encourage asking more about how the relationships with peers and staff influenced the student's expectations and sense of self. For example, "How did your peers in Bold Achievers

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influence your decision to either pursue or not pursue higher education? Do you feel like their choices on the matter impacted yours?” Future studies should also look deeper into the development of the relationships and trust between students and staff members.

Questions to staff could include asking “How do you develop trust with your students?”

Another topic to be considered for future research could be a critique of social reproduction theory and the education system. It would be interesting to investigate how the United States education system seems to be set up in a way that expects assimilation to “American” ideals, so in a sense how do our schools “white wash” students from varying backgrounds? How does this assimilation harm or rid of the rich culture brought into our schools by students from all different backgrounds?

There are many interesting topics that arose through this study and should be studied further in future research. Identity work is an important topic to consider when examining low income and minority students. The conflicts between one’s expectations of themselves, the perceived expectations of others, and the actual expectations of others make the task of forming and maintaining one’s identity especially difficult. This study only assessed the perceived expectations of others within participant’s more intimate groups and did not include the effects of the greater political climate and attitudes towards different minority groups. Future studies could look at how political rhetoric towards different groups of people, impacts students and the role that academic support programs such as Bold Achievers play in mediating this interaction.

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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Script

PREFACE FOR LEAD RECRUITER

Hello [Bold Achiever] Alums!

My name is [Name here] and I am the [Insert role here]. We have a mentor who is doing her senior honors thesis and wants to know more about the experiences of participants of our program. If you are willing to share your experiences with her or have any questions about her research and want to find out more, please give her a call or send her an email from the contact information below.

Johanna (Joey) Heilman
Email: johanna.heilman@colorado.edu
Cell: (720) 224-1721

Thank you for considering this opportunity!
[Name Here]

SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAIL

My name is Johanna Heilman and I am a senior honors student at the University of Colorado Boulder. I am conducting a research about the experiences of those involved with [Bold Achievers] and the impact on experiences of formal education and educational aspirations. I am emailing to ask if you would like to take about 30 minutes to one hour to complete an interview with me about your experience with [Bold Achievers] for my research project. Participation is completely voluntary and your answers will be confidential. I will be reporting results in aggregate form and using quotations that will not allow for identification of specific participants.

If you are interested or have any questions, you can send me an email at johanna.heilman@colorado.edu or give me a call at (720) 224-1721

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or my research advisor, Dr. Glenda Walden.

Dr. Glenda Walden
Glenda.Walden@colorado.edu
(303) 492-5217
Department of Sociology, University of Colorado, 165 Ketchum Hall,
UCB 327, Boulder, CO 80309, USA

Thank you for your time.

Johanna Heilman

APPENDIX B: Consent Form

Title of research study: “Educational Aspirations and Experiences in an Academic Support Program for Low-Income Youth” [Renamed]

Investigator: *Johanna Heilman*

Why am I being invited to take part in a research study?

We invite you to take part in a research study because of your previous or current participation with [Bold Achievers].

What should I know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at Johanna.Heilman@colorado.edu or Glenda.Walden@colorado.edu. This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”). You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

This study is looking at the experiences of participants in [Bold Achievers]. We are looking discover insight from core participants and to investigate the impacts of participating in the [Bold Achievers (BA)] have on the experience of formal education and educational aspirations on the students involved. I am looking to better include the perspective of participants in the understanding and analysis of the success of such programs, ideally applying my findings to the improvement of programs like [BA]. The broad goal is to positively make a difference in fighting education inequality.

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How long will the research last?

We expect that you will be in the interview for 30min- 1 hour, depending on how much you feel like sharing.

How many people will be studied?

We expect about 30 people will be in this research study.

What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

I would like to talk with you, and tape record our conversations, about your time in [BA]. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes to an hour, depending on how much you'd like to discuss. I will be happy to interview you at a private location that is convenient for you.

I want you to be informed that I am a mandatory reporter and must report current and potential harm to the self or others, specifically with regards to child abuse.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are not required to participate.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

The only potential risk to you by participating in this study is discomfort when discussing past experiences that may not be favorable.

If you do experience any discomfort, the following are resources available to you:

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Community Resources:

Mental Health Partners:	To Request Services (8 AM - 6 PM) (303) 443-8500	Rape Crisis Hotline (24 HR) (303) 443-7300	Emergency Psychiatric Service Crisis (24 HR) 1 (844) 493-TALK (8255)
For CU Students:	Wardenburg Student Health Center (303) 492-5101	Wardenburg Counseling and Psychiatric Services (CAPS) (24HR) (303) 492-5654	CAPS (24HR) (303) 492-6766
	Office of Victims Assistance (303) 492-8855	Judicial Affairs (303) 492-5550	Campus Ministries (303) 443-8383
	Women's Resource Center (303) 492-5713	LGBT Resource Center (303) 492-1377	

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this organization.

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

_____ Signature of subject	_____ Date
_____ Printed name of subject	
_____ Signature of person obtaining consent	_____ Date
_____ Printed name of person obtaining consent	<div>October 6, 2016</div> IRB Approval Date

October 6, 2016

IRB Approval Date
IRB Document Revision Date: April 8, 2013
HRP-502: TEMPLATE – Consent Document v2

APPENDIX C: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule:

Demographics:

1. Interview #: _____
2. Gender: _____
3. Age: _____
4. Level of Education: _____
5. Region or country in which s/he grew up: _____
6. Religious Participation growing up and currently: _____
7. Own and Parents Social Class: _____
8. Ethnic Identity: _____

This interview asks you to share your experience with [Bold Achievers]. You do not need to reveal any information that you do not wish. Everything you say will be held in strictest confidence. I do need to share with you that I am a mandatory reporter, so if I hear about any current abuse or harm to yourself or others, particularly children, I am obligated by law to report it.

Questions for past participants:

1. How long ago did you participate in [BA] and for how long?
2. Overall, what did you think of your experience? (Probe for more details here)
3. What is the most vivid memory you have of this time? (Probe for more details here)
4. What was the best thing about your time in [BA]?
5. What do you think was the most important thing about your time in [BA] that has stuck with you to this day? Why?
6. Who were some of the most important people from that time?
 - a. What was so special about them?
 - b. Why were they so important to you?
 - c. Are you still in contact with them?
7. Who were some of your favorite people from that time?
 - a. What was so special about them?
 - b. Why were they so important to you?
 - c. Are you still in contact with them?
8. Who did you hang out with in the program? How about outside the program? Do you still hang out with them?
9. Do you remember what you thought about school before you were a part of [BA]?
10. Did you enjoy school more, less, or about the same while in [BA]? After [BA]?
11. Did you get more out of school during and/or after being a part of [BA]?
12. Did you see school differently in any ways?
13. Did you see yourself differently especially around school or future education? Or what you felt you were able to do in school or in a career or in life in general?

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14. Do you feel like your experiences in [BA] affected how you felt/still feel about fitting in or being a part of a larger community? In other words, do you feel like participating in [BA] gave you a sense of belonging? (Probe for more detail here)
15. If pursued higher education:
 - a. Do you feel like you would have done this if you hadn't been a part of [BA]?
 - b. What motivated or encouraged you to stay in school and continue your education? (Probe for more detail here)
16. If they did not pursue higher education:
 - a. Do you ever think about going back to school of any kind?
 - b. Why or why not?
17. If you were running [BA], would you change anything about it?
18. In your opinion, based on your experiences, what do the people running [BA] need to know?

Questions for employees and volunteers:

1. How long ago did you participate in [BA] and for how long?
2. What was/is your role with [BA]?
3. Overall, what do you think of your experience? (Probe for more details here)
4. What is the most vivid memory you have of this time? (Probe for more details here)
5. What was the best thing about your time in [BA]?
6. What do you think was the most important thing about your time in [BA] that has stuck with you to this day? Why?
7. What was the biggest impact you saw [BA] have on the students involved?
8. Do you feel like connections you made with students made an impact on their lives? (Probe for more details here)
 - a. What do you think was the reason for this impact?
9. Do you think that [BA] gave the students a sense of belonging? Why? (Probe for more details here)
10. If you were running [BA], would you change anything about it?
11. In your opinion, based on your experiences, what do the people running [BA] need to know?