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“We All Fly Together, We All Fall Together”: A Fourth Generation Evaluation of the Experiences of Students of Color in a Strengths-Based Postsecondary Access Program

Abstract

One of the most persistent barriers within the education system preventing students of color from accessing and persisting in higher education is the deficit lens that the education system uses to judge college-worthy students. To combat this deficit lens, strengths-based programming has shown promise in validating the strengths and students bring to their postsecondary journey. This fourth-generation program evaluation amplifies the experiences of students of color within a strength-based postsecondary access program in Greater Boston, Massachusetts. Through interviews and focus groups, students, and alums of color in the Cornerstone program shared the experience that was most meaningful to them, and discussed their postsecondary journeys both with Cornerstone, and after graduation. Findings that emerged from the participants' discussions include a focus on programming that provides opportunity for connection and collective achievement and finding a sense of family and safety at Cornerstone. Students also highlighted the alums and staff of the program were mentors and models for their future. Additionally, participants highlighted Cornerstone's postsecondary programming as individualized, which was both a strength and challenge for the program, transitioning to isolation and a lack of safety on their college campuses. Recommendations include embracing the sense of family participants' highlight and finding opportunities to make postsecondary programming collective in its focus.

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“We All Fly Together, We All Fall Together”: A Fourth Generation Evaluation of the
Experiences of Students of Color in a Strengths-Based Postsecondary Access Program

A Dissertation in Practice

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Allyson Gunn

June 2023

Advisor: Dr. Christine A. Nelson, Ph.D.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Ela's¹ Story: A Cornerstone Alumna Leading Despite Challenges

Ela is a first-generation college student, the daughter of immigrant parents from Panama, and an immersed student leader at her predominantly white higher education institution in central Massachusetts. In 2011, Ela started a five-year, year-round leadership development and postsecondary support program called Cornerstone. Throughout her five years in the Cornerstone program, Ela learned about leadership, community impact, and postsecondary and career access. In the spring of 2021, I sat across a zoom screen from Ela, listening to her share her memories of the Cornerstone program, her challenges and triumphs at Central University, her college, and how she is making meaning and connection from all of these experiences. Ela agreed to participate in a qualitative program evaluation for Cornerstone, which aimed to explore the experiences of students of color in the program. Ela quickly highlights how Cornerstone supported her strengths and sense of self as she journeyed through the program. She carried that understanding with her to Central University. Ela spent the last eight to ten months of her college career navigating a global pandemic and a resurgence of protests against systemic racism and police brutality. She used that time to focus her leadership on sharing her truth as an Afro-Latina woman on a predominantly white college campus.

¹ **Please note:** All names of participants, students, staff, programs, and locations have been changed to support confidentiality within the dissertation.

She often felt that Central University stifled and marginalized her voice and identity. Despite that, she had been a vocal and passionate leader on her campus during the 2020-2021 academic year. She created programming that centered the voices of students of color at her predominantly white institution. She met with the administration to demand change. She started a podcast highlighting her experiences as an Afro-Latina at a predominantly white institution (PWI). We talked specifically about how Cornerstone was a space where she used her skills in leadership, built a greater understanding of her sense of self, and felt supported and connected. Her time there supported her desire to impact change on her college campus.

“And I think that Cornerstone taught me that there is value in my truth even if that's not... even if that's not truth that everyone else is aware of... And I think Cornerstone definitely taught me that. Yeah, you see, like at Cornerstone I never felt like a minority, ever. I never felt like I was spoken down to as a minority. Whether that be like, even if it's my age, my gender identity - never. Never felt like I was being talked down to.” (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Throughout our conversation, I heard two different versions of Ela's self-understanding. There is who she is and whom she believes the Cornerstone program sees her as, and then there is the narrative she fights against at Central University. She battled against the labels and stereotypes Central University placed on her, and she held tight to how she was seen and validated at the Cornerstone program. Ela's story is the story of many Cornerstone program participants; it is the story I had come to understand over my time working to support their postsecondary plans.

I spent almost a decade of my career as the Director of the Cornerstone program and later as the Director of Program Strategy and Innovation at Cornerstone's overarching organization, Pathways, MA. The Cornerstone program is prominent in my heart, primarily because of the amazing students I built relationships with, learned from, and watched grow there. I am still in touch with many of the first graduates of the Cornerstone program over 12 years after they started college. Because of this strong connection to the community and the belief that Cornerstone was creating powerful experiences for its students, I returned to Cornerstone as a focus for this dissertation in practice. Fortunately, as I was developing this evaluation, Pathways, MA was examining its practices and policies to learn how its organization can move toward a more antiracist approach in its programming, including within the Cornerstone program.

Stories like Ela's are what drove me to depart the Cornerstone program and seek out my doctorate in higher education in the first place. Moreover, after steeping my understanding of higher education theory and practice for three years, Ela's story and my understanding brought me full circle, right back to the Cornerstone program, to complete a program evaluation on their work. I wanted to explore how the Cornerstone program had created space and nurtured opportunities for students of color. I also wanted to provide space for students and alums like Ela to share where the Cornerstone program had not met their needs or expectations or how it needed to continue improving to serve its participants better.

Conceptual Flow: Centering on Cornerstone Students of Color

When I decided to embark on this evaluation journey with the Cornerstone program, I knew that if I was going to do the students and alums of color from the Cornerstone

program justice, I had to create a conceptual flow that would allow for students and alums of the program to remain centered throughout the evaluation process. I wanted the data and knowledge to emerge from the process as a co-creation between myself as the evaluator and the students and alums of the Cornerstone program participating in the evaluation. For this reason, moving forward throughout the evaluation, I will name the students and alums that participated in the program evaluation as participants. If a participant point was made by a student specifically, I will highlight them as a student participant. In contrast, if a participant point was made by an alum specifically, I will highlight them as an alum participant. As my theoretical framework and methodology will highlight, I utilized a constructivist paradigm and a fourth-generation evaluation process, centering on relationships and connection and involving the program's stakeholders from start to finish (Lincoln & Guba, 2004). These choices allowed me to support a result that would be valuable and meaningful to the Cornerstone program. Beyond involving stakeholders throughout, I wanted the written portion of the evaluation to be led and driven by the responses of the participants interviewed.

Typically, participant quotes are reserved for chapters discussing the findings and implications of a study. I intentionally place student quotes throughout all the dissertation chapters to keep student and alum participants at the center of the writing process. This evaluation is a space for the voices of the participants to disrupt the dominant, whiteness-centered narratives that label students of color as "less than" or "lacking" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). I attempt to follow the practices of critical scholars wishing to center student voices by framing evaluation participant narratives as counternarratives or opportunities for

counter-storytelling (Delgado et al., 2017). Counternarratives work to combat the dominant understandings of society that center on whiteness. Counternarratives also create more complex understandings of each individual. They disrupt essentialized discussions of marginalized populations as one set of similar experiences, minimizing the complexities of each person as human (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These counternarratives support understanding throughout each chapter of the dissertation, not just in the analysis and findings. They highlight key factors and knowledge from the participant interviews and focus groups. As the reader, you will find that the student and alum participants are the true knowledge creators; each section of the dissertation will use their words to guide and inform us.

The remainder of this chapter gives the reader a good understanding of what to expect as the dissertation continues, as it will begin each section with the knowledge and stories of the participants. Then my job as the evaluator is to deepen the participants' knowledge with additional perspectives, relevant research, and theoretical highlights. Moving forward, Ziah discusses the damage that dominant narratives can have as we explore the problem statement. NLK shares her belief of what her teachers see in her versus what the staff at the Cornerstone program see in her as we step into the purpose and significance of the study. Ela returns to help conclude chapter one with additional knowledge to frame the theory and methods choices for the study.

While this approach of centering on student voices may step outside the traditional format and expectations of an academic program evaluation, it is an intentional step to minimize my voice as the evaluator and allow for the opportunity of co-creation throughout the process. My role then shifts away from traditional evaluator and moves

toward facilitator and guide. Lincoln (2003) highlights that constructivist evaluation focuses on knowledge creation as a process of interaction and dialogic understanding between the researcher and participant, not as a result of the researcher's analysis alone. He says constructivist evaluation centers on how “social knowledge is less about discovery than it is about community co-creation” (p. 69). This co-creation will be present throughout the written evaluation, representing the process utilized during the research's data collection and analysis. Through a focus on co-creation and centering the voices of Cornerstone students and alums of color in this evaluation, I can work to minimize the dominant narrative that paints students of color as a deficit in the education system (Valencia, 2010). Centering on their experiences makes it easier to reinforce that the problem is not the students but the systems and structures within which they participate.

Whiteness Narratives that Create Deficit Understanding: Problem Statement

Ziah, an alumna of the Cornerstone program, was a sophomore studying nursing at a small private college in a suburb of Boston, MA when we spoke in the spring of 2021. She is a first-generation Haitian American from Brockton, MA. As we talked, she highlighted how her time in college has been marked by microaggressions and being othered, both in the classroom and during college staff and faculty interactions. Ziah felt she was expected to “know” things that she did not and was treated as though she was not up to par with the rest of her classmates when she asked for additional information.

“But, when I went into one of my classes, I was the only person of color there, or at least Black person, and I was like, oh, ok, well, that's not what I was expecting, but...sometimes, I would get looks about my hair, or about me just being the only

Black person there. Or they would have that... comments about, 'oh, something, something... Black people something, something.' And I would get that side look, and I was just like 'yes, may I help you?' So, it would just be... because of my first-generation status, my lack of knowledge of how things usually would go, I would get looks sometimes, or just like, they would give me an answer, but it's just, 'you should already know that.' But who would I know it from, you know? Yeah. I got that feeling a lot.” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

Ziah's experience is not unique to her college or the greater Boston community. It is also not unique to higher education alone. Ziah highlights what many students of color experience on their educational journey; moments, interactions, and perspectives that make them feel as if they should not be there. Moments of feeling as if they do not belong or are "lacking" in some way, in comparison to their white peers on campus (Hussain & Jones, 2021; Patton, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). This lack of inclusion and feeling of not belonging continues to plague the experiences of many students of color. It results from the systemic inequities plaguing the education system. These inequities continue challenging persistence and degree attainment for students of color (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015).

Beyond higher education, the P12 system of education that our students step into centers on a dominant narrative of whiteness, a narrative that tells us that the inequities in education that exist, from test scores to graduation rates, are about the students and the "problems" or "challenges" students of color have that need to be "fixed" (Pitzer, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 2010; Williams et al., 2020). By blaming the students, or the environments and families from which they come, the US education

system can move forward as is and not feel burdened by the systemic inequities and injustices that remain (Valencia, 2010). This deficit lens and discourse centers on lifting the characteristics and standards that white supremacist culture values and minimizes or discounts everything else (Valencia, 2010; Williams et al., 2020). When a student does not exhibit those expected characteristics or meet the anticipated benchmarks that whiteness ascribes to, they are labeled as "lacking" or "less than," and that label and understanding follow them throughout their educational journey (Valencia, 2010).

While Ziah highlights her story in college, this deficit discourse began long before she walked onto her college campus. From the moment students of color step into the education system, they will be examined for what they do NOT bring to the table versus being valued for the strengths and talents they do possess (Yosso, 2005). As they work their way through the education system, they learn subtly and overtly what is accepted as appropriate in the education system and what is not (Valencia, 2010). Furthermore, when they are not meeting the expectations set forth, they learn even quicker that the problem is theirs to solve. The students come to see themselves as the ones in need of fixing, not the system they were indoctrinated into, created with whiteness at the heart of its foundation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Whiteness has permeated the US education system throughout its history. Pseudoscience attempted to point to the differing sizes of brains and skulls to gauge intelligence amongst races (Smit, 2012; Valencia, 2010). Standardized testing and assessment were created with a racist understanding of intelligence (Milsom, 2021). The infamous "separate but equal" doctrine minimized the need for quality education in Black and Brown schools (Feagin & Barnett, 2004). Tracking and pathways systems sent students of color to jobs without

sustainable wages or career advancement opportunities (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014). Ultimately, whiteness allowed for a deficit discourse to emerge and manipulate the evolution of education in the US. With each new reform or adaptation, the deficit discourse remained, perpetuating systemic inequities, and impacting students of color at each step of their educational journey (Valencia, 2010).

When the education system labels you as "lacking" and marginalizes you in that way throughout your journey, there can be a significant impact on your understanding of what you are capable of, who you are, and where you belong. As students of color move through their postsecondary journey, this deficit lens impacts their choices, their belief in themselves, and their desire to keep going when those moments of marginalization continue (Patton, 2016; Valencia, 2010). We see how the impact of a deficit-lensed system plays out in the ways systemic inequities continue to keep persistence and degree attainment a challenge for students of color compared to their white peers. The disparities across various educational attainment data continue to highlight how systemic inequities remain, despite decades of efforts to remove them (de Brey et al., 2019).

P12 schools, higher education institutions, and community organizations have worked to build and evolve programming to support an increase in the numbers of students of color, low-income, and first-generation students accessing and persisting in higher education since the early 2000s (Cole, 2012). Two decades later, despite this investment, marginalized populations, particularly students of color, continue to be impacted the most by systemic inequities and the deficit discourse when examining degree attainment rates and persistence in higher education. Enrollment rates in 2016 showed some improvement, particularly for Hispanic-identifying students (de Brey et al., 2019).

Hispanic students enrolled in college at a rate of 39% in 2016, compared to 22% in 2003. Black students enrolled at a rate of 36%, a smaller amount of growth from their percentage of 31% in 2003. American Indian and Native Alaskan students enrolled at a rate of 19%. White students enrolled at a rate of 42%, and Asian students enrolled at 58%. For students seeking a four-year degree, 54% of Hispanic-identifying students graduated within six years, while that number drops to 40% for Black students. American Indian/Alaskan Native students are also graduating at a rate of 40% within six years. White students graduate within six years at a rate of 64%, while 74% of Asian-identifying students will graduate from their four-year institutions within six years (de Brey et al., 2019). So, while enrollment rates may have shown some promise, persistence and degree completion rates tell a different story.

In reviewing this data as is, it is important to acknowledge that it is shared in a way that once again compares students of color to white students, centering whiteness and white student success rates while pointing to how students of color are not stacking up. This deficit lens is still important to share for this discussion, as it provides statistical data to examine critically. The data points to how higher education institutions allow white students to persist at higher rates than their peers because the support structures within higher education were built to support white students and white success. Until support is created to better serve students of color in their persistence and success, higher education will continue to face statistical gaps in persistence and degree attainment.

COVID Creates an Exacerbation of Already Challenging Equity Gaps

The equity gaps that persist in higher education have become further complicated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown initial drops in college enrollment

throughout the country (Lederman, 2021). While colleges grappled with the switch to all remote-learning, remote recruiting, and a lack of on-campus tours, high school seniors struggled with canceled SAT/ACT testing, dropping grades as a result of online learning, and confusion around what college would even look like in the middle of a pandemic. As a result, initial data highlighted a two percent drop in persistence and retention in higher education between fall 2019 and 2020 (Lederman, 2021). Within the data, students attending college part-time saw the most significant gaps in their persistence, at rates of four to six percent. Research has shown that students of color engage in higher education part-time at a higher rate than their white peers, resulting in a heavier impact on students of color's college persistence overall. In examining data for students of color specifically, Hispanic students saw a three-point two percent gap in persistence rates between 2019 and 2020 (Lederman, 2021). With students of color persisting at even lower rates than their peers, this data only further exacerbates the equity gaps in persistence that institutions have grappled with for decades.

Along with persistence rates, college enrollment data has also shown significant declines in the last two years. As of October 2021, according to the National Student Clearinghouse, enrollment data for undergraduate institutions has faced a 7.8% decline since 2019. The biggest hits come from declines in two-year public colleges and four-year for-profit institutions, the same institution types that are more often the enrollment choices of students of color in higher education (Marcus, 2018; Wood & Vasquez Urias, 2012). Two-year public colleges (typically community colleges) have seen a 20.8% decrease in first-year enrollment since fall 2019, and four-year for-profit institutions have seen an 18.5% drop (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). In a system already

perpetuating a deficit understanding of students of color, this initial data indicates that the response of higher education institutions during the pandemic continued to benefit white students enrolled in their institutions, placing students of color at a further deficit by not giving them the supports needed to effectively persist during the unprecedented changes that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. As researchers continue to examine the impacts of the pandemic on higher education, it stands to reason those additional correlations will emerge, highlighting how higher education institutions' responses to the pandemic were more effective in retaining their white student populations than their student of color populations.

While the reasons behind the persistent and unending gaps in equity of access and persistence in higher education are complex and multifaceted, they all connect to and center on the dominant narrative of whiteness and white supremacist culture within higher education itself (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, within this white supremacist culture sits the ongoing discourse and practice of labeling students of color as "less than" or "lacking," othering them in relation to their white peers (Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). As whiteness defines what a "prepared and ready college-bound student" should look like, students of color remain stereotyped, invalidated, labeled, and dismissed on their college campuses for the duration of their studies. Even during an unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of white supremacist culture continues to have a disproportionately negative impact on students of color, despite higher education's attempt to respond to students' needs. Through this examination of data, we can see that this deficit lens emerges in all facets of higher education and its operations. Even in their attempts to support students, higher

education's response did not mitigate the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on marginalized students within their institutions. This is just one additional example of how white supremacist culture bares down on students of color as they work to navigate their postsecondary journey.

As a staff member of the Cornerstone program, I watched hundreds of students make their way through our program. Given that the program was implemented from their eighth-grade year through their high school graduation, we witnessed some natural and expected growth and development just by knowing them during that time in their life. However, often, at the Cornerstone program, the development of its participants seemed much more than average. Student after student would emerge from their time in Cornerstone with a strong sense of who they are and how they could impact the world around them. They would call each other family and declare themselves Cornerstone program participants for life. Their parents would share testimonies at Cornerstone graduation of their child's evolutionary journey while in Cornerstone and how grateful they were that Cornerstone was there to support their children in critical life moments. To me, it felt like a transformational space that did not define its students of color as "less than" or "lacking." This belief was validated anecdotally from how Cornerstone participants talked about their time and journey.

As I moved through my coursework in my doctoral studies, I came across Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, and I immediately could put into words what I saw happening at the Cornerstone program. In my mind, Cornerstone's purpose was to help young people identify and utilize the strengths, talents, and assets they already possess. The community cultural wealth model centered on the idea that students of color

possessed cultural wealth, capital that they received from their families, their communities, and themselves. This wealth and capital could fuel their success in education and higher education if only those systems and entities accepted it. Yosso (2005) argued that those assets were discounted and devalued, leaving students feeling "less than" and "lacking" in the way that the deficit lens and discourse in education demanded, despite possessing this wealth and capital within themselves. I did not see that ongoing invalidation or dismissal in the Cornerstone program. In truth, at the time, it felt like we were doing everything we could to cultivate that wealth, to encourage it, and to help our students of color see just how important it was for them to understand and utilize those assets and strengths whenever challenges arose. Nevertheless, I examined Cornerstone with the perspective of a white, middle-class woman acting as a staff member for an organization serving predominantly students of color.

Now, in retrospect, and with further understanding and growth, it was more about what the Cornerstone program was ready to do and what it was not ready to do. When I worked there, we were ready to support our students' understanding of their strengths and assets. We were ready to support them in feeling like they could be themselves. However, we were not ready to address some of the ways in which we were perpetuating whiteness in our efforts. We saw the skills and lessons we taught as preparation; perhaps they were more closely tied to assimilation. We recognized moments of racism and discrimination in the world around us but often got defensive when we explored what was happening within our structure. We created a safer space for our students to be who they were, but we never really talked about how they could find and build new, safer spaces in the communities they were stepping into after graduation.

Regardless of my understanding of the program, my identity as a white, middle-class woman impacted my understanding of its successes and failures. To gain further understanding of how Cornerstone was validating or invalidating the experiences, strengths, and talents of students of color, I needed to go to the students themselves and ask them. And then, I needed to work with them, centering their answers and voices to help the Cornerstone program lift up the ways it was supporting students of color, and dismantle and disrupt the ways it was failing them. Perhaps through that continued effort and evolution, new opportunities to support student success during their postsecondary journey would emerge, supporting Cornerstone as well as other programs attempting to disrupt that deficit discourse of students of color on their postsecondary journey.

Gaining Insight for Continuous Improvement: The Purpose of the Evaluation

Mertens and Wilson (2019) highlight that in most cases, program evaluations are multipurpose in practice as the evaluation is undertaken. The Cornerstone program evaluation revealed a multipurpose focus during its implementation, as Mertens and Wilson described. First, the evaluation worked to gain insight into the experiences of students of color in Cornerstone. By gaining insight from the students, their voices could remain at the center of the remaining evaluation process. After that insight and knowledge had been examined, I used it to evaluate opportunities for improvement of the Cornerstone program, particularly exploring how students felt they were seen and validated while also examining how they were marginalized or viewed with a deficit lens within the program. By exploring the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program as they concluded their time, the evaluation could highlight their summative understanding of their experiences to support the opportunity for continuous

improvement within the program and the Pathways Massachusetts organization. So, this two-fold purpose was first and foremost about exploring the experiences of students of color and centering their voices and understanding throughout the evaluation. This focus provided counternarrative opportunities for students of color engaged in strengths-based programming. These counternarratives then presented student-centered understanding to support the continued transformation and evolution of the Cornerstone program and the Pathways, MA organization.

Pathways, MA made it a priority to move toward a more antiracist set of policies and procedures. In order to do so effectively, the organization's staff needed to gain insight and understanding into how its students of color are experiencing the different aspects of the Cornerstone program as they journey through it and to support their postsecondary plans. While the Cornerstone program staff gather regular feedback on program effectiveness in the forms of surveys for all participants, that feedback has been generalized for all participants and has not explicitly addressed the experiences of students of color with a focus on moving toward a more antiracist set of practices. Because of the multipurpose focus of the evaluation, it was essential to intentionally select a design and framework that would allow for gaining summative insight into the experiences of students of color while also providing the opportunity for continuous improvement in the antiracist practices of Pathways Massachusetts and the Cornerstone program.

Intentional Engagement: Evaluation Design and Theoretical Framework Overview

Being seen, feeling valued, and being heard are things that all humans look for as we move through this journey of life. As highlighted previously, however, students of color

are often left feeling less valued or unseen as a result of the dominant narrative that centers on their experiences, strengths, and talents as "less than" that of their white peers in education (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1994; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). As a graduate of the Cornerstone program, Ela easily highlighted the differences between her time at Cornerstone and what she was experiencing at Central University in Massachusetts.

“And what I’m saying is that my time at Cornerstone allows me to continue to challenge people at this university. Because it’s so dangerous, it's so dangerous to think that there are these professors who are one-track minded that are training students to be one-track minded. But to be part of a career path that is a whole new world then what they are learning about and what they’ve already experienced as individuals. And you know, I had - there were people like you, Allyson, and Marie and counselors that were white women and white men who understood us, right? Who had that understanding. Who I had never felt othered by. But at Central University? It was like - these people have no clue. Like no one had a clue.” (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

I wanted the students of color to be willing to share their voice in this evaluation to feel seen and that their words had value and importance in this process. Their voices need to remain centered throughout the research and evaluation process. As a result, each facet of the design chosen allows for maximum stakeholder involvement and space to center on the marginalized voices of the students as a focal point of the process. Furthermore, the design incorporated theoretical understanding that would challenge the Cornerstone program and its staff and leadership to critically examine their practices for how they were perpetuating a deficit lens or discourse. With these focuses in mind, the evaluation

approach and framework needed to support these intentions while allowing marginalized voices to remain at the center of the process.

Evaluation Approach

When determining an evaluation approach, I needed to align with a process that would allow me to engage with the voices of the students interviewed throughout the evaluation. The approach needed to allow for the re-centering of student voices at multiple points in the evaluation process -the analysis, recommendations, and discussions with staff, to name a few. The makeup of the evaluation approach will include an understanding of the paradigm in practice, the methods for data collection, and the evaluation branch within which the purpose of the evaluation sits (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). I came to this evaluation believing that the Cornerstone program could not effectively implement a more comprehensive antiracist strategy through the staff's knowledge alone. Even with anecdotal information and a deep connection with the program's mission and its participants, the primarily white leadership staff of Pathways, MA cannot effectively examine and adapt their strategy for more antiracist practices utilizing their knowledge alone. Their experiences and understanding of the world around them will look very different than the experiences of the students of color they serve. The truth of what the students of color at the Cornerstone program have experienced cannot be named or highlighted by the observations of Cornerstone staff members alone. Staff and their relationships with students are critical in those experiences, those truths. Ultimately, though, the truths of the students of color are theirs alone and must be told as such. With this in mind, the paradigm of focus within the evaluation approach needed to

acknowledge that people held multiple truths and realities as a part of their interactions and reflections with others.

Paradigmatic Approach: Constructivism

This belief in the multiple truths and realities that we all are a part of because we all experience the world differently is at the heart of the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm "reflects a relativist's view of reality, in which reality is constructed by individuals through reflection upon their experiences and in interaction with others" (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 132). Constructivism highlights that there is no one truth, as each of us interprets and understands the world differently (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). With a constructivist paradigm, researchers can include and consider the multiple perspectives and truths that all contributors bring to the work of the evaluation. Through constructivist lenses, researchers can involve the community they are researching, ensuring the consideration of multiple perspectives throughout the research design and implementation. Utilizing a constructivist paradigm created the space for the counternarratives that students of color shared. The counternarratives could then be heard in as valuable a way as the dominant understandings that staff and leadership would bring. With this paradigm in place, the next step was to connect the paradigm to the right branch of evaluation theory.

Evaluation Branch: Values with a Social Justice Context

If the constructivist paradigm believed that true meaning and understanding came from reflection and interaction with others (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens & Wilson, 2019), then the use of this paradigm in an evaluation would mean considering and incorporating the values of the researcher, as well as the values of participants within the

research as critical components of the evaluation process. This focus on values and removing the notion of objectivity initially emerged in evaluation theory as more and more theorists began utilizing qualitative methods to support program evaluations (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Guba and Lincoln (1989) have argued that values are inherent in every piece of the evaluation, impossible to remove because, as evaluators, we must utilize our values when determining the scope and procedures, the methodology, and the purpose and goals, along with other stakeholders in the evaluation process. Because the focus of this evaluation centers on gaining insight from the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program, their values and perspectives are at the heart of the reality of their experiences. Therefore, aligning with an evaluation approach within the values branch has the strongest connection to the purpose and focus of this program evaluation.

While utilizing an approach within the values branch supports the purpose of centering the voices of students of color within the evaluation process, the desire to support improvement in the Cornerstone program's antiracist practices requires criticality within the approach. With this in mind, the program evaluation needed to also include elements of social justice and equity. Fortunately, researchers have already highlighted an inherent connection between the values and social justice branches, depending on the context and focus of the evaluation. Mertens and Wilson (2018) highlight this complementary nature between the values branch and the social justice branch of program evaluation, noting that the social justice branch has often been considered somewhat of an extension of the values branch itself or as a new branch that emerged through the evolution of values branch evaluations. In order to effectively utilize an

evaluation approach within the values branch that could also allow for antiracist recommendations and actions, the evaluation type needed to have a balance between opportunities for empowerment and the lifting of marginalized voices while centering on the values that were held dear by the Cornerstone program, its stakeholders, and myself as the evaluator.

Evaluation Type: Fourth Generation Evaluation

In order to center on the voices of the students of color in the Cornerstone program, I needed access to their voices through interviews and focus groups. As a result, the evaluation type needed to be qualitative in practice. Within the values branch, an evaluation type called fourth generation evaluation, created by theorists Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1989), allows for stakeholder involvement throughout the evaluation process. It encourages qualitative data collection, including interviews and focus groups, as a part of the evaluation process for education programs. Fourth generation evaluation emerged due to what Guba and Lincoln saw as an evolution of educational program evaluation as it moved toward a more natural inquiry of its participants. Using fourth generation evaluation provided an opportunity to keep students of color and their experiences at the heart of the research while also including feedback and discussion with staff and leadership. Guba and Lincoln believed in the power of inclusion and encouraged evaluation approaches that allowed stakeholders to have greater involvement in the process and add additional perspectives. Through a "hermeneutic dialectic" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) or a set of dialogue and reflection opportunities, new knowledge emerges as a part of the interactions between the researcher and various stakeholders during the fourth-generation evaluation process.

Fourth generation evaluation allowed a co-created opportunity between myself as the evaluator, the staff of the organization as program implementers, and students and alums of color in the Cornerstone program as stakeholders to work together toward the continuous improvement the Cornerstone program staff were hoping for. The purpose of this evaluation centers on amplifying the voices of the students of color participating in the Cornerstone program. Utilizing fourth generation evaluation within the values branch of program evaluation, then, meets the need to keep the experiences of students of color at the heart of the evaluative journey.

The work toward more antiracist and anti-oppressive practices within the Cornerstone program also highlighted a need to explore and fuse ideas from social justice evaluation theory with the constructivist paradigm and fourth generation evaluation. When looking at Guba and Lincoln's (1989, 2005) work in particular, Mertens and Wilson (2018) say that their understanding of the purpose and focus of evaluation evolved toward a more transformative purpose over time. Guba and Lincoln (2005) believed that the utilization of fourth generation and constructivist approaches created the potential for the liberation of its stakeholders (p. 131). It is impossible, then, to separate the meaning-making and knowledge-creation process of fourth generation evaluation from the tenets of the social justice branch of evaluation; lifting the voices of the marginalized is a purpose of both entities. Therefore, utilizing fourth generation evaluation allowed for the experiences and counternarratives of students and alums of color in the Cornerstone program to remain centered throughout the evaluation approach. Furthermore, the fourth-generation evaluation allowed for the utilization of counternarratives to support the goal of

continuous improvement and progress within Cornerstone's buildout of antiracist practices.

Evaluation Questions to Support Centering Student Experiences

In order for this dual purpose to be possible, there needed to be a set of evaluation questions that would center the experiences of students of color throughout the research process and push all involved to utilize the counternarratives of their experiences to support the Cornerstone program's efforts toward a more antiracist set of practices. The evaluation questions explored during the Cornerstone program evaluation were:

- How do Cornerstone students and alums of color describe their program experiences?
 - Which programmatic elements of the Cornerstone program are at the forefront of their understanding and meaning-making?
- How do Cornerstone students and alums of color make meaning and connections between their experiences in Cornerstone and their postsecondary journey?
 - How do they describe relationships with staff, and if at all, how do those relationships support their sense of self and postsecondary journeys?

The evaluation questions chosen allowed the experiences of students and alums of color to be at the heart of any findings and implications, keeping their voices centered throughout. In order to better support the need to improve practices and move toward a more antiracist perspective, these questions had to be examined and analyzed using critical theories that explore how race and racism are embedded in society.

Evaluation Framing: Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth

This program evaluation hoped to highlight how the Cornerstone program works with students of color from an empowerment-focused and strengths-centered perspective. The goal was to explore how students of color are experiencing the Cornerstone program. Beyond the experiences alone, focusing on students of color allowed the evaluation to explore ways that students were validated and empowered, as the Cornerstone program had planned, and where Cornerstone and the Pathways, MA organization may have utilized a deficit-oriented lens and approach, perpetuating the dominant narrative even within their attempts to dismantle it. When strengths-based programs do not consider how those strengths play out for different people, they default to a whiteness-oriented understanding of how one's strengths are utilized (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019). This understanding discount the barriers some people may face in effectively using their strengths. It also asks students of color to accept a singular understanding of what strengths are and are not, asking them to ascribe to whiteness to capitalize on their "strengths" effectively (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019).

Since whiteness is embedded in even strengths-centered programs like Cornerstone, this program evaluation design had to include Critical Race Theory in its theoretical frame. Because the evaluation asks for an examination of the ways students of color are looked at with a deficit lens and how that lens emerges in their experiences in the Cornerstone program and within higher education, it was important to include certain tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). CRT highlights that racism is ingrained in our education systems, emerging as a deficit understanding of students of color (DeCuir & Dixon,

2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Systemic racism in higher education and the college access process will attempt to label and stereotype the experiences of students of color. With this in mind, I needed to utilize a theoretical understanding of the strengths and capital students of color carry on their postsecondary journeys. This critical theory needed to fall outside of the dominant narrative that centered whiteness when regarding strengths and deficits. Scholar Tara Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth highlights how students of color have a wealth of knowledge and resources to support their success. These strengths or forms of capital are found within their cultural and community connections. Community cultural wealth (CCW) presents us with an alternative set of capital to utilize when examining how the Cornerstone program supports students and alums of color. Using CCW as a part of the theoretical framework, we can begin to see where a strengths-centered, postsecondary access program can impact a young person's understanding of their identity, supporting their self-efficacy and building their college-going aspirations. Using CRT and CCW, I provided insight into what programmatic areas needed further dismantling of the perpetuation of whiteness within Cornerstone's efforts.

While fourth generation evaluation sits within the values branch, its purpose centers on lifting the voices of all stakeholders, with an understanding that the equitable consideration of all voices is critical to the evaluation's success (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Evaluation as social justice should include the following: advocacy, relationship development, the inclusion of underrepresented voices, and stakeholder education and involvement in the evaluation process (Boyce, 2019, p. 14). By infusing CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994) and CCW (Yosso, 2005) into the framework, this program

evaluation design allowed for the voices of students and alums of color in the Cornerstone program to drive forward new knowledge and understanding. Utilization of this new knowledge by the Cornerstone Program and Pathways, MA furthers their growth in antiracist practices. By centering the evaluation on the participants' voices, they can contribute to the continuous improvements of the Cornerstone program and support the future beneficiaries of those improvements. This evaluation design addressed the purpose and focus and, as the next section highlights, also supports the significance of a student-voice-centered evaluation in the postsecondary and college access sphere.

Bringing Students of Color to the Center: Evaluation Significance

NLK was a 17-year-old Black student from Boston and just about ready to graduate from high school and the Cornerstone program when we spoke. She had a fiery spirit and was unafraid to speak from her heart as she talked about her connection to Cornerstone and her frustrations in high school. NLK highlighted that she saw the Cornerstone program already centering on student voices, especially when she compared her experience at Cornerstone to her experiences in her high school.

“I feel like the staff at my school, they don’t really like, a good majority of them don’t really value their students’ opinions. But there is a very small group of them that do. And the difference between that and [Cornerstone] is like everybody always values your opinion at [Cornerstone]. There’s nobody that will push your feelings or opinions aside. But at school I feel like they do. They just brush it off their shoulders and just ignore what you have to say.” (NLK, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

As NLK highlights, Cornerstone felt like a space where she could be heard. Her understanding of what Cornerstone valued about its students aligned with the purpose of this study and pointed to a need for continued centering as the evaluation moved forward.

There are many things that the Cornerstone program does well; their five-year program allows for strong relationships, and their staff uses those relationships to support students' understanding of their strengths and how those strengths will support their ability to build the future they wish to see, and the impact they want to make. There are also things that Cornerstone can think critically about as they work to remove deficit understanding from their practices and as they continue to recognize the biases that have become embedded within their procedures and policies. While this program evaluation will bring important knowledge to Cornerstone and allow them to align the findings in this study with their strategic plans and initiatives moving forward, this examination of Cornerstone can also support other strengths-based initiatives outside of the organization.

By focusing on students of color in particular, this study also begins to disaggregate the research and knowledge available, a noted area of need in the research base (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). Throughout the research base, discussions of strengths-centered programming efforts often examine student experiences in a generalized way. They do not often disaggregate for how students of color, in particular, might be experiencing these efforts (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019). This differentiation is important to build an understanding of for several reasons. First, despite efforts to remove a deficit discourse from their practices, strengths-based programs can still perpetuate a deficit lens on students of color, particularly when the "strengths" being focused on center on the valued and accepted strengths of whiteness understanding (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). By

pushing students to ascribe to an understanding of strengths that may not fit what they know to be true about themselves, strengths-based programs have been noted to potentially reinforce deficit discourse, even in their efforts to disrupt it (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019). By focusing on the experiences of students of color, the knowledge created can examine how deficit lenses emerge, even in programming designed to remove it. Second, focusing on students of color allows for a differentiation of experiences, creating space for Cornerstone program staff to focus specifically on supporting students of color in the program, as any efforts that benefit students of color should benefit all students as a whole (Iwasaki, 2016; Lopez & Louis, 2009). Lastly, this focus on students of color begins to disaggregate the knowledge and understanding of strengths-based and programming to make space for further disaggregation in the future. Further disaggregation allows for better understanding and support for students of all different backgrounds. The significance then mirrors the purpose of the evaluation, lifting and amplifying the voices of students and alums of color in the Cornerstone program, in order to share new knowledge and understanding. The following section summarizes the intentionality of the evaluation design to support these efforts.

Conclusion

The Cornerstone program focuses its learning process for students on relationships and reflection. Because the constructivist paradigm believes that we make meaning and create new knowledge from our interactions with others and our reflections (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens & Wilson, 2019), it aligns with both my worldview and the values of the Cornerstone program. Guba and Lincoln (1989) created fourth generation evaluation to allow evaluators focused on education to put the constructivist paradigm

into evaluation practice. This alignment with constructivism and education further met the Cornerstone program's needs. Through interviews and focus groups, I worked to lift the voices of students and alums of color and support understanding of their experiences I then asked additional stakeholders, including staff and leadership, to weigh in on their interpretations of those experiences. This allowed for all stakeholders, including myself, to make meaning together. What emerged was an aligned understanding of the findings and an opportunity for the staff to feel more connected to recommendations for action. As the evaluation progresses, I will discuss how our understanding of postsecondary access and equity in education continues to evolve nationwide. In addition, there will be discussion specific to the Cornerstone program and its key programmatic elements. For both reasons, it is important to present an overview of terms and their definitions so that as you read, you will understand what is being discussed as we move toward findings and recommendations. The following section will define terms for specific elements of the Cornerstone program and definitions for several terms within the postsecondary access and equity in education spheres. These terms will be helpful to understand moving forward.

Definition of Terms

The unique ways Cornerstone implements curriculum through activities like residential camp programming and wilderness trekking create terminology and programmatic elements not often discussed in the college access sphere. As a result, the definition of terms has been broken into two categories. The first category aligns with generalized terms often mentioned within postsecondary access and strengths-based programming. The second set of terms and their definitions highlight the unique

terminology that is part of the daily vernacular at Cornerstone, if nowhere else. By highlighting these terms specifically, we can better understand how the Cornerstone program team operates within these terms and procedures.

General Terms and their Definitions

Anti-Oppressive: An anti-oppressive practice uses

“strategies, theories and actions that actively challenge systems of oppression on an ongoing basis. Anti-oppression work seeks to recognize the oppression that exists in our society and attempts to mitigate its effects and eventually equalize the power imbalance in our communities” (Simmons Library, 2021).

Antiracist: To be opposed to, or against racism, while actively working to eliminate racism from policy and practice (Kendi, 2019). Organizations working toward a more antiracist practice examine their policies and programming to decenter whiteness, and drive toward equity and justice on an ongoing basis.

Asset-Oriented: NYU, Steinhardt (2022) highlights on its Teacher Education Reinvented webpage that asset-oriented education is “an asset-based approach focuses on strengths. It views diversity in thought, culture, and traits as positive assets. Teachers and students alike are valued for what they bring to the classroom rather than being characterized by what they may need to work on or lack.”

College Access: A comprehensive approach to supporting young people in gaining the knowledge, skills and capital needed to access higher education institutions (Perna, 2015). College access includes acquiring knowledge, searching for opportunities, and applying to institutions to gain admission into their programming.

College Persistence: The rate at which students are remaining at higher education institutions long-term. College persistence examines whether or not a student stays in

college until degree completion, or drops out before completing their degree or certificate (Lederman, 2021)

Deficit Discourse: In education, a deficit discourse centers on the way in which students of color and other marginalized populations are discussed in comparison to their white peers. This discourse focuses on students of color as “lacking” key skills, strengths or character traits that will support their success in education. This then becomes the focus of the challenges and problems students are facing; whatever these students are perceived to be “lacking” is causing whatever problems or challenges that have emerged (Smit, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia 2010)

Strengths-based: Strengths-based approaches in education center on the talents, skills and understandings students bring with them on their educational journey, regardless of whether these strengths align with the dominant narrative, or not. Similar to Asset-oriented approaches, strengths-based approaches support students in understanding the strengths they possess and learning how to use those strengths to support their success in challenging times (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a).

Whiteness: “An unfairly privileged exclusionary category, based on physical features, most notably a lack of melanin,” (Williams, 2020, para. 4). Within this evaluation, whiteness emerges in the ways that higher education and the college-going process center on and are built from white, middle-class understanding. This then creates a deficit lens on all those students of color bring to the college-going process and within higher education. Through this deficit understanding, then, whiteness perpetuates the oppression and exclusion of students of color within the system of higher education.

White Supremacy Culture:

“White supremacy culture is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value” (Okun, 2021, p. 4).

Cornerstone Terms and their Definitions

Insight: A daily group reflection, usually completed in cabin groups every evening, done at the Cornerstone program to practice reflection and communication skills, and to build connection and community within the program.

Postsecondary Journey: Students and alums discussed their postsecondary journey as anything connected to college or postsecondary plans, as well as the realities they faced when transitioning to and arriving at their postsecondary institutions. They specifically highlighted this journey as broader than college access alone.

Service: Volunteer experiences completed by Cornerstone students, usually completed in groups or with others in the Cornerstone program, at various sites in their communities.

Strengths-centered: An alternative way to look at where students can use their talents and treasures to support their success. A strengths-centered approach at the Cornerstone program works to first validate the strengths and talents that students see in themselves, regardless of how they define them, and then to support students in utilizing those strengths on their college-going journey.

Trek: A wilderness hiking trip completed each summer during the Cornerstone program. The hiking trip includes overnight camping, map and compass navigating, and

cooking and prep work. Trek lengths are up to seven days and 40 miles. Cornerstone program members will complete at least three treks while in the Cornerstone program.

Evaluation Overview

As the written evaluation continues, each chapter highlights the experiences of the students of color in the Cornerstone program, using their voices and knowledge as a guide for the remaining pieces of the program evaluation. In chapter two, I utilize current literature in the postsecondary access field, as well as knowledge of how community-based organizations work, to build a better understanding of the complexities of the Cornerstone program and its objectives. The literature review also tackles the ways in which strengths-centered programming has emerged as an attempt to combat the deficit discourse. I dive deeper into the theoretical understandings of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). A more in-depth review of methodological choices, participant selection and data collection and analysis methods will be presented in Chapter Three. Chapter Four will highlight the interpretations and findings that emerged from the students' discussions of their experiences. Chapter Five will share implications for the postsecondary access field, as well as recommendations and action items for the Cornerstone program and the Pathways, MA organization to consider as they move forward. Resources and Appendices will be presented at the conclusion of the dissertation, and highlighted in key areas throughout the earlier chapters, for reference. Chapter Two is up next, and in addition to a review of the relevant literature for this evaluation, it will include the words and knowledge of several Cornerstone students and alums, just as you saw in this chapter.

Chapter Two: Literature and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this evaluation is to uplift the voices of students of color within the Cornerstone program and ensure their understanding and knowledge guide the evaluation itself. With that in mind, the theoretical framework and literature review must support the voices presented and centered throughout this evaluation. Because of the ongoing marginalization and erasure of the voices of students of color in education (Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005), I start this chapter with a more extensive discussion of the utilized theoretical framework. I place the theoretical framework before the literature review to provide a lens of how I analyzed existing literature. By walking through the purpose and focus of each theory, it becomes clear that these theoretical lenses align with the purpose of the Cornerstone evaluation, which is to amplify the voices of Cornerstone students of color. After the theoretical framework, the literature review highlights the current topics within the educational sector that focus on college access and choice, deficit understanding in education, strengths-based programs, and how the Massachusetts education sector is fairing in the college access landscape. Before diving into the literature review, I share details of the theoretical framework of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen aligns with the purpose of the evaluation while also supporting the fourth-generation evaluation approach. The purpose of the evaluation was dually focused. I initially prioritized uplifting the voices and experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program, ensuring their knowledge and understanding remained centered throughout the evaluation process. Additionally, while those voices were centered, the evaluation process created recommendations for the staff and leadership of the Cornerstone program and Pathways Massachusetts as they continuously worked to improve their programmatic efforts and antiracist practices. Utilizing critical race theory (CRT) to examine the college access field and the Cornerstone program allowed students of color to create counternarratives of their experiences. These counternarratives emerge outside the dominant, whiteness-oriented understandings of college access and postsecondary success. Additionally, CRT supported the emergence of new ideas and challenges for the Cornerstone program to wrestle with. Using CRT (reference the tenet that allows this) in analysis, I continued to center on the voices of students of color in Cornerstone, particularly as the theory intermingled with the strategies of fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Fourth generation evaluation calls for a process that holds equal value on the opinions and understandings of all stakeholders, regardless of power dynamics within the organization.

Beyond the use of CRT, the evaluation design also needed to be mindful of how education, college access, and higher education continue to deficit-orient students of color (Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005), blaming them for what they are “lacking,” instead of acknowledging and valuing the strengths they bring to support their success (Yosso,

2005). Community cultural wealth uses critical race theory to critique the dominant understanding of social capital and to acknowledge and validate the capital, or strengths and assets, students of color carry with them (Yosso, 2005). By focusing on community cultural wealth, I explored the strengths and capital participants utilized within the Cornerstone program. These strengths emerge outside of the deficit lens that continues to minimize the capital they hold when it does not align with the dominant narrative. Community cultural wealth also pushed me to challenge deficit understanding where it exists within Cornerstone and throughout students' postsecondary planning journey. To provide additional context and understanding, I will dive deeper into each theory, starting with Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began in the field of law in the 1970s as a theoretical grounding that lawyers could utilize to highlight the continued, and in some cases growing, systemic racial discrimination since the Civil Rights Era (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Initial and founding theorists of CRT include Derrick Bell from New York University, considered a founding father of CRT and its tenets, and Kimberlè Crenshaw (1990), who deepened the understanding of CRT by introducing the concept of intersectionality. Crenshaw pointed to the multilayered identities we all possess and how those different facets of our identities are validated or minimized within systems of oppression. In particular, Crenshaw pointed to the ways Black women and their experiences are minimized or erased from movements to fight racism and movements to fight sexism, and patriarchy. As CRT grew in its understanding, theorists adapted and examined it in different fields, including education, higher education, and other systems

and structures of society beyond the judicial system. CRT centers on several tenets highlighting how racism is embedded throughout our experiences in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). These tenets or critical understandings allow us to examine the systems and structures within society with a critical lens (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). First and foremost, CRT highlights that racism is endemic and immersed in the systems and structures of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It is something that people of color experience as an everyday part of their lives, regardless of whether white people notice it or see it themselves.

CRT also explores the progress made in the fight against racism and highlights the concept of interest convergence as a way to manipulate those moments of progress. Interest convergence says progress is only made when the interests of white or dominant culture converge with those of antiracist initiatives, manipulating what we consider progress only when it benefits the dominant narrative and power structure (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). An example highlighted often in CRT research is the decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Bell, 1980). This seminal justice decision is often touted as a monumental moment in educational equity for students of color. Nevertheless, when we examine *Brown vs. Board* with a CRT lens, we also must include the contextual understanding of the world at that time. Derrick Bell (1980) argued that the worldwide view of the US at the time of *Brown* significantly influenced the decision. *Brown* came when the world press of the US needed a boost. Racism was seen worldwide as a problem for the US, even after Black and white soldiers worked together in WWII and Korea. The decision to desegregate schools in the US due to *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was argued to have improved the worldview of the US and therefore be a more

palatable decision for the white community. Allowing Brown to be a catalyst for desegregation in education would improve the worldview of the US. With the use of CRT, we can argue that what was in the best interest of the white politicians in power was really at the heart of the decision. To be seen as less racist would benefit the United States' standing as a growing global power. Brown accomplished this, and CRT theorists would argue that this influence cannot be erased from the discussion, regardless of how it progressed the Civil Rights Movement.

Critical race theory highlights whiteness as property, pointing to a set of systems and structures in place to benefit white people, thereby determining their whiteness as an asset. (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This concept of whiteness as property is particularly relevant as we examine racism in education because when whiteness has more value as property, it emerges as better educational opportunities. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) highlight the history of this understanding in their connection of critical race theory to education. They argued that previous attempts at educational equity during the Civil Rights Movement ignored the fact that the US economy and society were based on property rights. The creation of governments centered on protecting property rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Slavery complicated this understanding as the US was founded because, at that time, enslaved people were considered property. The concept of enslaved people as property brought about tension and conflict in debates between human rights versus property rights. Ladson-Billings and Tate argued that when we talk about the rights of individuals in the US, or even the concept of individualism and meritocracy, we are really only referring to individuals who own property. Others are not given or considered worthy of

those same rights. Education connects to the idea that property is the highest priority. Communities where property value is the highest are then less interested in providing educational funds for people from the lowest socioeconomic status within those communities. Those with better property, then, end up having better educational opportunities.

Critical race theorists are also critical of other "neutral" or "objective" theories, arguing that they mask and camouflage the dominance of racism and white supremacy in society. The understandings within liberalism, neoliberalism, colorblindness, and meritocracy, for instance, all work from a lens of whiteness and do not include the impact that systemic racism has on the experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT points to the lack of voice and representation in society for people of color. In response, theorists highlight the need to include the experiential knowledge of people of color in societal understanding. By sharing this experiential knowledge as counternarratives created by communities of color, it can combat the stereotyped understandings that systemic racism produces (Yosso, 2005). These stereotyped understandings that students of color are countering center on a practice of deficit thinking that permeates the education system.

CRT and The Deficit Lens of Education

Within education, critical race theory examines the way deficit thinking perpetuates inequities, labeling students of color as "lacking" and "less than" in comparison to their white peers and characterizing a "good student" as one who follows the dominant narrative that aligns with individualistic and meritocratic understanding (Valencia, 2010). This deficit thinking within the education system has led to inequities in college access

and postsecondary success. It continues to plague the experiences of students of color throughout their educational journey, including their postsecondary plans. In many ways, focusing on what students are "lacking" is at the heart of the challenges P20 school systems and higher education institutions have in supporting access and persistence for low-income students of color. This narrative emerges as a deficit lens on students of color, rooted in racism and impacting all facets of education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 2010). The deficit narrative impacts policy decisions, resource allocation, teacher education and understanding, and student learning assessment (Smit, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 2010).

One of the foremost deficit-thinking scholars is Dr. Richard R. Valencia (2010). Valencia highlights that deficit thinking results from racism and the pseudo-science that created an understanding of "superior and inferior races." This thinking was used to support the segregation of schools, the tracking of students into certain types of careers, and the understanding of why some students "succeed" and other students "fail." Deficit thinking is now systemic within the education system and is used to keep power structures in place, allowing white supremacist culture to remain the dominant understanding in education (Valencia, 2010). Valencia highlights that deficit thinking focuses on victim-blaming, highlighting the perceived flaws of the student as the explanation for why they are struggling, unable to meet expectations, or unqualified for an opportunity. Deficit understanding allows for the perpetuation of systemic oppression for students of color. It continuously tells them they are not meeting expectations due to who they are or where they come from. Deficit thinkers believe it is their duty to "fix"

what is wrong with the student, thereby removing any responsibility from the systems and structures of education that the student sits within.

Valencia (2010) argues that this deficit thinking remains part of the education system to retain the current culture of power within education. Lisa Delpit (1988) breaks down this culture of power as a set of rules or codes within the classroom centered on the dominant culture of whiteness that some students (those with power) understand and know how to enact without really being aware or willing to acknowledge that this culture of power exists. Students who are not part of the dominant culture are then unaware of these rules, and until they are shared with them specifically, they cannot acquire power within the classroom. This power structure is then perpetuated through the stereotypes enacted in the classroom. These stereotypes are used to justify educational decisions and practices, particularly regarding the treatment of students of color or the attitudes toward them by teachers and staff in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). So, if students of color are behind on their schoolwork, they may be stereotyped as lacking motivation or lazy. Then this stereotyped understanding can be used to justify low expectations for the student. Over time, this stereotype has been placed on all students of color. It can justify the dumbing down of curriculum, the lack of educational opportunities, or the sharing of information about postsecondary options for students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). The deficit lens also says the culture of the families of students of color and their communities is dysfunctional. For students of color to succeed in education, the deficit lens says they must learn about and ascribe to dominant, whiteness-oriented cultural understandings.

Beyond the deficit understanding, the myth of meritocracy complicates things even further. Clycq et al. (2014) highlight that a meritocracy validates the idea that a student's

lack of success is their issue, not anyone else's. If students really wanted success, they could work hard and get it; they would earn it. In addition, in meritocratic societies, if a student was unable to achieve success, the message they would receive was that it was because they lacked the talent or effort needed to achieve success. This understanding becomes internalized, and families of color grow to feel like they cannot access the education they deserve, regardless of how hard they try (Clycq et al., 2014). When deficit models and meritocracy are combined, structural and systemic inequities are ignored because they can be reasoned away. This ability to reason away systemic inequities repeats itself throughout the education system.

With a dominant narrative that centers on white, middle-class understanding, the education system perpetuates the existing racial hierarchy, working to keep white supremacist culture intact and fully functioning (Patton, 2016). Within higher education, this systemic perpetuation of inequities in college access can be seen in practices with a long history for many institutions (Patton, 2016). Admissions policies like legacy admissions and sibling scholarships make higher education complicit at best and a willing participant at worst in the perpetuation of white supremacist culture within the education system (Patton, 2016). The world looks to higher education as a resource for leveling the playing field and creating opportunities for upward mobility. This meritocratic understanding ignores how marginalized populations face obstacles far more significant than a desire to work hard for what they want. In reality, higher education is an opportunity for those already in power to continue gaining power, and it does not allow equitable access to a better future (Patton, 2016). Critical race theory allows these understandings to come to light and allows researchers to critically examine the systems

we exist within while providing the opportunity to counter those dominant understandings with the experiential knowledge of people of color. Community cultural wealth is a theoretical example of how utilizing critical race theory can support shifting the dominant deficit-oriented narrative in education to a more strengths-based understanding of students of color as they attempt to access higher education.

Community Cultural Wealth

In 2005, Dr. Tara Yosso used CRT to examine the concepts of social and cultural capital, theorized by Dr. Pierre Bourdieu. Yosso (2005) critiqued Bourdieu's (2011) understanding of cultural capital. She highlights how cultural capital theory did not effectively include the ways in which power solidified and valued a dominant narrative of social mobility. Yosso (2005) asserted that the concept of cultural capital was rooted in racism, saying:

“Bourdieu asserts that cultural capital (i.e., education, language), social capital (i.e., social networks, connections), and economic capital (i.e., money and other material possessions) can be acquired in two ways, from one's family, and through formal schooling. The dominant groups within society can maintain power because access is limited to acquiring and learning strategies to use these forms of capital for social mobility. Therefore, while Bourdieu's work sought to provide a structural critique of social and cultural reproduction, his theory of cultural capital has been used to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor. This interpretation of Bourdieu exposes [w]hite, middle-class culture as the standard, and therefore all other forms and expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'.” (p. 76)

Yosso (2005) then argued that students of color possess significant capital, cultural and social capital that has supported their success in their communities and could be used to support their access and persistence in higher education. While not the same as what was discussed in Bourdieu's understanding of social and cultural capital, this capital is still valuable and useful. Yosso argued for higher education's acceptance and validation

of this capital, which she coined “community cultural wealth,” to better support students of color on their postsecondary journeys.

Yosso (2005) broke down this wealth into six forms of capital: social, linguistic, familial, navigational, aspirational, and resistance. These six forms of capital are discussed in more detail below.

- Social - the networks and community connections students can access for support.
- Linguistic - the communication skills acquired and used when engaging with multiple languages or styles. Linguistic capital can also refer to ways of communicating through more creative means like art, storytelling, and music.
- Familial - cultural knowledge and skills shared amongst family. Familial capital takes a broad understanding of " family " and how kinship is defined. It can include a more extensive understanding of community and how extended community and important people in our lives can become a part of this familial capital.
- Navigational - working your way through structures and systems, particularly those that marginalize communities of color.
- Aspirational - maintaining hopes and dreams for the future, despite barriers.
- Resistant - the knowledge and skills that come from resisting witnessed inequities and challenging the status quo. Resistance capital often includes awareness of and use of critical consciousness in examining the world around us and a desire to create change to improve it. (Yosso, 2005, pp. 77-81)

Yosso also highlights how these different forms of community cultural wealth (CCW) overlap and interplay. There is no need to keep each form of capital separate. Students will sometimes use multiple forms of capital together to problem-solve or progress in their efforts. The discussion CCW has continued to evolve, with some theorists examining how students access and utilize it within oppressive systems (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021). Additional scholars offered new areas of capital for consideration, including spiritual, perseverance, and informational for consideration (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021). CCW presents us with an alternative set of capital to utilize when examining the strengths and assets that students of color carry with them on their postsecondary journeys.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework chosen aligns with the purposes and focus of the evaluation, supporting a critical view of the college access field and the Cornerstone program. CRT and community cultural wealth also provide an alternative understanding to traditional social capital, supporting the analysis of the experiences of students of color at Cornerstone. Critical race theory in education recognizes that racism is endemic. Therefore, we must work to combat it by raising the voices and amplifying the experiences of students of color, creating counternarratives to increase knowledge and understanding (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In education, endemic racism often emerges through the deficit lens that students of color are examined with, perpetuating systemic inequities (Valencia, 2010). Community cultural wealth supports a strengths-based approach to working with students of color. It highlights how their strengths can be

valuable and important on their educational and postsecondary journeys, even if they do not align with dominant, whiteness-oriented understanding (Yosso, 2005).

Together, this framework supports the efforts of this fourth-generation evaluation. As discussed further in chapter three, it complements the research design's goal of maximizing stakeholder voice, particularly the voices of the most marginalized. As we move into the literature review, these theories will be referenced in relation to the topics explored. Critical race theory and deficit thinking helps us understand the contradictory nature of education as an oppressor and potential liberator. Community cultural wealth supports research of strengths-based programming and educational practices, highlighting how students of color utilize their community cultural wealth and why it is essential to validate that wealth on their postsecondary journey. Ultimately, the theoretical framework, literature review, and research methodology are all aligned, supporting the success of this evaluation. I will continue to highlight that alignment within the sections of the literature review.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this evaluation encompasses four different areas of focus to argue that (1) systems and structures of P12 education and higher education are embedded with a deficit understanding of students of color (Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005), and (2) Cornerstone students have to navigate those structures when preparing for and navigating through postsecondary options. I utilize research in the fields of postsecondary and college access, strengths-based programming, and community organizations. Additionally, inclusion of the historical and current educational landscape of Massachusetts and Boston localizes the key points of the literature review. I also point

to how Boston's history impacts present-day inequities. These systemic inequities are not discussed as root causes of a lack of access, creating minimal progress for the city's students. I conclude by pointing to the ways strengths-based programming and community organizations have the potential to support students of color in postsecondary access and persistence while simultaneously perpetuating a deficit lens in education.

Current Statistical Understanding of College/Postsecondary Access

There has been a focus on increasing postsecondary access for marginalized students for decades. The field has grown significantly, the process has expanded and adapted, yet the systemic inequities and barriers remain. Despite the ongoing focus and evolution of understanding, challenges and obstacles remain a barrier for some students more than others, perpetuating inequities, particularly for students of color. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022a), the 2020 college enrollment rate for 18-24-year-olds was 40% nationally. The highest rates for enrollment were among Asian students at 63% and white students at 41%. Hispanic and Black students enrolled at a rate of 36%, and Multi-racial and Pacific Islander students enrolled at 34%. At a much lower rate, American Indian/Alaskan Native students enrolled at a rate of 22%. These rates highlight how systemic inequities perpetuate a lack of access for students of color compared to their white peers. The data shows how these inequities create a difference in access between 5% and 19% compared to white students and between 27% and 41% compared to Asian students. Furthermore, outside of the Hispanic population, which improved enrollment rates by 4%, these inequities were unchanged or even greater compared to 2010 data. While this data highlights how systemic inequities perpetuate the culture of power in education, the data discussed continues to center on

whiteness. This deficit lens is so embedded in our educational understanding that these numbers, representing people, are discussed as gaps, problems to be solved. Our approach to remedy these gaps often centers on interventions for the students of color who are not accessing postsecondary opportunities at as high a rate as white students. Until the discussion of this data shifts away from the students as the issue and centers on how these systemic inequities perpetuate a lack of access because of endemic racism, the current approaches will only exacerbate the problem.

In examining this data nationally, we can see a clearer picture of how systemic inequities persist along racial lines and how we use that data to perpetuate a deficit understanding of students of color. Before considering other things, like socioeconomic status, specific location, or parent/guardian education levels, race places students of color, particularly Black, Latinx, and Native American/Indigenous students, at a disadvantage. In thinking through this further with a CRT lens, I am reminded of how intersectionality complicates these numbers nationally, as Crenshaw (1990) highlighted in her work. This data, while necessary, paints a very broad picture of the college enrollment trends and does not consider how other systems of oppression might contribute to a student of color's successful enrollment in higher education.

It is also important to note that 2020 is the year of comparison in the above statistics, as this was also the year that the COVID-19 pandemic started. Higher education continues to grapple with dramatic shifts in enrollment and persistence due to the pandemic. A 2022 study completed by NCES reported that of households with students 18 years or older planning to take postsecondary classes in the fall of 2021, 16% had at least one person in the home cancel or change their plans as a result of the pandemic.

Upon closer examination, 16% of all households are disaggregated to show that the 16% comprises 9% Asian, 15% white, 17% Hispanic, and 21% Black. Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Multi-racial households collectively changed plans at a rate of 20% (NCES, 2022b). The impact of the pandemic on the number of students accessing higher education helps us see more clearly how intersectionality impacts and shifts the systemic inequities in education to keep the culture of power in place (Valencia, 2010). During the pandemic, systemic inequities were perpetuated in other societal structures like the job market, healthcare, and real estate (Benfer et al., 2021). With all of these factors impacting families and communities of color in a more concentrated way during the pandemic, the intersections of these systems of oppression resulted in students being unable to complete their postsecondary plans at an even greater rate. As the Cornerstone program wrestles with the best way to support its students and alums of color, this awareness will be critical as they build their antiracist practices.

The College/Postsecondary Access and Choice Process

Some of the earliest discussions of college access generalized the process for all, highlighting the “typical” journey for choosing a college. That typical journey, however, was based on dominant understanding and centered on the experiences of white, middle-class students accessing college (Welton & Martinez, 2014). In 1989, Hossler et al. highlighted the first college choice model, centering on three phases of the process: predisposition, search, and choice. The first phase of the model, predisposition, explored how students developed their understanding of college and whether it was right for them. The second phase focused on the search for the right college for a student. The choice phase concluded the process when the student made a final decision about which school

to attend. Hossler et al.'s model was simple and straightforward. Unfortunately, the simplicity of the process generalizes the experience for all students and negates the systemic inequities in place that make this process much more complicated. When we overlay this simplistic model with the way the system of education deficit orients students of color, we can see that this model only continues to perpetuate the oppression of students of color. This deficit lens on students of color prevents equitable access to the resources and knowledge needed to make an informed choice in the way this simplistic model suggests. (Valencia, 2010).

To dive deeper into this college access process, Perna (2006) created a conceptual model of the college choice process that addressed the impact of context and environment on the choice process. Perna (2006) highlighted that student demographics, social capital, and cultural capital would all play a part in the outcome of the choice process. She focuses her choice process on what certain students, communities, and populations do not have, which she says then negatively impacts their success in the choice process. What is not discussed is how the systems students are navigating within withhold access to opportunities due to a centering of whiteness in the college access process. Perna's choice process unintentionally places blame on the students and the environments students are emerging from rather than on how the systems of education continue to minimize access to higher education for students who attempt to navigate these systemic inequities. This ongoing message of what students are "missing" then impacts their understanding of whether or not college is "for them" or whether they are "college-ready" in the first place (Castro, 2021; Valencia, 2010).

What is not clearly addressed in either Perna's (2006) or Hossler et al.'s (1987) model is what happens when the college-choice process prevents some students from accessing higher education, making the college-choice process an oppressive system unto its own. In 1997, researchers Hurtado et al. released a study examining how Hossler et al.'s (1989) college choice model played out for students of color, highlighting the systemic inequities preventing access for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. The study determined that gaps in understanding during the postsecondary journey emerged between eighth grade and enrollment in college, particularly for Black and Latinx students, despite high achievement and high college aspirations. Once again, this frames the conversation as a missing understanding from students when it is really highlighting the missing knowledge kept from those students as part of the systemic inequities in education. Hurtado et al. (1997) concluded that the college choice model was designed with higher-income white students in mind and did not consider the barriers and systemic racism within schooling and as a part of the postsecondary journey for students of color.

In reality, the college access process is marred with obstacles and complexities for students of color that limit choice and options in ways that white students do not experience (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). When there is no discussion of community cultural wealth supporting the successful navigation of college for students of color, then that erasure minimizes students' understanding of what they are capable of, perpetuating a deficit narrative (Valencia, 2010). Until the college choice process includes opportunities for all students to see how the wealth and capital, they DO possess can support their access to higher education, students of color are left with the message

that either they are not worthy, or they are only worthy if they ascribe to and build social capital aligned to whiteness.

Alternatively, Welton and Martinez (2014) focused on why a culturally responsive approach to college access and choice is necessary and how programs can begin to incorporate culturally responsive approaches to better support students of color in the access and choice process. Welton and Martinez highlight that white supremacist practices must be acknowledged within secondary schools, particularly concerning what it takes for a student to be "college-ready."

“Therefore, secondary schools should recognize how dominant ideology ostracizes SOC [students of color] from college readiness opportunities. However, high schools must also consider ways in which the cultural identities of SOC mitigate structural barriers to college access and readiness.” (Welton & Martinez, 2014, p. 204)

Here, we see an examination of the college choice process that calls for the acknowledgment of how systems of oppression exist within education and the college choice process.

Welton and Martinez (2014) effectively incorporate Yosso's (2005) understanding of community cultural wealth and its need for validation in higher education. When college access postsecondary programs can examine how whiteness remains centered within the college-choice process and how the education system does not validate students' cultural wealth on their college-going journey, they can build a more antiracist practice. For Cornerstone to truly support its students outside of the dominant narrative, they need to continuously examine how the college choice process perpetuates whiteness and how they validate the strengths and assets its students utilize on their postsecondary journeys. To further understand how this dominant narrative of whiteness impacts students and

alums of color in the Cornerstone program, I will explore the current college access landscape related to students in Massachusetts.

The Current Postsecondary Access Landscape in Massachusetts

When postsecondary/college access programming boomed in the early 2000s, the hope was that more students would successfully navigate to and through college by increasing investments to better support the college-going process for students from marginalized communities (Coles, 2012). Initial investments focused on two areas; P12 schools looked at ways to better support students in college readiness, and higher education focused on supporting students in transitioning to campuses and finding success as a student. As more and more efforts were made to increase college access in marginalized communities, it became clear that the issue needed to be addressed holistically. This section explores the efforts of postsecondary access initiatives in P12 and higher education in Boston within the context of Massachusetts' long history of racism and segregation. Because students of color in Cornerstone are navigating the systems of education that have emerged from this history, it will be essential for them to place their efforts and understanding within this context. Without a continuous reflection of where the history of education has brought us, we cannot be truly prepared to carry that understanding with us as we dismantle and deconstruct those systemic inequities to better support students of color moving forward.

As we look at how postsecondary planning and programming has and is playing out in Massachusetts, we must start by highlighting the long and complicated history of racism and segregation within the education system, particularly when examining the schools and communities that people of color reside in (Delmont, 2016). In the 1960s,

Black parents in Boston protested at school committee meetings. Thousands of Black students conducted "Stay-Outs" from school to protest the segregation that the Boston School Committee refused to acknowledge (Delmont, 2016). In the 1970s, a solution was finally introduced to attempt to desegregate the schools - bussing Black and white students to schools outside their neighborhoods. The response of white parents in the South Boston community was so overwhelming that Boston bussing was thrust into national news headlines, and the white South Boston parents became the main story. Black parents had been fighting for years for recognition of the problem, but it was the white parents' indignation that garnered attention. Ultimately, the plan for desegregating the schools failed, and bussing was taken off the table (Delmont, 2016).

Even after bussing failed, in the late 1970s and 1980s, white families began removing their children from Boston public schools, deciding that there were better educational opportunities outside the city. White families moved to the suburbs or enrolled their children in private institutions that charged significant fees for attending (Chiumenti, 2020). White families exercised their privilege, and as a result, they were able to place their children in what they felt was a better educational opportunity. While these families often blamed the schools or the district for their decision to depart, ultimately, their efforts allowed their children to attend a more predominantly white school, as the suburban communities were and continue to remain predominantly white (Chiumenti, 2020).

Ultimately, this "white flight" to the suburbs created a narrative that said city schools, urban schools were not good schools. This search for a "better" school perpetuated the segregation white families had fought to keep in Boston in the 1960s. As a result, Boston

public schools became deeply segregated. Instead of neighborhood to neighborhood, this segregation became a district-wide phenomenon (Delmont, 2016). So, Boston schools, primarily serving students of color, became seen as inadequate schools. Even in a district-wide fashion, the deficit lens that plagues students of color remained. As long as the Boston public school district was known for what it was lacking, as white families attested to when they departed, the students receiving their education within those schools would also be seen as lacking.

The rampant segregation of the district continues today. In 2020, the Boston Foundation released a report on the segregation of Boston schools, highlighting that two-thirds or 66% of Boston school students attended a school that was considered "intensely segregated," meaning 90% or more of its population identified as students of color (Ciurczak et al., 2020). In 1980, the number of students attending an "intensely segregated" school was 2%. Currently, 87% of students in Boston identify as a student of color. In addition to school segregation by race, schools in Boston primarily serve students from low-income families. In 2014, Boston schools reported that 77% of their student population came from low-income families. Currently, 134 out of 140 schools in Boston reported more than 50% of their student population as low-income (Ciurczak et al., 2020). With a school system primarily made up of students of color and students from low-income families, students in Boston face the systemic barriers that students of color face in a district-wide fashion. The deficit lens is not just on the individual students but on the entire district. Almost 90% of the student population identifies as a student of color, and almost 80% of that same population identifies as low-income. This intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status (Crenshaw, 1990) maintains the white

supremacist cultural understanding of Boston Public schools as lacking, validating white families' decisions to remove their children from Boston schools.

Inadequate Support Reinforces the Deficit Lens in Massachusetts Education

Research has shown that added support, particularly personalized support for students as they navigate the college-going process, is critical to the success of students, particularly first-generation college students, students from low-income families, and students of color (Perna, 2015). The segregation of Boston Public Schools has perpetuated systemic racism for its students, resulting in a lack of funding and resources, creating additional barriers for students of color as they work to navigate the college access process. NLK highlighted a challenge from lack of resources: the ways overworked counselors result in a lack of support.

“I feel like getting help, me personally, I don't really get help from my school with the whole college process. So I do rely on getting help from the staff at Cornerstone. And there is only one guidance counselor at my school now, and she has to deal with so many other people...I'd rather just go, have a one-on-one with anybody that's in the postsecondary team. Because it's more personal and they already know me better than anybody at my school does.” (NLK, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

As postsecondary planning efforts increased in school systems throughout the nation, schools often turned to school counselors to support students in the college access process. School counselor roles shifted to offer more comprehensive college choice guidance to all students (McKillip et al., 2012). Even when counselors are better prepared to support students in accessing college, if their student caseload and other responsibilities prevent them from offering individualized support, they cannot

effectively share their knowledge with students (McKillip et al., 2012; Perna, 2015). In a study of college access for males of color, Elliot et al. (2018) found that in some cases, up to 25% of males of color never actually met with their school counselors about the college choice process until after a final choice had been made (Elliot et al., 2018). This lack of adequate and intentional support within schools continues to perpetuate the systemic inequities in postsecondary access for students of color.

Boston Efforts to Address Inequities

While Massachusetts is often lauded for its higher education opportunities, housing such powerhouse institutions as Harvard University and MIT, significant systemic inequities in access to higher education for students of color still exist. Within the state as a whole, 62.7% of its graduating high school students attend college (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). In contrast, only 49.8% of Boston high school graduates move on to attend college. In the suburban city of Brockton, a partner city of the Cornerstone program, that number is even lower, with just 40.9% of graduates attending college (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022). The population of Brockton High students is 78% students of color. So, despite Massachusetts' reputation for education, postsecondary opportunities are not equitably distributed to communities of color. Within the population of the Cornerstone program, 74% of students are from either Boston or Brockton. Cornerstone participants receive significant personalized support from the program staff throughout their college-going journey. As a result, Cornerstone students from Boston and Brockton move on to postsecondary plans after high school at a rate of 89%, almost 40 points

higher than the average Boston student and almost 50 points higher than the average Brockton student.

To address the inequities in college and postsecondary access in Massachusetts, initiatives have been launched to provide the personalized support needed for Boston Public Schools students. The Boston Foundation launched Success Boston in 2008. It focused on coaching students as they transitioned to college, supporting summer melt, belonging, and connection on college campuses (Linkow et al., 2021). Despite significant community investments, Success Boston (2022) only reaches 30% of students graduating from Boston high schools annually. The resources and opportunities afforded to students have shown an impact in the school district. However, any mention of the fact that the district is overwhelmingly students of color or that they face barriers in accessing higher education is deficit oriented. There is no mention of efforts to dismantle racism in the college access process or how the community cultural wealth and capital of students of color are validated as part of their support efforts. Without acknowledgment of the systems these students are navigating through as inherently racist, the focus of programming will center on what the students are missing or lacking versus the way the system prevents them from succeeding.

The Cost of Attendance Issue in Massachusetts

In addition to a lack of personalized support and individualized resources, Massachusetts students face significant cost barriers to higher education. The average amount a student spends each year in college at a four-year, public, in-state institution is \$25,487 (Hanson, 2022). In Massachusetts, that number jumps to \$27,618. Massachusetts holds the nation's fourth highest cost of attendance rates (Hanson, 2022). The federal

government supports the cost of attendance through its Federal Financial Aid program. In the fiscal year 2021, \$30 billion was allocated to the Pell Grant, SEOG grants, Federal Work Study, and other federal government financial aid programs (Department of Education, 2021). While this seems a significant investment overall, this \$30 billion is distributed to over seven million students yearly, resulting in an average grant amount of between \$10,000 and \$13,000 in the 2015-2016 school year (NCES, 2019). As the cost of attendance has increased year over year, federal aid has not kept pace.

The majority of Cornerstone program participants plan to attend college in Massachusetts. Cost of attendance here becomes even more daunting for students of color. Munoz et al. (2015) released a wealth inequality study highlighting significant racialized systemic inequities in Boston. It found that in Boston, homeownership for white families was 80 percent, while for families of color, it was less than 50%. Moreover, while fewer people of color own homes, those who do are significantly more likely to be in greater debt than their white peers. However, the most striking finding came when examining households' net worth. White households in Boston had a net worth of \$247,000, Caribbean Black households had a net worth of \$12,000, and US-born Blacks and Dominican families had a net worth of \$8. With a net worth of \$8, the cost of attendance becomes an impossible barrier to overcome without significant financial aid options. Furthermore, as highlighted above, the Federal Government does not provide enough financial aid to support covering the cost of attendance for students. Munoz et al.'s (2015) report highlights that the impact of this lack of financial aid is felt overwhelmingly by students of color in Boston, given the systemic inequities present in how wealth and property are racially distributed in the city. These systemic inequities

intersect and combine, limiting the growth and opportunity to improve postsecondary program affordability for students of color.

Boston Addresses Affordability

To address this lack of affordability, former Boston Mayor Marty Walsh launched a free college tuition program for all Boston Public School (BPS) graduates with a 2.0 GPA or higher at Boston's community colleges (TFCC, 2022). Currently, the Tuition-Free Community College (TFCC) program has expanded to all Boston residents as long as they graduate from high school within 18 months of applying. The program covers any remaining tuition and fees at Boston area community colleges after applying the Pell Grant. It also provides \$250 per semester to support books and supplies purchases. In 2017, TFCC expanded to include bachelor's degree options by allowing TFCC students to apply for additional funding through the Boston Bridge program (TFCC, 2022). While this effort could be an effective option to overcome the barrier of cost of attendance, it has not made a significant dent in the needs of Boston students. Between 2016 and 2019, only 489 students were accepted into the program. Boston Public Schools graduates over 4,300 students each year, on average (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). Almost all of those 4,300 students would identify as a student of color. Overwhelmingly, systemic inequities in wealth and property distribution in Boston (Munoz et al., 2015) have prevented families of color from successfully supporting their students in paying for college. So, while TFCC supported hundreds of students, it has left over 4,000 graduates a year, most of whom are graduates of color, to cover the cost of attendance at college in other ways.

The challenge of dismantling the systemic inequities in postsecondary access for students of color in Massachusetts continues to be impacted by its history of segregation in the schools. While efforts are making an impact, there is also a need to explore how these efforts perpetuate whiteness and erase race from the conversation. These initiatives attempt to address systemic inequities in postsecondary access for students of color while simultaneously perpetuating a deficit lens for the students of color that utilize those initiatives. While the deficit lens continues to permeate the education system, some programs are attempting a strengths-based focus in their programming. Cornerstone works from a strengths-based framework, so understanding what strengths-based efforts look like and their impact so far is critical to supporting the Cornerstone evaluation.

Strengths-Based Programming Efforts

While deficit understanding still permeates much of the college-choice process, there have been efforts to shift perspectives. There are attempts within the postsecondary access field to shift the discourse from one that discusses students as “problems to be solved” and moves it to students as “assets to be recognized” (Pang et al., 2018, p. 176). Higher education institutions have also begun incorporating strengths-based approaches, particularly in student affairs (Mason, 2019; Pang et al., 2018; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). By shifting the narrative away from a deficit-oriented understanding, there is an opportunity for students of color to provide counternarratives that tell the stories of capable and powerful young people with all the tools they need to be successful. Scholars of deficit thinking have pointed to a need to shift perspectives in education to place the “blame” on the systems and structures that perpetuate deficit thinking (Williams et al., 2020; Yosso, 2005). Strengths-based understanding can counter the deficit lens that

permeates education. However, shifting education's focus to students' strengths and assets is not easy. It means reflecting on the stereotyped understandings we harbor and working to adjust thinking so that students are individualized, not lumped into categories (Williams et al., 2020).

Strengths-based programming in higher education evolved from assessments created to support students in understanding their strengths. They were designed to give students a list of their strengths and how they can be used to support their college and career success (Lopez & Louis, 2009). Scholars Lopez and Louis then created a set of best practices for higher education institutions to maximize student strengths instead of focusing on the areas in which students were “lacking.” These best practices included personalized, individual support for students in recognizing their strengths and opportunities to practice and utilize their strengths collaboratively in safer spaces where they could continue to grow. A diagram of the flow of the strengths-based program model is included in Appendix A. Lopez and Louis (2009) believe these practices support students' self-efficacy and academic success when effectively implemented.

Lopez and Louis' (2009) strengths-based model has been utilized and followed by several higher education institutions and is considered a standard for strengths-based efforts (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). A challenge in their approach is how this model is broadly implemented, highlighting only specific strengths in line with the assessments used. While on the surface, this may seem to make sense, when those assessment measures center on strengths from a dominant discourse of whiteness, they end up reinforcing a deficit perspective for students of color when students have strengths that do not align with those assessments (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019). In addition, if those

strengths are not explored within the context of the systems and structures a student engages with, they cannot be generalized for all students. By not recognizing the systemic inequities that students of color face when utilizing their strengths in higher education, strengths-based programs are centering their understanding on those not facing barriers (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin, 2019). Ultimately strengths-based programs have the potential to reinforce whiteness, and reinforce deficit understanding, even within their efforts to eliminate it. Fogarty et al. (2018) warned of this, saying, "As such, there is a danger [in] simply advocating strengths-based ways of operating as a corollary to deficit, without carefully considering whether or not the approach is also an active producer of deficit" (p. 5).

Results of Strengths-Based programming in Higher Education

In higher education institutions, efforts have been made to incorporate strengths-based approaches in many areas of campus life, including housing, advising, career counseling, and within the classroom (Mason, 2019; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a & 2015b; Soria & Taylor, 2016). In 2015, Soria and Stubblefield released multiple studies that explored the benefits of a strengths-based approach for first-year students at a large, public, Mid-Western university. Data from a survey taken by over 5,000 first-year students highlights how the institution's strengths-based approach supported students' understanding of their strengths, increased hope, and sense of possibility, and supported their transition to college. The study found that conversations specifically about strengths and how to utilize them, whether in the classroom with faculty, in advising sessions, with housing staff, or with peers at the institution, increased the odds of retention year over year (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015c; Soria & Taylor, 2016). Data also showed that utilizing

a strengths-based approach increased students' self-awareness and confidence while creating a common language and a conversation starter (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). Other studies have found that focusing on students' strengths can increase their sense of agency and hope, allowing them to feel a greater sense of connection on campus (Mason, 2019). By balancing intentional opportunities for students to use their strengths and reflect on those experiences, students can better understand themselves and how they can successfully navigate challenges (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a).

Strengths-Based Programming Validating Students of Color on College Campuses

Studies have shown areas of promise for strengths-based programming for students of color in higher education, particularly when those programs are mindful of how higher education perpetuates deficit thinking. Part of this mindfulness comes from accepting the assets and talents that students bring to their postsecondary experiences regardless of whether they align with the dominant narrative (Pang et al., 2018; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016). Researchers also found a need to recognize students' strengths, provide multiple opportunities to use them in practice, and create space for reflecting on their strengths and how utilizing them supported student success (Pang et al., 2018). The difference is in how those “strengths” are defined, recognized, and validated for students of color (Pang et al., 2018; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016). These studies also highlighted the importance of students of color understanding the context and environment they are navigating through in higher ed, including the systemic racism they will face, particularly in predominantly white institutions. Researchers point to a need to accept the strengths that all students bring to campus and highlight community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as a way for students to understand the social capital they bring. Researchers point to the

need for higher education to repeatedly validate all students' strengths and assets on campus and eliminate deficit thinking for institutions to see true progress (Pang et al., 2018).

Scholars Samuelson and Litzler (2016) shared an example of this in practice when exploring the experiences of students of color in an engineering program. In this study, students used several forms of community cultural wealth or capital to support their persistence, including aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital. Aspirational capital allowed students to see the connection between their work in engineering to their future plans and next steps. Navigational capital supported them in navigating challenging parts of their engineering program and successfully navigating the complicated structures within the engineering department. Resistant capital helped them stay focused on their success. Students saw that they were beating the statistics by staying in their program and resisting the dominant narrative that stereotyped students of color in engineering as dropouts (Samuelson & Litzler, 2016). Ultimately, researchers found that many students combined different types of community cultural wealth to support their persistence in engineering.

There is growing evidence that HBCUs provide a positive space for Black learners and that they contribute to the success of Black students through the positive environment they create (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). HBCUs often use a strengths-based approach, celebrating and valuing students' backgrounds and finding success in a long-term approach to supporting the education of their students. Winkle-Wagner et al. highlighted the intentional and systemic asset-based culture that Spelman College implemented from the moment students were accepted. Researchers found that a holistic culture of success

at Spelman was embedded in all areas of the campus community, supporting the physical, social, emotional, and academic well-being of students at this all-women's college (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). Through these efforts, Spelman created a culture centering on the success of all students, regardless of what strengths and assets they brought to Spelman (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2020). Outside of higher education, there is additional knowledge to be gained from exploring the efforts of community organizations when they incorporate strengths-based programming into their postsecondary efforts.

Community Organizations, Strengths-Based Programming, and Access

As the postsecondary access field expanded and adjusted to work to meet the needs of students facing barriers to accessing higher education, community organizations became an important addition to the field, working to fill in gaps and provide additional support when schools and the education system were unable to meet student needs (Coles, 2012; Sampson et al., 2019). Coles (2012) highlighted community organizations' role in postsecondary access and success, stating that despite a focus on reform in P12 and higher education, community organizations also play a critical role in the movement to increase access and persistence. Coles (2012) highlighted that community organizations are an appropriate fit for the postsecondary access field, pointing to their flexibility in not being tied to core standards or policy and their immersion in local communities.

Community organizations can often offer more holistic services than schools can and center their efforts on youth development, making postsecondary planning and goals a good fit for the work already being done (Coles, 2012). She found that successful community organizations value youth voice and experiences and keep their knowledge and perspectives at the heart of their efforts.

In 2010, the Forum for Youth Investment pushed for further involvement by community organizations in college access (Yohalem et al., 2010). They highlighted youth development organizations, sharing how their further involvement in postsecondary access could give students the additional support needed.

“Practices that are fundamental to the youth development approach – high expectations, social support, engagement, and sustained relationships – are critical to the college completion equation... Flying largely under the radar of the current policy conversation about higher education, they represent a wealth of knowledge and capacity that can and should be mobilized in support of postsecondary success.” (Yohalem et al., 2010, p. 5)

Researchers highlight that the possibility of the greatest success in the postsecondary access field lies with community organizations, P12 education, and higher education systems partnering together to support students (Yohalem et al., 2010).

Where Community Organizations Find Success

Many community organizations have built successful support systems for the students they serve as they navigate their postsecondary goals and plans. Community organizations have supported strong relationships with peers and adults, increased students’ awareness of community impact and critical consciousness, and supported the social capital students need to access higher education (Baldrige et al., 2017; Ventura, 2017). Organizations work to center and amplify student voice, building opportunities to connect students to their community to increase understanding, sense of power, and awareness of the world around them (Ventura, 2017). Intentional mentoring relationships with adults and strong peer-to-peer relationships can increase self-efficacy and a sense of connection to the organization (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Ventura, 2017). When these relationships were also with adults and peers that looked like them or came from similar

backgrounds, community organizations supported their aspirational capital or ability to see their successful futures in college and beyond (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Those relationships build a sense of trust for the students in those community programs, becoming a major support and significantly impacting students' postsecondary journey (Jayakumar et al., 2013). At Cornerstone, students spoke about the importance of their strong relationships and how relatable they were.

“They knew exactly what everyone was going through, to some extent. Even if it wasn't people's personal lives, when you're at camp, you're at camp, and when you're in the program, you're in the program. And they knew that. And I think that made the transition of, like, being thrown into something new a lot easier. Because there was always someone to, someone that had your back.” (Victore, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Research has shown that staff at community organizations that are genuine and sincere support strong relationships that center on trust. Students had agency in cultivating and continuing those relationships, creating safe spaces for themselves where they see staff that really care about their well-being and where students feel free to be themselves authentically (Ramirez, 2021).

Social Capital Brokerage on College Campuses

One of the most significant ways community organizations have supported students, particularly students of color, on their college-going journeys has come through cultivating social capital for the students they serve. In these instances, community organization staff would mediate between students and the higher education institutions they were applying to support those students' successful enrollment (Ramirez, 2021).

These staff would use their networks, or social capital, to advocate for their students' needs.

“Instances of social brokerage included advocating for students with weak college profiles, mediating conversations with educators or gatekeepers, and negotiating access to diverse, beneficial racial and economic networks. These findings establish CBO [community-based organization] staff as strategic social brokers that advocate for the educational success of low-income students of color.” (Ramirez, 2021, p. 1075)

This use of social capital brokerage is transferred to the students, ultimately building that student's network of support on their campuses when the handoff occurs.

Raising Critical Consciousness for Students

Community organizations have also found significant success in supporting their students' critical consciousness and awareness of the needs of their community (Baldrige et al., 2017; Sampson et al., 2019). Community organizations will often utilize problem-solving and community service opportunities to build students' critical consciousness, helping them see all of the ways we are connected and helping them understand that they have the power to impact the world around them (Sulé et al., 2021). Students are encouraged to think about why things are the way they are. The experiences and curriculum focus on examining the world with an understanding of structural racism/classism and then looking at the power and voice they have to impact change (Shiller, 2013). With service and critical exploration of the world around them, Cornerstone students share their understanding of critical consciousness and its importance.

“That's what they mainly do is [tell us] how we're young and our voice has power, and even though the notion is that young people don't know what they're doing and

that they're not mature enough and they're just hooligans - we're professional... we're capable of doing things that other people do." (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 27, 2021)

Through building critical consciousness, students come to understand the resistant capital (Yosso, 2005) they hold by knowing they have the power to change the wrongs they see in their communities. They also utilize their navigational capital as they navigate the challenges they are exploring and can connect those skills to their postsecondary experiences (Shiller, 2013). These areas of success highlight some of the ways that community organizations can help fill in some of the gaps in support and knowledge during the college-going process for students of color. Despite these significant areas of success, community organizations also face challenges. These challenges create tension between the good work they are doing to validate the students they serve and the potential they have to perpetuate deficit thinking for those same students.

Challenges of Community Organizations in Access

As Solorzano and Yosso (2001) highlight in their understanding of critical race theory in teacher education, educational entities hold a tension within them, a contradictory nature. On the one hand, education as a system continues to be steeped in whiteness, marginalizing, and deficit-orienting students of color. On the other hand, education holds the possibility for transformation and liberation. Community organizations are working through the same contradiction. While community organizations may be making space for students of color to feel safe to be themselves, they can often also align with the dominant narrative of individualism and professionalism standards that reinforce deficit thinking (Sampson et al., 2019). Some programs focus on teaching a set of skills or

expectations as a part of the postsecondary access process. However, those skills or expectations align with the dominant, whiteness-oriented narrative of a college-ready student (Sampson et al., 2019). When community organizations reinforce the idea that a student of color needs to be fixed, or follow certain expectations aligned with dominant understanding, they reinforce the deficit thinking and white supremacist culture within education (Castro, 2021).

This reinforcement of deficit thinking creates mixed messages for students of color working with community organizations. They may be joining these programs as an alternative to the deficit lens they face in their schools and then find it duplicated at these programs, particularly if community organizations do not take time to work through their own biases and understandings (Baldrige et al., 2017). As community organizations continue to wrestle with this contradiction, Valencia (2010) suggests several strategies for combatting deficit thinking in education, including active and intentional community engagement with programmatic decisions and increasing opportunities for student agency and voice within programs. He also encourages regular reflection by staff and educators to re-center on the systems that perpetuate oppression and away from blaming students in a deficit-oriented way. Ultimately, community organizations should continue to grapple with the white supremacist culture they are attempting to dismantle and disrupt, regardless of the successes they find in their work and practices.

Conclusion

As Chapter Two comes to a close, it is important to revisit that each decision made thus far in the dissertation has been intentional and centered on the purposes of this evaluation. The theoretical framework aligned with the goal of supporting Cornerstone's

continuous improvement toward a more antiracist set of practices and allowed me to examine the experiences of the students of color in Cornerstone outside of a deficit model. The literature review provided context and perspective on the current postsecondary access landscape and how deficit thinking permeates education. It explored strengths-based programming in higher education and how community organizations have found success in their approaches while continuing to battle racist understanding and challenges within their efforts. This contextual understanding supported the research design and methodology of the evaluation, which I will walk through in detail in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Methodology

When embarking on this evaluation of the Cornerstone program, one of the most important goals was to allow for stakeholder involvement and engagement throughout the process and to allow the participant and stakeholder voices to remain centered throughout the evaluation. These stakeholder voices are critical to the evaluation's success because, as Lincoln (2003) highlights, "the objective of evaluation is to extend the boundaries of the community of knowers beyond policy personnel and program decision makers" (p.1). With this in mind, and with the hope of bringing the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program forward in the process, the methodology selected supported stakeholder voice and empowerment while connecting and aligning with the theoretical framework to produce answers to the evaluation questions that kept the participant voices at the heart of the findings.

The flow of Chapter Three will continue to place the students' and alums' voices of the Cornerstone program at the heart of the methodology discussion, highlighting how their understanding of their voice and the Cornerstone program further supported the methodology choices. I will highlight the methodological choices chosen within a constructivist paradigm and the use of a values branch evaluation, yet bricolages with understandings within the social justice branch approaches. These complementary branches support the dual purpose of gaining insight from the experiences of students of

color and working toward a more antiracist practice for the Cornerstone program. The evaluation implemented a fourth-generation approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to prioritize stakeholder voice throughout the process.

In order to best understand the methodological choices, the chapter will begin with a description of the evaluation site, the Cornerstone program at Pathways, MA. Additional contextual understanding will emerge through a discussion of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the evaluation. After explaining contextual knowledge, the chapter will dive into the heart of the methodology. I will highlight how a constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) aligned with the values and beliefs of the Cornerstone program, making it the best paradigmatic option for the evaluation. Next, a review of the choice to bricolage elements of the values and social justice branches of evaluation highlights a focus on the evaluation purpose. By revisiting the evaluation questions, we can see the alignment between the paradigm, the evaluation approach, and the organization's needs. I will then discuss in more detail the methodological choices, including fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and its implementation. I will also highlight participant selection, data collection, and analysis. I will also share some thoughts on my positionality and how I approached my role as evaluator. Upon reviewing the overall design and implementation of the evaluation, I will discuss judging quality through authenticity criteria, a method encouraged in fourth generation evaluation, and a review of potential limitations and ethical considerations within the evaluation implementation. The chapter will then conclude with a summary of the methodological choices and a nod to the findings and recommendations discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

Site Description

The Cornerstone program is a five-year, year-round leadership development program for young people in the Greater Boston area of Massachusetts. Pathways, MA is a youth development organization in Massachusetts that has existed for decades. As a national initiative, a Fortune 500 corporation started the Cornerstone program, a strengths-based leadership development and postsecondary access program. Pathways, MA decided to launch a branch within its programming in 2004. This program supports middle and high school students from marginalized communities to understand their strengths, impact their communities, and access higher education. Since 2004, when the first cohort of young people began the program, Cornerstone has worked with over 1,200 young people, supporting them in their leadership development, community impact, and college and career exploration.

A selective opportunity, the Cornerstone program accepts nominations each year from community partners throughout the Boston area - public and charter schools and afterschool programs. Even former Cornerstone program members can nominate 7th graders to the program. Once nominated, students complete an application with an essay, submit a recommendation, and complete an interview, ensuring that each applicant understands the program and what it means to join it while allowing program staff to get a feel for the applicant and if they would benefit from what the Cornerstone program offered. Once selected for the program, families and students attend an orientation to understand how the program works and what is expected of students and families as they get started.

Over 70% of Cornerstone participants identify as people of color, 68% qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 75% of participants reside in low-income, urban communities. Several participants in the Cornerstone program have or had a sibling participate, and some parents were a part of Pathways, MA programs when they were children a generation ago. Many Cornerstone program participants return to the program as seasonal or full-time staff members. At the time of the study, four of the eight full-time program staff at Crossroads were graduates of the Cornerstone program.

The program combines immersive residential summer camp experiences with school-year events, weekends, and service opportunities. Through an extensive curriculum implemented during summer camp sessions and school-year activities, Cornerstone works to build student understanding of community impact while making space for them to regularly reflect on the strengths they bring to the group and areas of growth in the future. Some intensive programmatic activities include wilderness trekking, week-long college tours, community-organizing symposiums, career exploration, and networking events.

The program scaffolds and builds upon itself, focusing on specific skills and understanding each year. Students carry those specific skills forward each year after that. As a first-year student, the focus is on learning to understand oneself, one's strengths, and how to connect authentically with others. Year two centers on collaboration and working together, emphasizing that no one can do it all in isolation, regardless of how strong one's skills are. The third year puts everything into practice in a foreign environment, an extensive wilderness trek, and bridges learning and practice with achievement and a sense of accomplishment. This third year is the final year of summer camp programming,

and the transition to postsecondary planning as a primary focus occurs here. The fourth-year centers on college and career exploration in a personalized and individualized manner. Students travel in small groups on a college tour, staying in campus dorms and engaging with the campus community as they consider the best postsecondary option for them. The final year of the program centers on the college and career access process, as well as on community impact. Students in their final months of the program work together to analyze a community issue, better understand community organizing, and then create an individual project highlighting their ability to impact change in their communities. This culminating effort is designed like a capstone project, so they can independently utilize their strengths and talents and present them to the organization for feedback at its conclusion.

Throughout the five-year curriculum, the program centers on relationship building, coaching, and mentoring to support a student's growth. As a result, the program retains over 80% of its participants year-over-year, and before the pandemic, about 70% of students matriculated through the entire five-year program. Over five years, students set goals for their future, serve in their community, and immerse themselves in a postsecondary planning culture. Currently, 89% of Cornerstone graduates enroll in a postsecondary program in the fall immediately following their high school graduation. The program's success depends on opportunities for students to build trusting relationships with each other and the staff. Students often speak of the program as an extension of family or a space where they feel they can be themselves. This focus on trust and connection became particularly salient during data collection, occurring at the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Note About COVID-19: Site and Methodological Complications

When a program centers its opportunities for growth on residential, overnight experiences, trips to tour colleges with stays in residence halls, and events and activities at service site locations, conference centers, and on campuses, it cannot be understated how impactful the pandemic was for students as they discussed their experiences in their interviews and focus groups. Current participants were completing the college application process from their bedrooms on zoom. The reflection and debrief opportunities that drove the Cornerstone program forward did not have the same impact in breakout rooms and on chat notifications. Furthermore, the pinnacle experience of each year, summer programming, was canceled or dramatically altered for two summers in a row. Because of the dramatic impact of COVID-19 on the program, it was impossible to avoid methodological challenges as well.

Initially, I planned to make several visits to observe the programming as it was happening and to complete interviews and focus groups in person. I could not be physically present at the Cornerstone program until the end of the dissertation experience. This inability to complete the evaluation as intended initially could have been a limitation to its effectiveness. Fortunately, my insider understanding of what programming looks like due to my time working at the Cornerstone program made for an invaluable perspective as I completed data collection from a set of zoom and google meet appointments. My understanding of the program under previous circumstances allowed me to bring contextual understanding to the discussions. I had been a part of many debriefs and reflections, hiked with students, visited colleges with them, and counseled them on the best postsecondary fit for them while I was a part of Cornerstone. This

understanding also allowed me to support the Cornerstone program continuously, as a result of what students shared about their experiences with programming during COVID. On more than one occasion, I connected with staff and leadership to share feedback about how students were experiencing zoom calls or what they felt they still needed, even though COVID-19 had effectively canceled that part of the program for them. Because fourth generation evaluation calls for ongoing engagement with all stakeholders, this approach allowed for some in-the-moment responses, even though the impact of COVID was not the focus of this evaluation. This ability to share data in other ways felt relevant and important. It was a way to lift the students' voices in real-time. Lincoln and Guba (1989) talk about the evolving nature of fourth generation evaluation and how evaluators can be responsive to the data as they proceed. The adaptive nature of the evaluation process allowed me to share some feedback and then return to the main focus of the evaluation.

Despite the frustration and challenges that the pandemic presented, it did leave participants with a desire to share their thoughts and clarity around their needs. The unique circumstances presented during data collection proved incredibly useful. Students seemed much more aware of what made the program work, what they wished was different, and how the program helped them understand who they were. The forced removal from programming produced a sense of appreciation for what they had and what opportunities they wished they had experienced or not missed. While there were no initial expectations for any of this to emerge in the way it did, it allowed the students to share a richer understanding of their connection to the program. This unique perspective allowed

the Cornerstone program to see which areas the students highlight as most critical, regardless of the ebbs and flows of the evolution of programming.

The pandemic impacted the dissertation process and, more importantly, the Cornerstone program from the moment I started the evaluation until today. There are several factors, like remote interviewing, inability to observe events in person, and lack of in-person connection throughout the writing process, that, if different, would have resulted in a significantly different evaluation overall. What did emerge from the process was still valuable and something I am genuinely grateful to have been a part of. As we are all beginning to experience, the impacts of the pandemic are real and permanent; in many ways, there is no going back. So, even if I stopped the evaluation altogether and decided to wait until students returned to their programming in person, it would still feel different than its original intent. There was no escaping that. Thankfully, the research design and methodology, and more importantly, the constructivist paradigm at its core allowed for this adaptation and evolution. They lifted participant voices throughout the evaluation process, despite the truly unprecedented circumstances surrounding it.

Methods: Aligning Evaluation Design to Purpose

Knowing what I did about the Cornerstone program, I knew that if this evaluation was going to be valuable and meaningful to the program, it needed to align with what the program valued, what its goals were, and how it accomplished what it did. First and foremost, the Cornerstone program believes in the power of learning from others, of learning through dialogue, collaboration, and reflection. The collective understanding that we are better together than we ever will be alone is central to how Cornerstone teaches leadership and community impact and even how it coaches its students to determine their

postsecondary dreams. It was with this understanding in mind that I chose to center the program evaluation within a constructivist paradigm (Lincoln et al., 2011)), and to dive even further, I selected fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) as my evaluation approach. Constructivism illuminates a worldview in which knowledge creation comes from our interactions and opportunities for reflection (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Fourth generation evaluation takes this understanding and uses a framework that allows new knowledge to emerge through a collaborative effort between evaluators and stakeholders of the program (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In my discussions, participants validated these concepts multiple times, as participants highlighted the importance of learning from each other and learning from their reflections. Nicole, a fourth-year Cornerstone participant at the time of our interview, highlighted how much the collaborative reflections meant to her growth and how integral a part of the Cornerstone program those reflection opportunities were.

“Honestly, some of the best moments in Cornerstone are debriefs after an activity and Insight. Because that's like just hearing people, because you guys ...we all do the same thing, but hearing people's - like what they took away from it - it's like, 'oh I didn't even know that.' But it's in the back of your mind and then what they said unlocked it and it's like 'oh yeah I could think about it this way and not just this way'.” (Nicole, personal communication, April 10, 2021)

Nicole’s note of how her knowledge is “unlocked” by connecting with and listening to others highlights the importance of those moments of reflection for her in the Cornerstone program, and it also highlights the reasoning behind the purposeful choice of utilizing a constructivist paradigm and fourth generation evaluation within this work.

The Constructivist Paradigm: Unlocking Knowledge Together

That ability to "unlock" new knowledge, to bring forth new understanding from opportunities to interact and create dialogue with others is at the heart of a constructivist worldview (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Therefore, the Cornerstone program evaluation utilized a constructivist approach and process to maximize the opportunity for participant and stakeholder voices and allow for their different perspectives and interpretations to have equitable weight. Within a constructivist approach, gaining stakeholder perspectives is a vital part of the process from start to finish. Allowing their input to support the meaning-making and knowledge creation is critical to the evaluation's success (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 2001). In addition, constructivist understanding centers on the knowledge created between people through the relationships and connections they have built. Constructivism holds that there is no single objective truth but that the realities and truths of the world live within an individual's understandings and interpretations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Furthermore, constructivism believes that true meaning and interpretation come from interactions and reflection with others (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens & Wilson, 2019; Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivism is idiographic in that it "focuses on understanding the individual as a unique, complex entity" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). This complex understanding of the individual leads to detailed, descriptive research and a deeper dive into a particular phenomenon versus a generalized overview that would be broadly applicable. Constructivism is therefore emic in its beliefs. This emic understanding highlights the focus on individualized concepts or behaviors as impossible to generalize, as they will

differ between individuals (p. 128). Therefore, with its focus on multiple truths and individualized realities, constructivism is both idiographic and emic in its approach.

While constructivism was the paradigmatic focus, it was also vital that there was a secondary belief in the desire to take steps toward a transformative opportunity for Pathways, MA. In 2020, Pathways, MA refocused its efforts to decenter whiteness understanding from its programming and operations, working to build a more comprehensive set of antiracist practices. With that in mind, examining Cornerstone using critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and community cultural wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005) tells us there is a bricolage of paradigmatic understandings to consider. The focal point of the dissertation centers around constructivism, but it was impossible not to intertwine some of that understanding with a critical paradigm. Researchers that work from a critical paradigm believe in subjectivity and multiple realities, similar to constructivism (Lincoln et al., 2011). Critical theorists take this concept of multiple realities a step further, highlighting that the social constructs we journey through are impossible to separate from the realities we understand. Lincoln et al. (2011) highlight that those societal systems are at the heart of the truths we discover, saying, "such critical theorists tend to locate the foundations of truth in specific historical, economic, racial, and social infrastructures of oppression, injustice, and marginalization" (p. 177). Within the Cornerstone program evaluation, removing the dynamics of power and privilege was impossible. In looking to center the voices of students and alums of color to support the efforts of the organization's move toward a more antiracist approach, I needed to also utilize a critical worldview. Underneath that constructivist focus was a

layer of critical understanding, and it was utilized throughout the evaluation to support interpretations and raise awareness.

Over time, theorists have pointed to an evolution of paradigms and how they are changing and shifting, highlighting where different paradigms have become complementary to each other to produce new knowledge and understanding (Lincoln et al., 2011). This elimination of an absolute understanding of one paradigm as a unique entity without engaging others allows further depth and complexity to emerge with the knowledge explored. This complementary or collaborative use of interdisciplinary theories and paradigm is an interplay of sorts, also called a bricolage (Lincoln et al., 2011; Ponterotto, 2005). "There is great potential for interweaving of viewpoints, for the incorporation of multiple perspectives, and for borrowing or bricolage, where borrowing seems useful, richness enhancing, or theoretically heuristic" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 167). With this understanding, it was most beneficial to center the evaluation on constructivism but intertwine the understandings of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and CCW (Yosso, 2005) to support the amplification of the voices of students and alums of color during the evaluation. The success of this multipurpose evaluation depended on an approach that kept the voices of students of color at the heart of each step in the process. Before diving into the specifics of the process, I think it is important to review the purposes of the evaluation and the questions it looked to answer. This review will help contextualize the evaluation design choices moving forward.

Review of Evaluation Purpose and Questions

For Cornerstone, the purpose of the evaluation is two-fold. First and foremost, this program evaluation aims to explore the experiences of students of color and center their

voices and understanding throughout the process. This amplification of their voices will provide counternarrative opportunities for students of color engaged in strengths-based programming for Cornerstone to gain insight. Secondly, there is an opportunity for student-centered understanding to support the continued transformation and evolution of the Cornerstone program and Pathways, MA, as it takes steps toward a more antiracist, anti-oppressive set of practices. Pathways, MA, has prioritized moving toward a more antiracist set of policies and procedures. In order to do so effectively, the organization's staff need to gain insight and understanding into how its students of color are experiencing different aspects of the Cornerstone program as students and alums journey through it and utilize it to support their postsecondary plans.

This multipurpose evaluation centered on questions that would illuminate the experiences of students of color in Cornerstone to support staff in moving toward a more antiracist practice. The questions utilized for this program evaluation were:

- How do Cornerstone students and alums of color describe their program experiences?
 - Which programmatic elements of the Cornerstone program are at the forefront of their understanding and meaning-making?
- How do Cornerstone students and alums of color make meaning and connections between their experiences in Cornerstone and their postsecondary journey?
 - How do they describe relationships with staff, and if at all, how do those relationships support their sense of self and postsecondary journeys?

These questions allowed for the words and understanding of the students to serve the multiple purposes of the evaluation while minimizing evaluator influence. With the questions and purposes aligned, it was then necessary to intentionally select a methodological framework that would allow for gaining summative insight into the experiences of students of color while also providing opportunity for continuous improvement in the antiracist practices of Pathways Massachusetts and the Cornerstone program. With a constructivist paradigm and a desire to weave in critical understandings chosen, finding an evaluation type that would bring opportunity for co-creation and collaborative reflection was a crucial next piece of the puzzle.

Fourth Generation Evaluation: Constructivism in Action

When I first explored evaluation types and approaches to consider, I started by narrowing in on an evaluation branch. With a constructivist paradigm, the evaluation type needed to allow for the exploration of multiple truths and realities based on participants' interactions and reflections. Within the values branch of evaluation theory, there is space for that understanding, as the values branch highlights that our values and biases cannot be removed entirely from the evaluation process, even as the evaluator (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). This understanding felt salient to my worldview and aligned with the purpose of gaining insight from the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program. Another consideration, however, was the purpose of improving the Cornerstone program's antiracist practices. This purpose required a critical lens. The evaluation design allowed for a critical examination of the Cornerstone program using critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and community cultural wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005). These theories highlight the embedded racism within our societal structures and

systems by pointing out racism's inevitability in our current world (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2005). By utilizing CRT and CCW, the knowledge gained in the Cornerstone program evaluation was more purposefully analyzed for the unique learnings and experiences of students and alums of color as they explored their strengths and connected them to their college-going identity. Utilizing the tenets of these theories highlights the importance of validating the strengths and assets that students of color carry with them while simultaneously making space for how these students believe those strengths and assets are perceived within the Cornerstone program and in their communities and postsecondary experiences. These counternarratives provide additional perspective for stakeholders and staff within the Cornerstone program and Pathways Massachusetts organization, allowing the stories and experiences of students of color to be at the center of their efforts to move toward a more antiracist practice and approach within programming.

When selecting an evaluation type, this additional consideration meant that the evaluation approach needed to sit within the values branch of evaluation but also lean toward the social justice branch of evaluation theory (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Ultimately, the critical examination of the program should lead to a more just and equitable experience for students of color. This meant finding an evaluation approach that made space for the values of all stakeholders while pushing for program improvement that would enhance empowerment and equity for the students of color that were a part of Cornerstone.

Through the paradigmatic understanding of constructivism, Guba and Lincoln (1989) created an evaluation approach that utilized the concepts of a constructivist paradigm to

allow for a co-creation of findings and interpretations between the evaluator and the stakeholders within the evaluation process. A constructivist paradigm tells us that we will interpret the world around us differently based on how we interact and communicate. Evaluations, then, must be conscious of how those multiple realities and understandings can be a part of the evaluation efforts throughout and not funneled through one viewpoint by the evaluator. Guba and Lincoln (1989) created fourth generation evaluation after they realized that a truly impactful evaluation must work to include all voices equitably and that the greatest chance to allow for the representation of all voices within the evaluation would be to include both evaluator and stakeholder voices throughout the evaluation process. This focus on co-creation is made possible in fourth generation evaluation by hermeneutic dialectic circles, a process in which evaluator(s) and stakeholders come together to talk through their understandings and interpretations of the research, the program, the learnings in order to find common ground and to talk through discrepancies together. Ultimately, this process creates the opportunity for new understanding and interpretations [or, as Guba and Lincoln (1989) put it, constructions] to emerge, ultimately ending in a learning process for all involved. It is hermeneutic in that through working together and learning from each other's understandings, there will be a deeper meaning and more impactful knowledge-building opportunity through those interactions. It is dialectic in that there is a recognition that understandings will sometimes conflict with each other and need to be reconsidered and reworked through this circular and cyclical process of analysis and discussion (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 89-90). Knowing that the evaluation would focus on the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program, the best way to understand their experiences would be by allowing them to

share their personal knowledge and stories. Fourth generation evaluation provided a process to center and re-center the voices of students and alums of color in the Cornerstone program at many different points. This approach also allowed other program stakeholders, like staff and board members, to learn from the students' and alums' knowledge and expertise and consider it in relation to their own contextual knowledge of the program. For these reasons, and because reflection and dialogue were such an integral part of the Cornerstone program already, a fourth-generation evaluation approach aligned with the goals and purpose of the evaluation.

Utilizing the Steps of Fourth Generation Evaluation

Fourth-generation evaluations are not looking for generalizability, as the multiple perspectives included in the process will prevent the same results within different evaluation processes (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Instead, this constructivist approach looks to gather perspectives to the point of data saturation, allowing for a more profound and multi-faceted understanding of the program and all its parts to emerge from the data collected. The fourth-generation evaluation occurs in two general phases; “discovery and assimilation” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 2001). During the initial discovery phase, the evaluator, working with stakeholders, gathers information and perspectives from all those invested in the program, from leadership to participants (Guba & Lincoln, 2001). Through the information and perspectives collected, the evaluator will interpret the different meanings, understandings, or constructions resulting from the data collected.

To support understanding between myself and stakeholders, I broke the discovery period into two phases. Discovery phase one centered on preparation, initial data

collection, and planning. This phase included meeting with the Director of Program Evaluation to discuss the concept and goals and meeting with Pathways, MA's CEO to discuss planning. Discovery phase one also included a program staff focus group to gather contextual understanding and discuss planning for participant recruitment. Discovery Phase two included the remaining data collection, individual interviews, and focus groups for current participants in Cornerstone and recent graduates from the Cornerstone program. As the discovery phase concludes, the fourth-generation evaluation approach shifts to the assimilation phase. The assimilation phase centers on Guba and Lincoln's (1989) approach of "hermeneutic dialectic" (pp. 149 – 155) or a series of dialogues between the evaluator and a diversified group of stakeholders. It is important to highlight that Guba and Lincoln (1989) do not require the discovery and assimilation phases to happen in a specific order. They also point out that movement between the two phases as the evaluation continues is possible and expected. In this way, the data collection and analysis processes of fourth generation evaluations are not linear but an ebb and flow of knowledge, interpretations of that knowledge, and then restructuring even further as new knowledge emerges and is collected. Guba and Lincoln (1989) highlight this back-and-forth of refining information, gathering new information, and refining it even further as an integral part of the evaluation process and how stakeholders remain a part of the process from start to finish. "Thus the constructivist cycles and recycles the hermeneutic circle, sometimes retracing steps or leaping across intervening stages, until there is consensus" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 180). I have created a Venn Diagram to support the visualization of the phases of Fourth Generation Evaluation, found in Appendix B.

The goals and pillars of fourth generation evaluation are the concepts of dialogue, reflection, and an ongoing co-creation of knowledge. These practices aligned with the purposes of the Cornerstone program evaluation and my paradigmatic understanding of constructivism. It allowed for and encouraged the amplification of marginalized voices in the evaluation process. In these ways, it was the right choice for the program evaluation. Because the stories and experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program were so critical to the evaluation's success, the evaluation design was only phase one of the intentionality needed to effectively complete the evaluation's objectives. There was equal importance placed on determining who would share their stories as part of the evaluation, as the participants and stakeholders that were a part of things would be co-creating the knowledge right alongside me.

Participant Selection

Effective qualitative research must include good quality data, and good quality data comes from purposefully chosen participants, or as Jones et al. (2014) say, "sampling for information rich cases holds the greatest potential for generating insight about the phenomenon of interest" (p. 107). Each group of participants was purposefully selected with specific criteria to support good quality data and a depth of data that would benefit the evaluation process. Participants in the evaluation data collection fell into two groups: program staff and current students and alums of the Cornerstone program. All program staff were invited to and agreed to participate in an initial focus group, providing contextual understanding and knowledge about the current state of the Cornerstone program and its implementation efforts. This staff selection was purposeful, and the only

criteria for participation were that they were current full-time staff members for the Cornerstone program team.

To work to continuously minimize my voice and influence in the process, I asked the program staff team at Cornerstone to produce a list of qualified current students and alums so that I could reach out to potential participants that the staff team felt represented the diversity of experiences and understandings of students within Cornerstone. Knowing that we wanted to explore the experiences of students and alums of color at Cornerstone and as they took their college-going journey, I highlighted some specific criteria to narrow the program staff team's focus as they culled together names. I asked for the identification of potential participants to include several factors. First, to understand the experiences of students of color in a strengths-centered program supporting their postsecondary journey, we needed to focus on current Cornerstone students planning to enter college within the next year or two and alums of the Cornerstone program that had recently started college. Second, to effectively evaluate the program using the theories of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and CCW (Yosso, 2005), the case study participants needed to identify as a student of color. Third, participants needed to have a current relationship with program staff in the Cornerstone program. The Cornerstone program team already knew that strong relationships were key to their success, and it was important to allow the students of color interviewed for the evaluation to share their interpretations of what made those relationships meaningful and in what ways those relationships influenced them and their understanding outside of the program itself. With those sampling criteria in mind, I worked with the Cornerstone program staff to identify a minimum of 25 people to invite to participate, with the initial goal of having 15

participants. Guba and Lincoln (1989) highlight the importance of purposeful sampling and continued exploration of sampling throughout data collection to reach a point of data saturation where no new issues or knowledge emerge from discussions. As interviews concluded, saturation occurred after discussions with eleven total participants.

Initially, I planned for a snowball sampling practice to increase participation as needed. Snowball sampling is used in qualitative research when additional data is needed, and current participants can share recommendations of who else might provide critical perspectives for the study (Jones et al., 2014). Snowball sampling is also an effective strategy for fourth generation evaluation approaches, as it supports the need for data saturation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 2004). In the end, I utilized this strategy only once when a recent graduate of the Cornerstone program declined participation but offered the name and contact information of another recent graduate that he thought would be a good fit. Otherwise, the list of students offered by the Cornerstone program team was sufficient because most students approached about interviews were keen to participate.

Students were initially reached out to by program staff, who shared an overview of the plan for the evaluation and explained that I might reach out to them to share information about participation. After the program staff outreach, I emailed potential participants to go over the purpose and focus of the evaluation and participation requirements. All potential student participants currently in the Cornerstone program received an overview of the evaluation and a consent form for them and their parents to sign electronically. This informed consent form can be found in Appendix C. Since several students were not yet 18, an assent form was included, highlighting that they were

willing to participate and fully aware of what it meant to do so. The assent form can be found in Appendix D. Pathways, MA also required that all of its currently enrolled students in Cornerstone have a parent signature for participation, regardless of their age at the time of the study. Alums of the Cornerstone program currently enrolled in college were not required to have a parent's signature for their consent forms and were not given an additional assent form to complete. All recent graduates were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three at the time of data collection completion. Both current Cornerstone students and alums completed an individual interview. All participants also received an invitation to a follow-up focus group as part of the evaluation process. After completing their interview and focus groups and reviewing transcripts and interpretations, participants received a \$10 gift card, delivered via text or email, to either Chipotle, Starbucks, or Amazon, depending on their preference. These data collection options centered on qualitative methods in a purposeful way. In the next section, I will highlight why the use of qualitative methods, specifically interviews, and focus groups, were the best choices for this program evaluation.

Data Collection Overview

With a focus on elevating the voices of the students and alums of color that agreed to participate in the evaluation, purposeful data collection needed to allow their knowledge and experiences to be at the heart of the analysis process. With that in mind, I decided to focus on qualitative data collection methods, particularly interviews and focus groups. Knowing that the Cornerstone program focused a lot of its learning on reflection and debrief opportunities, I felt that those methods would allow the participants ample opportunity to talk through their reflections and to share their truths and realities in a way

that felt comfortable, and also in alignment with their experiences in the Cornerstone program. I also knew that some contextual understanding might be important as we worked through the hermeneutic dialectic circles, so I planned for observations and document review to be a part of the process. While document review was possible and not an issue due to the pandemic, observations became a challenge, as programming that did occur looked much different from what students had previously experienced. Ultimately, both data collection methods looked much different in practice than initially anticipated. In those moments, my previous employment at Pathways, MA, and for the Cornerstone program became ever more critical to the program evaluation's success, as I had contextual knowledge and understanding of what events and programming looked like pre-pandemic because of my employment there. When processing students' realities and truths with them, I utilized my insider knowledge in a way that ultimately benefited the evaluation overall, particularly given the timing of its completion.

Qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups are also considered appropriate and important for inclusion in a fourth-generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Some researchers have argued that qualitative methods align with a paradigm that centers on multiple truths and realities. Ponterotto (2005) highlights that constructivism is hermeneutic in its understanding; knowledge creation emerges from interactions and engagement with others and reflection of those interactions. Ponterotto sees constructivist research as a co-creation of findings based on those reflections in the evaluation process. “Reflection is stimulated from research-participant dialogue” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). With all of this in mind, and with the purpose being bringing the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program to the forefront for greater understanding and

meaning-making, data collection focused on interviews and focus groups, with additional support from observations and document review.

Participant Overview

After the selection process, six program staff members, six current Cornerstone participants, and five recent alumni of the Cornerstone program participated in focus groups and interviews. Staff members had all worked for the Cornerstone program for at least one year, and all were employed full-time at the time of the focus group. Four program staff identified as women, and two identified as men. Three staff identified as white, one as Black, one as Multi-Racial, and one as Asian American. All program staff members participated in the same focus group. All six of the current Cornerstone students identified as students of color. Four students identified as women, and two students identified as men. All of these students were in their last two years of the Cornerstone program and engaging in the college access process in some way, shape, or form at the time of their interview. Five alums of the Cornerstone program identified as students of color also opted into the study. Three of these recent graduates identified as men, and two as women. These students graduated from the program between 2016 and 2019. Four were currently enrolled in college, and one graduated in 2020.

Interview Details

Each student that opted into the study was interviewed individually in a semi-structured format to allow for equitable influence in the interview process. A semi-structured approach covers broad topics and open-ended questions rather than a detailed set of interview questions that require an answer. It allows participants to share their perspectives as they see fit, highlighting the most meaningful points while remaining

within the overarching topics and discussion points for data collection purposes (Jones et al., 2014). Interview completion took 45-90 minutes, depending on the participant. Each interview started with me describing what I was doing, an overview of my time with Pathways, MA and the Cornerstone program, and an opportunity for the students to ask me any questions they might have before we started. I also made space for them to share any current things going on in their life or their day to help them release any outside influences and ground themselves in our discussion. All interviews were completed over zoom, as in-person discussions were not feasible during the pandemic. Many participants had been on zoom or a similar format for hours before our discussion for class or work. While they were all enthusiastic participants in the study, it was clear that zoom fatigue was a part of their lives. I did my best to let them use their time in the ways they felt were best, knowing that the time and space we were all in during the pandemic was draining and overwhelming. I took notes as the students spoke and asked follow-up questions at certain points for clarification or to get them to dive deeper into the point they were trying to make.

The topics covered within the semi-structured interview focused on the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program and during the college access process. I also asked students to share their understandings of relationships with Cornerstone staff and relationships with other students in the Cornerstone program. In this semi-structured format, students could choose to skip any topic they were uncomfortable discussing and were encouraged to share any additional details that they wanted to speak about that did not come up during other points in the discussion. This semi-structured approach choice options for the interview participant allowed participants to have some control over the

discussion and how the interview evolved. This ability to work from the participants' lens and needs is an important component of fourth generation evaluation when working to co-create constructions or meaning between participants and evaluators (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In this way, the semi-structured approach and protocol were key factors in discovery phase two data collection. I shared the interview protocol for current Cornerstone students in Appendix E. Interviews with Cornerstone alums asked them to reflect similarly on their experiences and understandings as students of color in the Cornerstone program, to reflect on the relationships they had with staff and participants in Cornerstone and also made space for participants to share their experiences thus far as students of color in higher education institutions. I shared the interview protocol for Cornerstone alums in Appendix E as well.

Focus Group Details

The evaluation also included three focus groups. Focus groups bring small groups together to discuss topics and questions similar to those developed in interviews. Focus group participants can build on each other's thoughts and ideas, producing a rich discussion (Kellogg Foundation, 2017). The first focus group was with program staff at the Cornerstone program. This focus group discussion gathered contextual understanding of the program and what staff believed was working and not working. Two additional focus groups were utilized as a follow-up discussion after initial interviews with current students and alums concluded. In the fourth-generation evaluation process, these focus groups acted as hermeneutic dialectic circles (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) or an opportunity to build upon the initial understanding that emerged from individual interviews. A constant comparison of data as it is collected is an integral part of building upon the

initial meaning examined as we work toward a more comprehensive and sophisticated set of understandings for use by the program (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In this evaluation, follow-up focus groups allowed participants to return to the initial points they had discussed and compare each other's understandings and knowledge.

The program staff focus group was completed first and designed to support contextual understanding of where staff members felt the program was at, what issues they felt were at the forefront of their current work, and what they believed were important things to keep in mind as I began interviewing students and recent graduates. The contextual knowledge from the staff focus group allowed for a deeper understanding of the staff stakeholder perspective, particularly those staff working closely with the current Cornerstone participants. As stated earlier, fourth generation evaluation involves stakeholders throughout the evaluation process and brings forth opportunities for hermeneutic dialectic circles as a part of the methodology and analysis process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In this instance, the focus group acted as an initial hermeneutic circle for staff in that they were able to bring their understanding of the program forward and share what they felt were the most transformational components of the program for the students involved, as well as the focus areas for growth and improvement. Guba and Lincoln discuss the importance of gaining a broader understanding of the issues at the outset to better support a narrowing of what is most salient as the evaluation progresses. With this mindset, I approached the staff focus group discussion to set the contextual stage for the discussions planned with students and alums of the Cornerstone program. The focus group protocol for the staff focus group is in Appendix E.

Two other focus groups completed after individual interviews concluded involved students and alums. One focus group centered on current student participants, and one included alum participants of the Cornerstone program. Four of the six current students in Cornerstone participated in a focus group, and four of the five recent graduates of Cornerstone participated in their focus group. Each focus group lasted 90-110 minutes. These focus groups supported a contextual understanding of interview discussions and highlighted the data saturation point. They allowed for a deeper clarification and discussion of what emerged for each group in their interviews (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I began the focus groups with a reminder of the purpose of the program evaluation and the goal to better understand the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program. I also provided some context to the importance of sharing both highlights and challenges to best support the program's growth and improvement for future students. I shared an example of how previous students in the program had once brought forth feedback about the program's dress code, sharing that it was culturally insensitive to the needs of Black students in the program, particularly during its overnight and residential camp components of programming. I highlighted this example to remind students that their voices and perspective are critical and that without them, the Cornerstone program might miss essential understandings needed to support its students best. I then utilized themes that had emerged in multiple interviews and some key moments that had come up as a starting point for discussion in both focus groups. I asked participants in these focus groups to weigh in on the themes presented, adding to what discussions had already occurred or offering an alternative viewpoint to the group as the discussion ensued. The protocol for both student and alum participant focus groups are in Appendix E.

These follow-up focus groups were also utilized as hermeneutic circles in the evaluation process, with the goal of bringing meaning and interpretations to a more salient place over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The purpose of the hermeneutic circle is for stakeholders to weigh in on the data collected and share their understanding of it. By doing this together, groups can attempt to work through any conflicting understandings or gain clarity about the information that has come forth, ultimately, over time, bringing about a narrower focus and a more defined set of learnings. So, these focus groups become a part of the data collection and data analysis process, as each is constant and interplays with each other throughout the fourth-generation evaluation process. Student participant and alum participant focus groups were just one point of refining within the evaluation process.

Alternative Observations

Initially, data collection planned to include observations of programming sessions. The goal was to observe the programmatic elements brought up in interviews and focus groups to witness the events most salient to the experiences of the students of color interviewed for the Cornerstone evaluation. This use of observations would support the importance of varied data collection methods needed for effective fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Unfortunately, these programmatic elements had yet to be fully reincorporated into programming at the time of data collection and analysis because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Because events and programming during the pandemic looked much different than those discussed in interviews, most observations would not have been able to provide the contextual understanding hoped for as part of the evaluation process. Instead, there were three moments of observation that I engaged with

outside of the initially planned scope. The 2020 and 2021 Cornerstone graduations were virtual. Each graduation lasted approximately two hours. I attended and observed these events to gain contextual knowledge about community and culture within the Cornerstone program. In addition, a virtual fundraising event in May of 2021 allowed me to listen to how leadership staff spoke to stakeholders about students' experiences within the program. I took notes during all observations to help support my memory, to help me think through the contextual nuances that emerged, and to compare the ways in which organization staff spoke about Cornerstone in comparison to evaluation participants. It was important to hear the perspective shared at that event to determine how understandings matched those that the students shared in interviews and focus groups and where the organization and its staff shared different understandings or messages. Outside of these alternative observations, I utilized document review to add context and verify points made in interviews and focus groups.

Document Review as Triangulation

I utilized a few programmatic overview documents for review as part of the data collection process. The Cornerstone staff team shared their Learning Stance, Outcomes, and Theory of Change, and all were shared as online documentation for my review. Documents utilized supported comparison of the experiences that students and alums shared to the outcomes the organization hoped for. These documents were also helpful in gaining perspective on the priorities of the organization. Yin (2008) highlights that document review can validate and corroborate other data sources and provide additional perspective to the evidence already collected. I utilized document review to fill in some gaps in understanding and confirm that what was shared matched what the organization

had put into practice. Guba and Lincoln (1989) highlight the use of documentation to connect to the meanings emerging from the interviews and focus groups. I also utilized document review to examine spaces and opportunities for movement toward a more antiracist set of practices.

Summary of Data Collection

Overall, the data collection methods allowed the voices and understandings of the students of color interviewed to remain centered throughout the evaluation process. The perspectives of program staff, the observations I made, and the documents I reviewed helped to refine and mine the data presented by the students and recent graduates, keeping their experiences at the heart of the evaluation. In this way, there is a focus on empowering voices not often centered or included in decision-making conversations. This empowerment opportunity is a goal of fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In addition, there is validation and corroboration of those students' truths through observations, the staff focus group, and document review within the data collection. This framework for data collection allowed for a similar flow within data analysis. The experiences of the students of color, as told by them in their interviews, were the focus of the analysis. Staff perspectives, stakeholder feedback, document review, and observations provided contextual understanding and an opportunity to refine the knowledge brought forth, supporting implications and recommendations. The analysis process then became about building understanding and knowledge based on the experiences shared and the voices that shared them.

Data Analysis

When approaching the data analysis process, I wanted opportunities for stakeholder involvement to be ongoing and multi-faceted so that if they found it difficult to express their understandings and voices through one step in the process, they would have the opportunity to do it again, perhaps in a different way or through a different medium. This back-and-forth process that included multiple opportunities for feedback by stakeholders is the key to effective fourth generation evaluation, according to Guba and Lincoln (1989). In discussing the hermeneutic dialectic process, they highlight it as a way to connect understandings between participants, various other stakeholders, and the evaluator. "Nevertheless, the major purpose of this process is not to justify one's own construction or to attack the weaknesses of the constructions offered by others, but *to form a connection* between them that allows their mutual exploration by all parties" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 149).

Throughout the evaluation process, I connected with Cornerstone participants and stakeholders through interviews, focus groups, hermeneutic dialectic circles, emails, and text messages. I wanted to provide ample opportunity for the ideas and perceptions of all stakeholders, particularly the students and alums of color who were at the heart of the evaluation process, to come forward in whatever ways felt comfortable for those involved. Moreover, in line with fourth generation evaluation practices, this back-and-forth collection and analysis is integral to combing through the meanings and interpretations with all those involved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In a world and time

where we all felt zoom fatigue on an ongoing basis, having the option to send a quick email or text to me instead of jumping on another call felt like a good fit for some participants as we reflected on their responses. With time zones and school schedules also complicating when our free blocks of time would align, these back-and-forth options allowed the students to engage when they felt they could. The adaptable flow of the fourth-generation evaluation process allowed me to accept those reflections as part of the ongoing collection/analysis process.

For instance, in a back-and-forth with Nevaeh, a student participant I interviewed in Spring 2021, she came to a new realization about her interview responses. After reviewing her transcript, she shared something she had not articulated in our interview or during the follow-up focus group opportunity. When examining her words on paper, she noticed things about how she spoke and what she emphasized that I had not noticed on my own. In an email, Nevaeh wrote, "I realize that my thoughts weren't fully developed when initially answering the question on zoom, and my answers were very repetitive, so I apologize" (Nevaeh, personal communication, January 31, 2022). Her reflection revealed a realization that would not have emerged in the interview alone. This chance to examine her words and share her realizations with me led us to an ongoing discussion over email about what that might have meant. In the end, we both realized that her repetitive responses were ultimately her articulation of the most transformative and critical things to her as a Cornerstone participant. It was for moments like this that I chose to approach the Cornerstone evaluation with constructivism in the first place. As I will share in the

remainder of this section, the ongoing back and forth between data collection and data analysis were critical components to the success of the evaluation overall.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) speak significantly of the parallel work of data collection and analysis, with the understanding that all stakeholders and participants, including myself as the evaluator, are becoming more aware and more educated about the data and its meaning as we proceed. This ongoing "interplay of data collection and analysis that occurs as the inquiry proceeds" (Guba & Lincolns, 1989, p. 178) occurs as hermeneutic dialectic circles, a set of ongoing opportunities for reflection, connection, and reaction to the data and interpretations that are emerging. These circles always include the evaluator, but outside of that, the groups that meet in these circles can shift and change as the evaluation continues and as new knowledge and understanding emerges. The hermeneutic dialectic circle process occurred in three phases for this evaluation. Each phase presented opportunities for the data interpretation to shift and change as it when revisited, re-examined, and adapted based on new understandings through discussion and reflection. The first phase was most closely aligned with traditional data collection processes, as participants reviewed the initial interview transcripts and interpretations. The second phase involved re-examining the interview data and diving deeper into the initial interpretations in follow-up focus groups for alum participants and then student participants. During this same phase, data from interviews was culled together and examined by Cornerstone staff for their initial feedback. The final phase was taking the interview and focus group interpretations and diving deeper into the emerging themes,

utilizing document review and observations as necessary and possible. This final phase also produced the findings that would be the focus of recommendations and strategies for Cornerstone moving forward.

Data Analysis: Phase One

In phase one, each interview completion occurred with either a student or an alum of the Cornerstone program. After the interviews, I examined the content for how each group of participants talked about the program and what seemed to come up most often in discussion. I utilized a broad thematic coding analysis for this initial review, pulling seven main themes I noticed current participants and recent graduates regularly highlighting. These themes comprised the overarching topics for discussion in our follow-up focus groups. I met with four of the six student participants in one ninety-minute discussion over zoom and four of the five alum participants in a separate ninety-minute discussion over zoom. These zoom meetings focused on diving deeper into their understanding of what had emerged from the initial interviews and what they took from those discussions. Within this first phase, I also hosted a zoom session for Cornerstone staff and reviewed the main themes that had emerged from initial interviews with them. This discussion centered on what had emerged for the students of color interviewed and what thoughts and questions came up for staff as they saw what these students were discussing.

Lastly, there were more individualized hermeneutic dialectic circles happening in phase one between myself and each student participant interviewed as we reflected on

and examined their initial interviews and the themes that emerged from those discussions through a more traditional member-checking process. For this process, I wanted to simplify the data to allow the student participants interviewed to review what was said more easily and in what ways I was interpreting what they said initially. A full interview transcript was dense, long, and cumbersome. I also knew that most of the participants interviewed had not been a part of research in this way and therefore did not have as much of an understanding of how to read through the transcripts and what to reflect on as I did. Fourth generation evaluation does not look to exclude stakeholders based on their lack of understanding or knowledge of the process. It places the responsibility on the evaluator to educate and support stakeholders in being able to participate effectively and contribute at an equitable level (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). With that in mind, I created a shorter, more succinct summary report of the interviews for each student to review and examine. These summary reports highlighted the main points that I found in the interview and included quotes from the interviews to back up where those main points had emerged. I sent these summary responses to each student interviewed and the full transcript for reference as needed. Each student was then able to review the summary sheets and utilize the transcript as needed, to weigh in on how I understood what they were saying and to share their understanding of what was said. These ongoing discussions happened primarily over email and text. Students examined and gave feedback on the summary responses and transcripts while highlighting how they saw the data presented before them. This process allowed me to support the students in

understanding where and how they could use their knowledge and perspectives to continue to propel the evaluation forward. It also supported the education of participants on some of the complexities of formal evaluation and research to support their sense of empowerment as an equitable contributor in the process. I utilized these practices to align with the focuses of education of all stakeholders, equitable voice for all stakeholders, and empowerment through the process within fourth generation evaluations (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln, 2003). Lincoln (2003) highlights the importance of participants' ongoing involvement in the evaluation process as a way of remembering their humanity, saying, "To the extent that evaluation participants are honored as active agents in the processing, analyzing, interpreting and re-narration of evaluation data, they have regained status as non-objectified conscious beings" (p. 6).

Data Analysis: Phase Two

During phase two of the data analysis process, I took the initial themes from the interviews and overlaid them with discussions and reflection during the initial hermeneutic circle opportunities of phase one. I did hand coding of the focus groups conducted and compared the themes that had emerged from those discussions with those in the initial interviews. I utilized notes and reflections from the initial hermeneutic circle with staff stakeholders and the participants' back-and-forth responses to contextualize how the focus group themes deepened understanding of the individual interview themes. In this way, I could pull together a comparison and note moments that took a theme and moved it to a new level of understanding. A new version of the original themes emerged,

one with a deeper understanding of what meaning students were making of their experiences in Cornerstone, incorporating the ongoing learning and reflection for all stakeholders involved. I presented this new, more profound understanding of themes to focus group participants for review and reflection, with a similar summary response and a full transcript for reference. In addition, I brought this deeper understanding of the themes to Cornerstone staff for review, reflection, and feedback. As a last step in this phase of the analysis, I brought together participant representatives, program staff and leadership to discuss the themes together, provide additional context, answer questions, and resolve any tension or conflicts between the groups' understandings of what was emerging. This hermeneutic circle aligns with Guba and Lincoln's (1989) strategy of merging circles as the evaluation progresses to ultimately find consensus and a co-created set of interpretations to utilize in strategies for action.

Data Analysis: Phase Three

After reviewing the deeper set of themes with stakeholders in phases one and two, I used phase three analysis to more concretely bring in additional data through document review and observations to enhance contextual understanding. I also intentionally utilized theoretical understanding to analyze the interpretations more critically. By reviewing the themes with the tenets and components of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and CCW (Yosso, 2005), I could align the interpretations more to the ongoing antiracist work of the Cornerstone program and Pathways, MA. After adding the contextual and theoretical knowledge to the interpretations created, I brought this new understanding to

stakeholders to reflect on and revisit. Within this hermeneutic circle, participants reviewed the complete set of interpretations for any points of conflict or misunderstanding and then aligned on which of the interpretations that had come forth should remain a focus for recommendations in this evaluation and which interpretations were not as high a priority at this point. This prioritization process (Guba & Lincoln, 2001) is a step to recognize that utilizing all data is not realistic within one evaluation. When multiple interpretations come forth, it is vital to work with the organization and stakeholders to determine which themes and findings are the most critical to act on in the current time and space of the program itself. Across stakeholder groups, this circle then co-determined the priorities to focus on in findings and recommendations. Ultimately by choosing the focus of things moving forward together, there is the hope that stakeholders across the organization will be more motivated to action (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Through these opportunities to co-create knowledge and choose together what comes next, there is also an opportunity for stakeholder checks and balances on the evaluator's work, ensuring that the evaluation is of the quality they were anticipating. This focus on the quality of the evaluation, or its goodness, is also a critical component of the fourth-generation evaluation process.

Judging Quality and Goodness Through Fourth Generation's Authenticity Criteria

In Karl Hostetler's (2005) persuasive essay "What is Good Education Research," Hostetler argues for the determination of research "goodness" to be about more than a set of criteria to follow prescriptively. Hostetler points to the need for the judgment of

research to focus on how it impacts our community; what positive result does this research have on our humanity? With this in mind, the goodness criteria centered on a set of recommendations outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989) that blends important practice considerations, focusing on how the evaluation empowers stakeholders to impact change within their program. Guba and Lincoln posited that if fourth generation evaluation processes center on a paradigm that believes in the individualized truths and realities of all people, then centering goodness criteria on strategies that parallel the positivist paradigmatic understandings of objectivity and a singular truth may not be effective. Guba and Lincoln highlight these trustworthiness practices and validity measures as an option. However, they also highlight a few additional points of goodness criteria to consider that may prove a more effective way to measure the quality of this particular evaluation process.

For this research, the quality assessment came from the "authenticity criteria" explicitly created for constructivist evaluation approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 245). There are five categories within authenticity criteria. The first is fairness, the equitable review and acknowledgment of the various interpretations and constructions from data sources (pp. 245-247). The hermeneutic circles created to review the emerging understandings and themes allowed for a fairer and more equitable process. My understandings and interpretations came under the same scrutiny and review as the understandings of other stakeholders that were part of the process. In this way, the fairness of the evaluation centered on how well we made space for all voices in our circles, and the different data collection and analysis choices that allowed for the voices of the students and alums of color interviewed to remain at the heart of the evaluation.

The second focus is ontological authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 248), determined by evidence that research understandings have become more developed and informed over time. As ongoing data collection and analysis intertwined, we repeatedly dove deeper into the emerging knowledge, bringing about a more impactful set of understandings as the evaluation process continued. The utilization of focus groups allowed more knowledge to emerge from interviews. Hermeneutic circles allowed us to process interpretations and constructions. All of these steps point to progress from an ontological authenticity lens. The third focus within authenticity criteria is educative authenticity (pp. 248-249). Educative authenticity asks the evaluator to explore how individual stakeholders, including the evaluator themselves, have become more understanding of constructions and meaning over time. Again, through the evaluation processes' constant reflection and revisiting of data and with new understanding regularly discussed by stakeholders, this evaluation allowed for many moments of educative authenticity.

The fourth and fifth areas of authenticity criteria center on how the evaluation has moved stakeholders to action and motivated opportunities for change. Catalytic authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 249), or the level of action the evaluation moves stakeholders toward, should be confirmed through the stakeholders' responses at Cornerstone when presented with the final report and the next steps taken. Initially, evidence of catalytic authenticity includes the ongoing discussions during hermeneutic circles and how Cornerstone stakeholders invested in and wrestled with the process itself. Their willingness to take on such a significant investment before the final results indicates their interest in bringing about impact and change from the evaluative

conclusions. Tactical authenticity focuses on how stakeholders are empowered to move forward and act on the evaluation insights (p. 250). This final focus of authenticity criteria has yet to play out entirely. However, as will continue to be discussed, Cornerstone staff took action-oriented steps due to the ongoing learning and interpretative discussions within our hermeneutic circles.

It is also important to note that fourth generation evaluation includes a natural process for examining goodness throughout the evaluation process. Because fourth generation evaluations attempt to empower all stakeholders in the evaluation efforts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), the distribution of power throughout the process provides ample opportunity for stakeholders to deliver feedback on the quality of the process and interpretations. The hermeneutic dialectic circles allow for ongoing checks and balances to occur within the evaluation, as stakeholders and participants have multiple opportunities to highlight their concerns and bring forth any difference of opinions concerning the evaluator's understanding, or the understanding of other stakeholders involved. These circles created a space for all involved to share their expertise and knowledge, minimizing my biases and influence as much as possible. This was at the heart of the reasoning for choosing fourth generation evaluation and a constructivist paradigm in the first place and supported the goodness of the evaluation at each step in the process. The process in place worked to minimize my voice and influence and maximize the voices and influences of the students of color that were a part of the Cornerstone program. However, removing my influence and understanding completely was impossible, so being conscious of my positionality throughout the evaluation was a critical part of my work.

Evaluator Positionality

I started working at the Cornerstone program about a year after I received my master's degree at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education. I was in my twenties and believed wholeheartedly in asset development, positive youth development, and college access as ways to eliminate gaps in equity in education. I wanted desperately to make a difference in the world, and I remember writing my personal statement about my passion for giving back because of how much I benefitted from the opportunities given to me. I was a single, white, cis-gendered, middle-class woman with a graduate degree. What I still did not understand then, even after obtaining my master's degree, was how much my identity afforded me significant privilege. As a white, middle-class woman, I had been afforded opportunities, understanding, and resources based solely on my race and class (McIntosh, 1990; Matias, 2022). This white privilege resulted in opportunity after opportunity for me and a desire to go out and right the world's wrongs because not everyone had those same opportunities afforded to them. I am unsure if it was guilt, a white savior complex, or both. I wanted to make a difference, and I understood that racism was a main factor in the inequities that I wanted to impact, so I thought that I needed to fix that. At the same time, I was utterly unprepared to have discussions about race, made assumptions that were not inclusive, and often reinforced the very deficit understanding I was trying to shift. The privilege I held impacted my work daily, but it was not something I thought much about or even saw the impact of. It was an ignorance that I entered the work at Cornerstone with, something that I had to

disrupt for myself in order to be able to better support the students of color with whom we were working. This understanding of my privilege, its impact on me, and my understanding of it is something I continue to work to disrupt as I write this.

As I gained experience and perspective from my time at Cornerstone, the relationships I built with the students and staff in the program supported my learning and understanding as much as I strove to support their goals and plans for their future. Through this work, I learned to walk alongside our students in the journey instead of trying to lead them through it. At Cornerstone, I came to understand how the leadership curriculum empowered students of color and perpetuated systems of oppression. Furthermore, at Cornerstone, I realized that supporting our students to gain entry into college was not enough to ensure they would find the success they were seeking for their futures. At Cornerstone, I came to understand that the higher education system that had brought me so much joy and so many impactful learning experiences worked as it was supposed to for me, a white, middle-class woman. It also worked against the students of color, hoping to have similar experiences to mine. Those experiences, those moments when the system discounted and disillusioned some of the strongest young leaders I had ever worked with, helped me realize it was time to walk away from Cornerstone. In order to better understand the complexities of the deficit-oriented systems of education our students navigated through, I needed to step inside it once again and study it from within. Thus, I applied to receive my doctorate in higher education.

Even though I moved across the country to pursue this degree, the Cornerstone program was with me as I took each step in this journey. I would bring artifacts from the Cornerstone program, pictures, and symbols, into classes to highlight what motivated me and where my worldview was coming from. I recalled personal conversations with participants as I wrote research papers for coursework; I interviewed participants to support other projects and proposals as I continued my doctoral journey. They were always with me. When my advisor suggested that I return to the Cornerstone program as I considered my dissertation focus, I immediately knew she was right. I could not finish what I started without the Cornerstone program right there with me. And here we are.

The general understanding of formal scientific inquiry centers on a positivist paradigm. This view says objectivity, facts, and a singular truth must be at the heart of every research study, as that is how knowledge creation occurs (Lincoln et al., 2011). The positive paradigm would suggest that everything I have shared about my time with the Cornerstone program is why I should have never even considered completing my dissertation in practice with a focus on the program I worked for. I, however, saw this passion for and connection to Cornerstone emerge as a true asset as I completed this dissertation. The truest and most powerful knowledge I have ever gained has come from my connections and relationships with others. This belief in creating knowledge from interaction, connection, and interpretation places me squarely in a constructivist paradigmatic understanding (Lincoln et al., 2011). In those moments of true connection, I am forever changed as others' perspectives and understandings push and mold my own. I

am forever grateful that the Cornerstone program allowed me to examine their work with the new perspectives I gained while studying for my doctorate. It has allowed me to take my understanding of the work at Cornerstone and how students of color are experiencing it to a much deeper and more powerful place. I hope this evaluation brings the Cornerstone program new insights, information, and critical considerations to ponder as they continue to evolve and fine-tune their programming.

Additionally, it was essential to remember that with exclusively qualitative research methods, the evaluator effectively makes themselves responsible, in partnership with the participants and stakeholders, for interpreting and sharing their truths and understandings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). As a white, middle-class woman, I needed to regularly acknowledge and wrestle with the fact that my experiences and understandings varied greatly from the experiences of the students of color interviewed for this study. Making space for continuous education, self-reflection, and dialogue with peers and colleagues was an integral factor in this work. It had to remain a part of my focus constantly to support approaching this work as a co-created endeavor. Checking and rechecking my understandings and biases was one of the main strategies that I needed to incorporate if (1) I were to allow for student voice to remain at the heart of this endeavor, and (2) if I were to truly explore the experiences of students of color in the Crossroads program with a critical lens and eye for improvement.

I engaged in a fourth-generation evaluation to minimize where my voice and mindset would lead the charge and make space for the ideas and understandings of the

participants to be at the core of the evaluation effort (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Combining fourth generation evaluation practices with the theories of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) allowed for my positionality to become a part of things but not the heart of things. I could push my understanding, revisit my thoughts and statements, and ultimately work toward my own development of antiracist practices while supporting Pathways, MA, on its antiracist journey. The process is ongoing and evolving and will continue to be an integral part of my practice moving forward. This continuous reflection and opportunity for growth also aligned with Guba and Lincoln's (1989) goal of learning and growth for all evaluation participants, including the evaluator. This strategy of reflexivity propelled my thoughts forward, along with the evaluation process.

Reflexivity as the Evaluator: My Own Personal Journey

Outside of being aware of the positionality I held as I entered this journey, it was also critical to practice reflexivity throughout the process, particularly as a facilitator within a fourth-generation evaluation process. If I was truly going to engage with the work in the ways that fourth generation evaluation called for, I needed to be conscious of how I was growing and the challenging moments I was working through. I needed to present myself as humanly and genuinely as possible. Reflecting on what was working, what was not, and how I could continue to grow were critical to the success of the evaluation. Moreover, I needed to practice that reflexivity in the presence of stakeholders, so they knew I was not pretending to have it all figured out and that we were on this journey together.

Reflexivity forces us to come to terms not only with our choice of research problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with ourselves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting (Alcoff & Potter, 1993, as cited in Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 183)

There is one particular moment of reflexive practice that occurred during a hermeneutic circle with key Cornerstone program staff members that I want to highlight as an example. I presented some initial themes that had emerged from interviews, and a staff member asked a question that threw me off, as what they said felt very deficit-oriented in its understanding. I responded in a way that I believe perpetuated that very deficit-oriented understanding and other staff members questioned the focus of the discussion at the moment. I knew right away that I had not supported the forward momentum of the evaluation in that interaction, and after the meeting had ended, I reached out to a staff member that had been present via text. I was honest with her, telling her that the comment had thrown me off and that I was cognizant of the deficit language we utilized in the exchange. We were able to send voice and text messages back and forth to process things further, and I was able to propel my thinking in new ways, ultimately due to my mistakes. I realized that part of my prep and planning for our circles needed to include anticipating how staff at the organization might respond to the information presented, particularly when, no matter how good our intentions were, there would still be moments that perpetuated whiteness and deficit language in our efforts. Without focusing on reflexivity as a part of the constructivist process, those moments may have gone unchecked, and the evaluation may not have been as impactful a process as it should have been. These same reflexivity practices within my work as an evaluator allowed me to

think through the ethical implications ever present when we tried to lift and amplify traditionally marginalized voices.

Ethical Implications

There were two areas of focus for me as I considered the ethics of the program evaluation. The first centered on the age of some of the young people in the study because not all evaluation participants were eighteen at the time of their interview. Knowing that some of the participants in the evaluation would be considered minors, it was essential to have a consent process that allowed parents to permit their children and provided space for families to ask questions as necessary. In these ways, parents could consider what their children would be stepping into, the information shared through the consent process and the communication with students throughout the research.

In addition, there were ethical considerations to keep in mind as students shared their personal experiences as students of color in the program. In order to minimize anxiety and fear, and maximize willingness to share, student participants and their families were allowed to share their thoughts anonymously, with the use of Pseudonyms throughout the interview process. In some ways, staff could have recognized someone because they had a hand in selecting potential participants. However, with the anonymity created during the interview process, they would not know who said what, making space for students to speak freely. Most students seemed eager to participate and share their stories, but it is unclear how that might have changed if they thought their names would be attached to what they shared. Ultimately, I believe the pseudonyms allowed students to feel more comfortable sharing their truths, leading to a more impactful evaluation process for the Cornerstone program. For each ethical implication that arose, solutions were created to

minimize concerns and allow participants to feel a sense of control over their involvement in the evaluation process. Outside of ethical concerns, there were potential limitations to consider and create solutions for as the dissertation was underway.

Potential Limitations

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, the most significant potential limitation to overcome for the Cornerstone program evaluation came from the limitations and restrictions we all faced as a part of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic presented challenges regarding data collection, engaging with stakeholders, and completing the evaluation promptly. Programming for Cornerstone and Pathways Massachusetts changed dramatically, and the experiences students were having were undoubtedly different than what students had been experiencing prior to the pandemic and subsequent programmatic shutdowns. Events and activities completed in person were moved online and run through zoom. Canceling key learning opportunities from programming, including wilderness trekking and in-person college tours, meant impacting student experiences. These missing milestone programmatic elements will undoubtedly impact the Cornerstone experience for current participants in ways that we have yet to understand fully.

For the most part, however, students participating in the program evaluation had completed most of Cornerstone programming before the pandemic hit. Alum participants had not had their Cornerstone programmatic experience impacted by the pandemic. In that sense, for the purpose of this evaluation, the experiences of students of color in Cornerstone aligned, for the most part, with the program's intentions. It will be important, however, to look for opportunities to engage with current participants to gather an

understanding of their experience with Cornerstone from Spring 2020-Summer 2022.

Due to the pandemic, many participants will have gone through almost half of their five years of programming with significantly altered curriculum and programming.

From a data collection perspective, the pandemic also limited the types of data collection that could be completed, including observations in person and in-person interviews and focus groups. Instead, I completed observations of online events and completed interviews and focus groups over zoom. While this was not the original intent of the evaluation proposal, interview completion came almost a year after the pandemic began. This timing meant that students and staff had adjusted to discussions online and knew how to engage with each other over video chat options like zoom. Furthermore, completing interviews over zoom did minimize scheduling and commuting issues, potentially making it more likely that students and alums participated in the evaluation than if all data collection occurred in person. One recent graduate, for instance, was attending college in Georgia. However, he could participate and add his voice to the evaluation because interviews occurred over zoom. What could have been seen as a limitation was actually used to engage a more diverse group of students in ways that in-person discussions may have limited. Despite the challenges that COVID-19 presented for us all, we adapted the evaluation to turn challenges into opportunities, effectively removing the limitations from consideration. Because of the strategic design, Cornerstone's evaluation included a compelling data set and analysis plan to achieve its purposes while also aligning with my goal of lifting the voices of students of color throughout the evaluation process.

Conclusion

As can be seen in each section of the research design and implementation, the main areas of focus were to (1) amplify and lift the voices of the students and alums of color interviewed for the evaluation, and (2) to create opportunity for the most impactful program evaluation possible for the Cornerstone program. Using a fourth-generation evaluation approach, the data collection and analysis process brought rich and detailed truths from the students of color experiencing this program. Through the hermeneutic dialectic circles outlined in fourth generation evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), the program's stakeholders could work through the emerging information, allowing it to deepen from additional perspective and context. Ultimately, the findings emerged as a co-creation of knowledge and understanding by all involved. Guba and Lincoln saw fourth generation evaluation as a tool to increase opportunities for empowerment. It allowed new knowledge and understanding to emerge for organizations, empowering them to go forth and take action based on what emerged. Of stakeholders in fourth generation evaluation, Guba and Lincoln (1989) said, "They do not need a special institutional dynamic to get things done, a kind of bureaucratic hierarchy that sees to it that each lower level does things "by the book." The person-organization distinction disappears" (p. 227). As we will see in Chapters Four and Five, this research design allowed that distinction to disappear as the emergence of new knowledge was examined, revisited, and refined. Ultimately the experiences that students shared led to a set of findings that can and will propel the Cornerstone program forward on its antiracist journey.

Chapter Four: Findings

My goal for the Cornerstone program evaluation was to amplify the voices and knowledge shared during interviews with participants of color. The evaluation findings highlight the knowledge they shared to honor their experiences and support Cornerstone in its efforts of continuous program improvement. This program evaluation looked to answer two main evaluation questions. Within each main question was a sub-question to support additional data analysis. These questions are shared below.

- How do Cornerstone students and alums of color describe their program experiences?
 - Which programmatic elements of the Cornerstone program are at the forefront of their understanding and meaning-making?
- How do Cornerstone students and alums of color make meaning and connections between their experiences in Cornerstone and their postsecondary journey?
 - How do they describe relationships with staff, and if at all, how do those relationships support their sense of self and postsecondary journeys?

Per the fourth-generation evaluation approach, I incorporated multiple hermeneutic dialectic circles to gather feedback and to gain understanding from stakeholders at multiple levels within the organization (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Participants interviewed for the evaluation also reviewed the preliminary findings and shared their perspectives.

Staff members reviewed how I captured the participants' experiences and offered their programmatic perspective. The breakdown of the findings was finalized as a result of confirmation from students, alums, and staff reflections. In one stakeholder meeting, for instance, a Cornerstone staff member (also an alumnus) shared that in her mind, the connection or consistency in the participants' knowledge focused on collectivism and individualism. That conversation helped solidify the findings, and that moment highlighted the fourth-generation evaluation process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) in action, as new understandings resulted from stakeholders' ongoing involvement.

Findings for the Cornerstone program evaluation were primarily developed from responses during interviews and focus groups conducted of Cornerstone students and alums identifying as people of color, per the methodology discussed in Chapter Three. Throughout the findings, I use "participants" to name the participants that took part in the study. If their status as a student or alum informs the finding, I label the participant as being a student participant or alum participant. Four findings resulted from this program evaluation.

The first finding demonstrated how the participants experience aspects of the Cornerstone program as opportunities for connection and achievement. Within this finding, participant thoughts mainly centered on how service opportunities allowed them to create community impact and how wilderness trekking supported overcoming challenges and achieving things together. The second finding indicated that participants experienced Cornerstone as a safe space and a community that felt like family. Within this finding, two sub-findings point to how the values of trust and acceptance supported the creation of that safe space and that this sense of family allowed students to build an

authentic sense of self. The third finding focused on participants as mentors and models for students in Cornerstone. Discussion of this finding includes two sub-findings, the first highlighting how participants see staff (often also Cornerstone alums) as guides and mentors in the Cornerstone program. The second sub-finding shows how participants see alums as models of the possible futures ahead of them. The final finding focuses on the individualized nature of postsecondary programming at Cornerstone and is divided into three sub-findings. First, participants share how they utilize Cornerstone as their primary postsecondary support. Second, participants’ experiences highlight how the individualized nature of postsecondary programming is both a strength and a challenge. Finally, as students transitioned to college campuses, they felt a sense of isolation and lack of safety. Figure 1 highlights each finding and sub-finding.

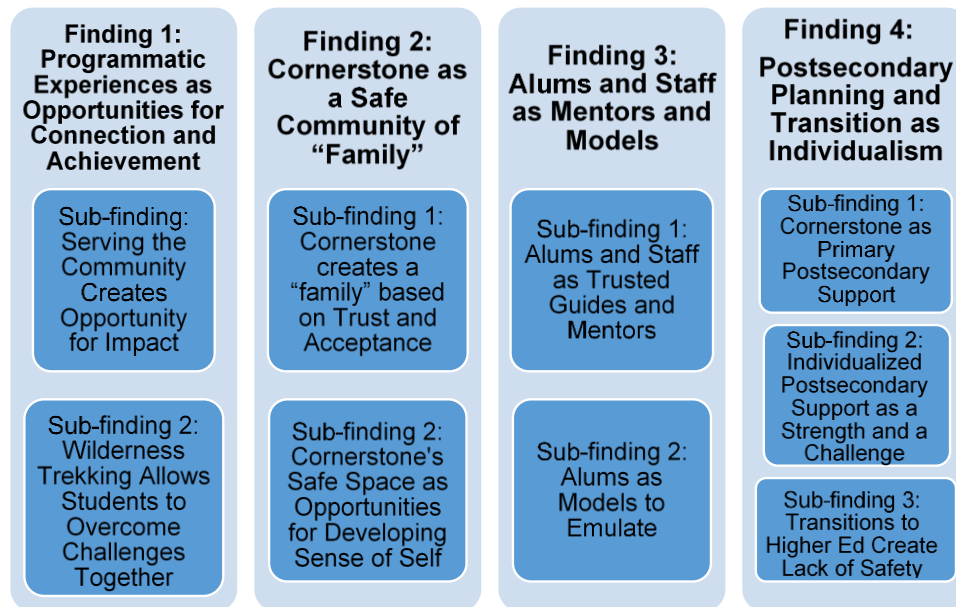


Figure 1: Cornerstone Program Evaluation Findings

The following section will explore how participants of color experienced aspects of the Cornerstone program as opportunities for connection and achievement, with a particular focus on service to the community and wilderness trekking.

Finding 1: Programming as Opportunities for Connection and Achievement

The Cornerstone program is a five-year, year-round opportunity for all students involved. The asset-based framework focuses on utilizing one's strengths to overcome challenges in a residential camp environment and then using knowledge of one's strengths in selecting a postsecondary plan and impacting the community. Figure 2 is a summary breakdown of the focuses of each year, including summer and school-year programming.

When reviewing what participants shared about their programmatic experiences, it was clear that two critical programming components outshined the rest as the most memorable, challenging, and meaningful. These two elements, service and wilderness trek, were discussed over and over again by all participants. There was a light and energy to their voices as they spoke, and while most memories were positive and joyful, others were challenging and frustrating. NLK brought me with her to a service event memory filled with joy, telling me how “people are singing songs, people are dancing, people are making games out of doing simple things, like getting stuff down the line and putting it on a shelf. People are tossing it and swinging it to each other, making beats on the shelf. They just make it fun,” (NLK, personal communication, May 22, 2021). Nicole recalled her time at trek with a similar fondness, sharing such a sense of achievement as she spoke, saying, “I just feel very accomplished and proud of myself and proud of everybody else,” (Nicole, personal communication, March 20, 2021).

Year 1: Skill Building	Learning about strengths/skills, building them, and understanding Cornerstone Culture	Continued culture/community building, practicing and building upon strengths
Year 2: Working Together	Using strengths in groups, problem-solving, conflict management, and stepping out of comfort zones	Group problem-solving, initial career exploration, preparation for a third-year wilderness trek
Year 3: Using Skills in a New Environment	Utilizing strengths on a week-long wilderness trek, achieving and accomplishing something despite fear/uncertainty	Reflecting on summer experiences, begin to transition focus from strengths building and practice to postsecondary plans
Year 4: Postsecondary Planning and Finding Your Fit	College Tour to immerse in campus environments, begin to construct ideas of individual fit for each student	Continued exploration of postsecondary options, increased focus on impacting one's community
Year 5: Community Impact and Future Plans	Community Organizing and Impact Summer Intensive analyzes a community issue to develop a plan for positive change.	Postsecondary Planning and Action Steps, community impact project completion as a capstone for each student

Table 1: Cornerstone Programming Overview

As NLK and Nicole highlight, the experiences that kept coming up were the wilderness treks and service opportunities at Cornerstone. Students participate in a wilderness trek during their first three summers, the most significant and challenging happening in their third summer at Cornerstone. Students complete service activities in the summer and during the school year as part of their programming, often working in groups at local organizations for several hours at a time. Participants found meaning from these programming activities in two ways; they saw them as powerful moments of connection with their Cornerstone community and as opportunities for collective impact and achievement. This finding on programmatic experiences as opportunities for

connection and achievement will be broken into two sub-findings, highlighting how those moments emerged in service opportunities and wilderness trekking.

Sub-finding 1: Serving the Community Creates Opportunities for Collective Impact

Participants spoke of their involvement in service activities as unique to Cornerstone and how service brought joy and fun. Service was spoken of as "instilled" in them and a "lifelong" commitment after Cornerstone introduced them to it. Participants defined service with Cornerstone as something that could never be wholly replicated elsewhere. Ela remembered the fun and enjoyment of volunteering with her fellow Cornerstone students, even as she realized that some of their chosen volunteer opportunities may not have aligned with her thinking today.

“I remember having so much fun meeting all these new people, meeting the organizers. First time I ever used a megaphone to cheer people on, that was amazing. I also think going to a bridge to cover up graffiti, which now I can look back and be like, 'why were we covering up graffiti?' But, like, the ones [graffiti] that didn't, I'm sure, look the best. We did cover it up, but I just think that was another great experience, everyone pitching in and having a good time.” (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

While Ela would likely think twice about covering up graffiti today, she remembered the task as a community-building experience with her fellow Cornerstone students. She also recalled the joy of the experience and having fun with her peers. Ziah spoke of service similarly. She acknowledged that not every moment was the most fun ever, but in

the end, the service activity she completed did not matter as much as the people she was doing it with.

“Of course, there's not always great parts, but when you're with people you care about, it doesn't really matter because you make anything a good time. You can be sitting and talking while folding baby clothes, and you could have the wildest conversations, and it would always turn out fun.” (Ziah, personal communication, May 2, 2021)

Ziah was honest that sometimes, the actual tasks of service were not her favorites, but the ability to use those tasks to connect with the Cornerstone community made the time special. The connection with others, and the way that they experienced service together, was what made the service opportunities with Cornerstone different. Participants often spoke of how they have also volunteered in other spaces without Cornerstone, but it just was not the same. Nevaeh said volunteering with her school did not compare to volunteering at Cornerstone. "I love service trips (with Cornerstone). We had to do community service for middle school, and it was not the same. I did not have a good time” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 27, 2021). Here, Nevaeh indicates that the community of people at Cornerstone make service fun and that makes a difference. She loves her time at service with Cornerstone specifically because of Cornerstone’s approach.

While Ela, Ziah and Nevaeh focused on the joy that connecting with each other through service brought, other participants shared the way Cornerstone helped them understand the importance of service as a connection to the world around them. TJ

highlighted how Cornerstone service opportunities helped him see how we are all interconnected.

“For me personally, it makes me feel more connected to humanity of the world because I'm doing something that might not necessarily affect me, but I'm not the only one on this planet...Cornerstone definitely doesn't offer it in a way that seems like, 'oh it's that savior complex type thing.' I feel like it's coming from a genuine place, and that's why it was so impactful to me, definitely.” (TJ, personal communication, May 2, 2021)

TJ pointed to how service opportunities in other places may not be community-focused and can center on understandings of white saviorism. White saviorism in volunteering emerges when whiteness invades the purpose and focus of serving a community. “White saviors” step into spaces with the understanding that they know better and feel superior to the people or communities they are volunteering in, so they must enter those communities to fix them (Bandyopadhyay, 2019; Coles, 2012). True service to the community focuses on connecting with communities and supporting their ideas of what is needed and how they want to move forward. Ela echoed this idea of seeing service as more than fixing the problem but connecting with the world as humans. “I feel like if we want to help folks in communities, we need to humanize them. We can't treat them like statistics; we can't treat them like concepts” (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021). Cornerstone allowed participants to experience service as a way to connect with each other, and perhaps more importantly, find authentic connections with their humanity through service.

This love of service and this desire to connect with humanity extended beyond what participants thought about serving in Cornerstone. For many of them, it became part of who they were. Participants saw serving their communities as part of their futures. Jesús pointed to Cornerstone's service opportunities as influencing his understanding of impact. He said service "definitely made me look towards my future and pretty much encompass the whole community building and world building that they strive for. It instilled that into me" (Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021). Jesús developed his understanding of "community building" through service opportunities with Cornerstone. He felt empowered to impact his community throughout his life. NLK felt similarly, finding a career option that she felt would keep her serving others as a regular part of her life moving forward. However, she acknowledged that serving others would never be quite the same as in Cornerstone.

"I feel like service never stops. My career path, it involves helping people. I'm going to end up finding little things to help me help other people because that's something I truly love doing. But as for would it be the same going to volunteer at other places without Cornerstone? I feel like it would never be the same because it's just the people you're going with. It's [a] different energy." (NLK, May 22, 2021)

Service never stops, but service will never be the same after Cornerstone. NLK highlights the way Cornerstone service opportunities left participants empowered to make a difference in their communities. At the same time, participants saw the service opportunities at Cornerstone as something that only Cornerstone could provide because of the energy and the people they were serving with. Cornerstone staff and peers made these opportunities all the more meaningful for them. This idea of connecting with others

continued as participants talked about wilderness trekking. In trek, the connection was about what students in Cornerstone achieved together and how sharing their vulnerabilities with each other propelled their relationships forward.

Sub-finding 2: Wilderness Trekking: Overcoming Challenges Together

While all three wilderness trekking experiences in Cornerstone came up for participants as they spoke in interviews and focus groups, the trek that came up most often was the last one they participated in. The trek experience in their third summer was designed to be a conclusion to their trekking activities, one that would take them outside of Massachusetts and would involve seven days of hiking, completing a total of 20-30 miles. This trek was spoken about as the most challenging part of Cornerstone, both physically and mentally. In the same breath, it was often talked about with the greatest sense of accomplishment. Participants acknowledged that accomplishment came from digging deep within themselves and coming to rely on each other. Victore talked about getting through the experience and coming out the other side with an understanding of its importance.

“All right, climbing this mountain for the next week is about to be one of the hardest things I've done in my short life so far. And then, in hindsight, it's all right. It was a great experience to learn about myself and about the people I was with and how we overcame adversity, and different life lessons that you can take from an experience like that.” (Victore, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Victore saw trek as a way to see a community of people getting through challenging experiences together. He learned about himself and the people with whom he trekked.

Nicole spoke further about how trek supported students in understanding themselves and each other differently.

“Trek in itself puts, since we come from the inner-city, we have almost no time outside in the mountains or outside in nature, all that. It puts, again, it puts us in a different type of environment we've never been in. So we're able to see both characteristics of ourselves and of others in a space that they've never been in, and we've never been in.” (Nicole, personal communication, March 20, 2021)

This idea of being in a foreign space, intending to accomplish something that many participants were uncertain they could do, is a big part of why they were able to connect and support each other effectively. This shared uncertainty and shared challenge forced participants to reach out to each other for support and reassurance. TJ reflected similarly on how those strong connections emerged from trekking together.

“But there was the whole social aspect and really getting to know... needing to know who you're with, stuff like that. Getting to know yourself and how you guys work together. And I feel like, yeah. It just makes for a very memorable experience because you don't, at least I don't really do things like that often.” (TJ, May 2, 2021)

Trek brought about a sense of vulnerability. Participants shared with each other in ways they had not before. NLK thought it was being somewhere new that encouraged honesty amongst her group. "It's just something about being in the mountains that you're just like, 'ok, it's free. Let's just say stuff. Let's talk about the most randomest things'" (NLK, personal communication, May 22, 2021). Nicole agreed.

“I don't know, it's probably the air up there. And it's the fact that you know you're by yourself. So no one's going to hear it. I think my group actually yelled stuff across the

mountain just to get it off our chest because it's just freeing, just doing...because you're out of your comfort zone, so why not push yourself even further out of your comfort zone and say something I probably would never say?" (Nicole, personal communication, May 22, 2021)

There was no one to hear their thoughts, except each other. The new environment that trek provided brought a sense of trust and a willingness to be vulnerable with each other. Participants often found that trek allowed them to connect in powerful ways because of their shared experience. Nevaeh contributes that connection to what they accomplished together. "So you can go through a lot during trek, and you're with people so you can relate to them, and you know that you can trust them because of what you've been through with them" (Nevaeh, May 22, 2021). In some cases, this sense of trust emerged as a willingness to be real and acknowledge that not everything would be conflict-free. Ela talked about how she learned that conflict did not have to be something she avoided because of the trek.

"But I've always wanted to see eye to eye with others and avoid conflict. But sometimes I have to realize that conflict is a part of growth. Like, people have to learn to communicate. And sometimes you're not gonna agree, but it's part of the process." (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

To trust enough to face conflict instead of avoiding it was a big part of what participants experienced on the trek. Devonte highlighted that his trek group struggled with decision-making at times. Ultimately, they realized they had to stay aligned because they needed to finish.

“But hammer trek, you're carrying, like, 40 pounds. You got... you can't really argue with the people you're with, cause the only thing to do was to keep going forward. There's no going back... when you get put in tough situations, what are you gonna do? Are you just gonna fold or keep moving forward?” (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021)

The trust and ability to rely on each other allowed them to complete the trek and complete it successfully. Furthermore, the sense of accomplishment of what they had done, all together, made it worth it. Devonte indicates that he carried this understanding with him after trek when he discussed being put in “tough situations.” Devonte keeps “moving forward.” Ziah also spoke about how the accomplishments of the trek helped her see that anything was possible.

“So me, just standing there, looking at the mountain I just climbed, I was so proud of myself, I cried a little bit. It was just that thought and feeling of ‘I did that. This is amazing, I can do absolutely anything if I really wanted to.’” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

Nicole said she started to feel that sense of accomplishment before the trek concluded because she knew she would finish.

“When you're summiting the mountain, that's one of the best feelings. Cause it's like, you're almost there in, like, your goals. That's the goal of trek. That's the point. And seeing everything is just like 'I did that. I didn't know I could do it, but I did it.’”

(Nicole, personal communication, April 10, 2021)

Nicole could see the achievement as it was coming, and that powered her through. She was left with a sense of accomplishment, and a reminder that even when you think you

can't, you can. Beyond their sense of accomplishment, participants also reflected on how they came through the experience together. NLK pointed to the ways they pushed each other forward to success. "So just keep going and just trust that. [You] Just have to trust in the peers around you that you guys are going to find your way and you're going to get out of here safely" (NLK, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Ziah said the students needed to get through it together because they had become so important to each other. "You care about them, so you don't want to work hard just for yourself. You want to make sure that other people you care about succeed. We all fly together, we all fall together" (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021). Participants indicated that trek allowed them to achieve something they weren't sure they could. However, more importantly, students recognized the power of that achievement came from doing it together and trusting one another. This trust also allowed for acceptance and authenticity. This sense of trust, acceptance, and authenticity extended beyond trek and stood at the center of the Cornerstone program. Participants discussed it as a sense of family, which will be examined further in the second finding.

Finding 2: Cornerstone as a Safe Community of "Family"

As participants shared their experiences in programming, the moments of being tested and challenged were some of the most memorable of all, primarily because they found a support network in each other to get through them. That support network turned into a truly committed community that students connected to deeply. This community became an extension of family for them. Victore highlighted this sense of family in Cornerstone as he reflected on what made Cornerstone special to him.

“It was a family culture that I think really did it. Because everyone is like 'you're part of a family once you're there.' And I think that was a big part of it, and as a result of that, everyone seemed relaxed in a way and very comfortable.” (Victore, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Participants shared that Cornerstone's safe community allowed them to share more authentically about who they are and what they think. The people that Cornerstone participants shared their truth with became much more than fellow students or even friends. Cornerstone participants overwhelmingly chose the word "family" to describe what the people of Cornerstone meant to them. Jonah said his Cornerstone family kept him coming back year after year. "I was just committed, and I was like, 'yeah, I just want to be around my [Cornerstone] brothers and sisters and my counselors that just want to see the better in me'" (Jonah, personal communication, March 29, 2021). Jonah highlights how people at Cornerstone can "see the better" in him. This indicates that Jonah believes the people in Cornerstone see him for who he truly is and allow him to understand himself for who he is, regardless of the societal messages he might receive. Participants discussed this sense of family as something they got to choose, and something they desired, because they could be themselves with this “family.” Jesús talked about how he felt that young people like him are looking for a sense of family, even if they don't know it.

“They're all naturally friendly, if that makes sense. They are all naturally wanting to, what's the word I am looking for, wanting to build their own type of family like their own brothers and sisters. They all wanna build that. So Cornerstone gives the [students] the space to build their own family at their own pace, and it does so in a

way where it just kind of just naturally happens.” (Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021)

When asked about the people at Cornerstone, Nevaeh shared similar thoughts about this family dynamic. “It’s kind of like brothers and sisters. We call each other Cornerstone family, and it really does feel like that,” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 27, 2021). Nevaeh’s use of “brothers and sisters” in her reflection shows that she sees the people in Cornerstone as more than friends or fellow students. TJ reflected on why it feels like a family; a family you choose to be in your life.

“The whole idea of chosen family. I feel like that definitely plays a big part into it as well. Because, obviously, blood, you don't get to choose. And society makes it seem like you have to accept your family just because they're your family. Whereas people you meet along the way in your life who aren't related to you, but you have that bond, you have that trust or whatever. It does feel like family, and family that you get to choose. There's no societal pressure to 'oh, but it's family.' So I feel like that's important.” (TJ, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

It’s important to note that while participants found a sense of family in Cornerstone, none of them spoke of it as a replacement for, or a better support than their immediate families at home. While the deficit understanding of communities of color often accuses families of color of providing inadequate support to their children (Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005), participants never discussed this as part of their personal experiences. Some participants, however, indicated that perhaps other students needed this sense of family at Cornerstone to compensate for what was lacking at home. This understanding was never backed up with any specifics and is a possible reinforcement of the deficit

messages they have been given about marginalized families throughout their lives. As we continue to explore finding two, we'll highlight two sub-findings about this sense of family at Cornerstone. The first sub-finding will focus on the way the values of trust and acceptance allow for this safe community and sense of family to emerge. The second sub-finding will highlight how trust and acceptance created a safe community. This safe community supported participants in being comfortable exploring their sense of self.

Sub-finding 1: Cornerstone Creates a “Family” based on Trust and Acceptance

As students continued to talk about this sense of family at Cornerstone, I asked them to reflect on where it came from or what made Cornerstone feel so safe that the people there became family. Jesús said it came down to hearing that he mattered, just as he was. "I believe it came from just the constant, what's the word I'm looking for, reassurance of 'it's ok to be yourself'" (Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021). By being told he could be himself and then being accepted as himself, Jesús felt like he could trust the Cornerstone program to be a safe community. Victore echoed the same sentiment, saying that he felt this sense of acceptance right at the start and throughout his time at Cornerstone.

“But there was not even a, you know, not even a second where I didn’t feel a part of the group or a part of the family or whatever. And even the people I’m friends with to this day, like, our backgrounds are different, but you know, when we come together, I feel like we are all brothers and sisters or whatever.” (Victore, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Victore felt connected immediately, and accepted by everyone, despite coming from different backgrounds. In his reflection, he seems somewhat conflicted over his own

understanding, perhaps because of the way society defines “family.” It’s clear Victore sees the Cornerstone community as a safe one and feels a sense of family with the people at Cornerstone. However, he hesitates when speaking with me, by his use of “or whatever” each time he uses the term “family” or “brothers and sisters.” I saw this as a moment where he knew what he believed, but wasn’t sure I would understand, perhaps because he saw me as an outsider. These ideas, however, were brought up by participants repeatedly. Cornerstone was a safe community where they were accepted. Cornerstone supported participants in taking risks and trusting each other. Devonte highlighted that trust was inevitable at Cornerstone. “You kind of like, you have to trust them because technically you’re meeting a bunch of strangers, and if you’re not trusting them, it’s probably going to be a worse experience for you” (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021). Devonte indicates that trying to go through Cornerstone alone would not have been easy and that relying on others makes things better. Furthermore, Nevaeh said trust grew and expanded because students regularly reflected and debriefed about their experiences in Cornerstone. One opportunity mentioned often was “Insight,” the end-of-day reflection that helped students process what they had accomplished.

“Everyone’s so accepting and willing to talk to you. I feel like even in normal conversations they’re like, “this is a safe space.” Especially in Insight, it’s a thing where it’s like ‘hey this is a safe space. We’re accepting. We want to hear what you have to say.’ And it starts from there, just from the staff, and it trickles down throughout the students.” (Nevaeh, personal communication, May 22, 2021)

Students found the values of trust and acceptance at the heart of Cornerstone programming, leaving them feeling like they could be who they are. The safe community

created by Cornerstone allowed participants to share and express their thoughts in ways they had not before, during Insight and activity debriefs. Jesús talked about how he and his fellow Cornerstone students shared things without fear of losing that acceptance or trust.

“I was able to kind of express myself in a way that I really haven't before, and no one really judged me, and then they did the same. We were able to accept who we really are without any judgment because we were all in the same type of mindset. It was definitely what I was looking for, even though I didn't realize it at the time.” (Jesús, personal communication April 5, 2021)

Jesús found a safe community in Cornerstone and could share his truths with confidence there. Ela also found Cornerstone to be a safe space of acceptance. She highlighted that acceptance from the staff, in particular at Cornerstone, was invaluable. “And it was always so reassuring and validating to hear those that are older than you and that you look up to, be like ‘it is important for us to hear how you feel and what your feedback is’” (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021). Students shared their truths at Cornerstone and were met with trust and acceptance, regardless of what they shared. Furthermore, their staff and peers shared this sense of trust and acceptance. As will be discussed in sub-finding two, students found that the safe community they created supported their ability to be authentic and build a greater sense of self.

Sub-finding 2: Cornerstone's Safe Community as Opportunity for Developing Sense of Self

With the safe community and sense of family that Cornerstone provided participants, they could explore their sense of self in ways that felt relieved of the pressures and

expectations of the world around them. Through this exploration of their sense of self, participants were able to develop a more authentic understanding of who they were. Ela highlighted that she felt she could release herself from the roles she felt tied to at home. "Cornerstone was the first place where I did not feel like I had to fulfill a role. I wasn't a student. I wasn't the oldest sister, the oldest cousin. I wasn't the example for anyone" (Ela, personal communication, May 2, 2021). Ela could be Ela without the pressure she felt at home. Similarly, Imani discussed Cornerstone as a safe space to explore who she was, at a time when she struggled with acceptance of herself.

"I talked about how I was shy, but it was more than that. I wasn't happy in my own skin. I was not confident at all. And I just feel like after being in Cornerstone and going through all their programming and things like that, I really just started to not really care what other people thought about me or what they were going to say about me. I feel like I just love what I love to do now. Cornerstone has taught me a lot about being true to who you are." (Imani, personal communication, March 28, 2021)

Similarly, the values of trust and acceptance that helped participants feel safe at Cornerstone allowed Devonte to become someone that spoke up, even though that was not who he was in other spaces.

"It's taught me that I can be a vocal person. I didn't know that about myself. I used to be a very quiet kid unless it was my circle, my friend group. Now I'll go up to pretty much anybody and ask them how their day is going and what their profession might be." (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021)

Devonte's experience indicates that his confidence grew, and he felt more comfortable asking questions and engaging with others. This confidence speaks to him learning that

he may not have to be “a very quiet kid” all the time. He can engage with others, like adults, to extend his network. While all participants shared moments of building their sense of self in Cornerstone, they each focused on different things. Victore talked of how his sense of self expanded because Cornerstone's safe community let him explore who he was as a Black man.

“It's something that I am grateful for now because it helped to mold me into who I am. But I think it also helped to, um, I feel like it helped me identify with my Blackness more. I feel like it just kind of happened. And I feel like; I think it helped me kind of figure out who I am. Like, you can kind of have multiple parts of yourself if that makes sense.” (Victore, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

When a community feels safe, people feel safe to explore who they are, and own their truths. Participants saw their time at Cornerstone as a way to explore their sense of self, and the different parts of who they were. TJ expanded his sense of self by observing and engaging with others. "In terms of just seeing everybody and learning a little bit about every other person and their identities and how they're figuring it out. I feel like that kind of helped me figure it out” (TJ, personal communication, February 25, 2021). Participants indicated that they gained knowledge of themselves through engaging with and communicating with others. This constructivist knowledge creation process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) becomes active; students are learning as they engage with activities and each other. They allowed their sense of self to emerge because of the safe and trusting engagement they had with others. For many participants like Jesús, reflection and debriefing became a valuable part of the Cornerstone experience. Moreover, Cornerstone was often the only space participants found that focused on it. “It's very unique to

Cornerstone. Because, I don't see it in many other programs or even school-sponsored programs. They don't really give us a chance to like 'oh do you want to reflect on what you've done so far?'" (Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021). Jesús found those moments of reflection to be a chance to open up and share in ways he had not before. For him, those were some of the best memories he had. "I don't know, during those campfires, like, a lot of people were able to just kind of like express their mind. Just talk about things, just share their experiences or how they felt during the whole summer. So it's very near and dear to me," (Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021).

Reflections and debriefing, whether via campfire or Insight, were near and dear for many participants. These opportunities furthered the sense of trust and acceptance Cornerstone offered. As Nevaeh wrestled with her understanding of what Cornerstone meant to her, she landed on one thought. She had changed her understanding of herself because of Cornerstone. "That's what I really know, I'm not the same as I went in. I don't know. They help you learn who you are" (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 27, 2021). Nevaeh's quote highlights that her time in Cornerstone gave her the space to explore who she was, and this opportunity for exploration changed her.

While participants discussed their engagement with each other as critical to their experience in Cornerstone, they were equally focused on the way staff and alums impacted them. The staff (many of whom are Cornerstone alums) engaged with the same trust and acceptance they ask students to embody. In Finding 3, students will share how staff and alums of the program become mentors and models at Cornerstone. They support participants' understanding of their sense of self by guiding them through the program and support participants' aspirations for their future by modeling the possibilities ahead.

Finding 3: Alumni and Staff as Mentors and Models

“I’d say that I really, they really focus on what the Counselors do, what the alumni do. They (students) try to replicate and copy it even though... cause they may not have an older sibling or like an older figure that they look up to, and Cornerstone is where they find these people.” (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021)

As Devonte highlighted so succinctly, the people that are a part of the Cornerstone program, particularly those leading and facilitating it, matter to the participants of color that were interviewed for this program evaluation. If Cornerstone is a safe space and a community of "family," staff and alums of Cornerstone are critical to that understanding. Many alums of Cornerstone return to the program in a staffing capacity, on both a seasonal and full-time basis, so in speaking of staff in Cornerstone, we are largely speaking of alums as well. In the summer of 2022 alone, alums of the Cornerstone program made up approximately 60% of the seasonal staff hired. As participants talked about their experiences at Cornerstone, their relationships with staff/alums centered on two ideas. First, participants saw staff members as guides and mentors who embodied trust and acceptance and approached students as their authentic and genuine selves. Second, participants saw alums and their paths as potential possibilities for their futures. These understandings of staff and alums emerged from their discussions as the third finding. Each role (mentor and model) is discussed as a sub-finding below.

Sub-finding 1: Alums and Staff as Trusted Guides and Mentors

Participants discussed how they trusted staff and alums to guide them, mentor them through challenging moments and help them decide their next steps. Furthermore, if staff were also alums of the program, participants felt a powerful sense of trust in those

relationships, because they knew those alums had experienced Cornerstone too.

Participants felt this sense of "mentoring" by staff from start to finish in the Cornerstone program. Devonte felt he could trust the staff as early as his interview for the program.

“And it’s like, coming into the program, you already have people that are like mentors to you. The people that interview you, it seems like right since then you have a relationship with them. And they're people you know, I don't know. You feel like you can reach out to them even when they haven't done anything to you or for you yet.” (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021)

Nicole felt similar trust in how the staff guided her through Cornerstone. She attributed their strong mentoring to the staff’s ability to see her for who she was and what she needed.

“I don't want to say they're always listening and stuff like that to our conversations, but they notice stuff. They notice how we take in the information, how we apply it. And if we take the information and we apply it because we trust them, they see ‘oh, they clearly trust us to give them the right information. So we should make sure it’s the right or correct information, the proper information to get them where they need to be.’” (Nicole, personal communication, May 22, 2021)

Nicole observed the way staff listened, observed, and honored the trust they had placed in them. Nicole’s belief that staff would find “the right or correct” information for participants to “get them where they need to be” indicates that she sees staff as mentors that can be trusted. This trust by participants that staff will do what’s right by them also motivated participants to want to do the same for others. Staff mentoring empowered

Jonah so much that he became a staff member as well, continuing the cycle of mentoring for others.

“Like all of them, they were really like kindling to me, I guess you could say. They were getting me started. They helped spark the flame, and now they're ready to pass on that full torch to me. Now that's what I am doing with my campers.” (Jonah, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Every participant felt it was easy to connect with, talk to, and trust the staff at Cornerstone. This trust in staff resulted in a willingness to be nudged forward outside of what was comfortable. In Jonah's case, that nudge moved him to become a staff member. Nicole felt the nudge forward, too. In her case, the nudge pushed her, but never too far.

“They'll push you, but if they know they're pushing you too far, they'll definitely stop. So like, they'll push you, like, decently to a good extent. To get you out of your comfort zone a little bit, like do what you thought you never could. And I like that a lot.” (Nicole, personal communication, March 20, 2021)

Nicole trusted that staff members were there to push her to go further than she believed she could, but never over the edge. Nicole was able to accomplish things she likely wouldn't have on her own, as a result of that push. Beyond the nudge and push of the staff, there was a sense that staff mentoring included treating the participants as equals. Imani believed that staff were there because of a desire to connect and learn with Cornerstone participants. "They want to learn from not only... they don't want to just tell you what to do all the time. They want to learn with you, and they want you to learn" (Imani, personal communication, March 28, 2021). Participants highlighted that the staff showed up as mentors and followed through. This follow-through gave participants a

greater sense of their worth and the worthiness of their goals and dreams. Ela talked about how a staff member helped her understand that he was really there for her. "He would come to my neighborhood, and we would meet at Dunkin' Donuts or the library and stuff like that. It's like, this man really wants to see me go to college. Oh, ok, I see that" (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021). Ela indicates that a staff member's actions spoke loudly about his desire to support her. Similarly, Jonah talked about how even after he became an alumnus, his mentor always checked up and checked in.

"She was always there for me. She would always check up on me and everything, even now. Even though we don't really talk to each other, like we don't really talk on a daily basis or as often, she still checks up on me and, like, looks out for me and stuff like that." (Jonah, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Jonah's relationship with a staff member held strong, despite the years that passed. This idea connects back to the sense of family for Cornerstone participants. Jonah had graduated from the Cornerstone program several years before our discussion, and yet he still found a mentor in a Cornerstone staff member. Participants trusted the staff that were a part of the Cornerstone program to push them, to follow through, and to stay connected. This trust allowed for authentic and vital dialogue that participants carried forward with them. TJ said his cabin counselors provided important male guidance for him.

"I don't know. I feel like I never really had male guidance before I got to live in a cabin of all guys and have two strong male role models as my counselors. I feel like that definitely helped. And often times one, if not both, would be a man of color as well, and I feel like that definitely helped a lot." (TJ, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

TJ found guidance in the staff assigned to his cabin in a way he had not before. And, TJ's mention of those staff identifying as a man of color indicates that he appreciated the chance to connect with men of color at Cornerstone. Devonte also found the representation of his staff members impactful. He was able to connect with staff members that were from his neighborhood and said the words of wisdom he received from his counselors rang truer because their experiences mirrored his own.

“And it feels like there's some people in Cornerstone that can say things that nobody else can tell you. They've gone through it. And I don't know. Hearing something from someone that has gone through the same type of situation or predicament or, like, school situation... anything that it just feels like it clicks with you more than hearing it from a teacher to say, 'you should push yourself to get better grades.' But hearing it from a guy that went through the same type of environment and hearing them say that, it kind of pushes you a little extra step.” (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021)

Participants felt they could trust Cornerstone staff (who were also often alums) to guide them through the program and their choices. They saw them as mentors and guides throughout their experiences. Furthermore, alums were seen not only as mentors but models of future possibilities as participants began planning for their postsecondary options after high school.

Sub-finding 2: Alums as Models to Emulate

As the discussions about staff and alums continued, participants pointed out how they saw themselves in the alums with whom they connected. In some cases, this understanding of alums and staff would overlap because so many staff members were

also alums of Cornerstone, and vice versa. Ela highlighted how important it was to see young adults like her authentically representing themselves.

“One thing I always appreciated about the staff and just about the program is that it was representative of the community that I was in. The community that I came from. Being able to see counselors, young counselors that like had Locs, and had tattoos and express themselves through art, through their clothing, in so many different ways. In ways that, you know, wouldn’t be thought of as professional in other settings, was so refreshing. Because then that also gave the message to the campers that they can be themselves in those spaces.” (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Ela hit on the idea that young adults from communities like hers, communities of color, were finding success and forging a path by being themselves. By seeing these alums/staff modeling that possibility, Ela could envision her success outside the expectations of others and society. Nicole spoke similarly about a conversation she had with an alumnus. “She said she's also majoring in business, and she told me, like, her steps to it, and I'm like, 'oh, that's so cool. I never thought of doing it that way.' It's like - 'oh, maybe I can take a similar step to get to where I need to,” (Nicole, personal communication, March 20, 2021).

Nicole had a goal to own her own business and spoke a lot in her interview about being a Black woman in a world where white men dominated business ownership. By connecting with an alumnus of Cornerstone and hearing her thoughts and perspective, Nicole envisioned new routes and paths to her own success.

“Just to hear their paths were not definitely a straight line. They like switch. They thought they were gonna do this and this and then they ended up in a completely

different place than they thought they were going to end up prior to Cornerstone or during their Cornerstone years. But, Cornerstone helped them get to where they need to be.” (Nicole, personal communication, March 20, 2021)

Nicole’s vision of her future became multi-faceted and perhaps a little less scary after hearing how an alumnus had forged a path with unexpected twists and turns.

Imani enjoyed every opportunity to hear from alums at Cornerstone. "I love, love, love speaking to Cornerstone alum(s)...I just love seeing, after Cornerstone, what they're doing with their lives, and how Cornerstone helped them through that" (Imani, personal communication, March 28, 2021). She said hearing that alums had their own journeys through the program, filled with successes and challenges, helped her see that her journey was normal and part of the process.

“And it’s just really relatable when they can be like, 'oh yeah, I started in Cornerstone, and I was really quiet, reserved, shy. I didn't like to speak to people.' And now I'm sitting there, and they're running the whole show, they're the boss, and people are asking them questions. And it's really putting it into real life like, 'oh my gosh, I could do this. This could be me.' And so I feel like that's just most... the best part about it, seeing how their life could be my life, or my life could be their life.”

(Imani, personal communication, March 28, 2021)

The futures that alums had created for themselves became the possibilities that lay before Imani. Alums modeled those possibilities and inspired participants in Cornerstone to keep moving forward on their journey. Alums also normalized that every path was different, and no path was straight and narrow. Participants found connection, guidance, and role models in the staff and alums of Cornerstone. Moreover, they began to

understand that the path alums took could be their own. As participants discussed their postsecondary planning process, they began to speak of their paths differently. While they spoke of the paths and roads that alums took with a sense of connection and relatability, they spoke of their postsecondary plans as a singular journey. Postsecondary planning became more of an individualized focus when participants talked about its place in their Cornerstone experience.

Finding 4: Postsecondary Planning and Transition as Individualism

When asked about the most memorable experiences in Cornerstone, participants spoke about opportunities for collective success, ways to build connections, and to find opportunities to accomplish something new in Cornerstone. When explicitly asked about postsecondary programming and how Cornerstone supported participants in accessing college, participants tended to focus on a different aspect of Cornerstone. Participants experienced postsecondary programming as individualized and personalized to their plans and goals. In the fourth finding, participants' ideas about their postsecondary journey and transition to college centered on individualized support and goals and less on the collective understanding that trek and service programming had provided.

In this finding, I want to share a reminder of the way the postsecondary journey is defined as a representation of the way participants shared their understanding. They discussed their postsecondary journey as anything connected to college or postsecondary plans, as well as the realities they faced when transitioning to and arriving at their postsecondary institutions. Participants highlighted that the journey was broader than college alone and that all participants needed support with their next steps, whether that was college, trade school, or workforce opportunities. I aligned my writing with their

understanding throughout the program evaluation. Participants broke this understanding of their postsecondary experiences into three sub-findings. First, alum participants shared that Cornerstone was their primary support in their postsecondary planning. Second, they highlighted how postsecondary programming and support at Cornerstone felt individualized and personalized. This was both a strength and a challenge of postsecondary programming. Finally, alum participants highlighted how that individualized understanding of the postsecondary journey brought about feelings of isolation and a lack of safety as they transitioned to their higher education institutions.

Sub-finding 1: Cornerstone as Primary Postsecondary Support

The first thing clearly expressed by participants was that Cornerstone was a primary support for them as they explored postsecondary options and plans. Jonah said he would have had to figure things out himself if it were not for Cornerstone's support.

“I feel like that is something that I would’ve had to figure out on my own because I got...obviously I wouldn’t have known what college is like unless I’ve experienced it myself. But like, I mean Cornerstone, they were good about me, about making us college-bound. Giving us materials like being able to go to college and be a successful student.” (Jonah, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

Jonah needed to have a contextual understanding of the college access process because he had not experienced something like college before. Cornerstone helped him feel more prepared and aware of what it meant to attend college. Jesús similarly highlighted the way he would have to seek out information on his own without Cornerstone.

“They are not really, like, given to you. They're not really even brought up in the first place [at school]. You need, you're the one that needs to look for like, 'oh, can I apply

for the scholarship through high school?' It is not given to you at all unless you look for it yourself. Cornerstone, they make it a part of their whole program like 'you need to think about this, and you need to start to develop an idea of what you want in college.'" (Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021)

While Jesús understood he needed to advocate for himself and the support he needed, he also appreciated that Cornerstone openly shared information he may not have found otherwise. NLK said she did not receive help at her school as she progressed on her postsecondary journey. "I feel like getting help, me personally, I don't really get help from my school with the whole college process. So I do rely on getting help from the staff at Cornerstone" (NLK, personal communication, March 24, 2021). NLK often spoke about how she felt a lack of support from her high school, and always returned to Cornerstone to fill the gap in information and support she needed. Devonte also expressed frustration about the postsecondary support offered at his high school. He had a college counselor assigned to him but felt like they just sent blast emails to everyone and did not really explain what they were supposed to do. He felt most concerned for his friends who were not a part of Cornerstone, because the minimal support from his high school was not enough.

"Yeah, when you've never done this before, so there's no way you could possibly know. And it's kind of like, it's tough because I'm thinking about the kids that might've had him as a college advisor or another college advisor, and they didn't have other people to reach out to. So I feel like it's tough because I'm grateful now that I've gone through Cornerstone and have adults I can reach out to, and they [other students] might not even have parents that have gone to college or anybody that's

gone to college before that can help them out. And it's kinda like they have to do it on their own. I think it's a big deal that it does need to be looked at, like at all schools, and make sure if they have people that they can reach out to.” (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021)

Devonte recognized the way he relied on Cornerstone to help him through his postsecondary planning process, and at the same time worried for his friends that were not part of Cornerstone. Devonte indicates that he trusts Cornerstone to give him the support he needs to be successful and is not as trusting in what his school has to offer.

Participants often indicated that their schools had some sort of opportunity for learning about the postsecondary journey, or options for support. They settled on the idea, however, that Cornerstone’s support was more thorough, more personalized, and provided details that their high schools missed. Nevaeh highlighted that her school had a presentation but that it was information she already knew, thanks to Cornerstone.

“Well, actually, just yesterday, we had a guidance meeting. Not a meeting, a presentation, that's what it's called. We had a guidance presentation where the guidance counselor went through a whole PowerPoint of college and how it looks and admissions, FAFSA, all that. But, I feel like everything he said, I kind of already knew it because of Cornerstone.” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 27, 2021)

Nevaeh was finishing out her junior year in high school when we spoke. At that point in her postsecondary journey, she should have an understanding of things like the SAT, FAFSA and college applications. If left to her high school alone, she’d be getting her first presentation pretty late in the year. Imani similarly shared that her school offered help, but she needed more to feel truly supported.

“And I have to say, Cornerstone does a whole bunch more than my school does. I feel like they care about our postsecondary success, but it's more like emailing about 'oh, yeah, Common App. Go on Common App.' I didn't really know what that was until Cornerstone programming.” (Imani, personal communication, March 28, 2021)

Imani highlighted that her school shared some information, but it lacked the details she needed to truly understand what to do with it. Research shows that a lack of adequate counselor staff and resources at schools leaves many young people, particularly those in low-income communities and communities of color, without the support they need to access college or other postsecondary opportunities (Perna, 2015). Imani went on to offer another example of what she meant. Because of her high school, she knew they were offering the SAT soon. But Cornerstone gave her the details to support her in registering for it by sharing a fee waiver. "I feel like that's just really helpful because I didn't even know you had to pay for the SATs, just because I was a little clueless about it" (Imani, personal communication, March 28, 2021). Cornerstone provided additional context, so Imani felt confident moving forward in her planning. Participants also shared that getting individualized support from Cornerstone felt personal because the staff had stronger relationships with participants. This individualized support is the focus of our second sub-finding. As participants discussed the individualized focus of postsecondary support, their understanding highlighted that support as both a strength and a challenge at Cornerstone.

Sub-finding 2: Individualized Support as a Strength and a Challenge

The Cornerstone program supports participants in understanding their strengths as they explore their postsecondary options and plan to impact their communities positively

in the future. Within this broader program scope are specific postsecondary-focused programming activities; group events and workshops, individualized coaching and counseling, and a small group college tour in their fourth summer of the program. Participants discussed how postsecondary planning is individualized and personalized based on participants' goals. In many ways, this individualized support was a strength of the Cornerstone program and likely why participants said Cornerstone was their primary source of postsecondary support.

Participants saw the support that Cornerstone provided as holistic. They felt supported regardless of their choices or the options they were interested in pursuing. NLK talked about how Cornerstone would support her on her postsecondary journey regardless of the type of support needed.

“So for me, if I had any troubles with postsecondary things like college or finding a plan after high school because it's not always about that. It's actually about helping you get set up for your later future. So even if it was a question about that, they were able to help me. And even if it was for something about my personal life that I needed help with that, they were able to help me.” (NLK, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

NLK saw the support offered at Cornerstone as bigger than just applications and financial aid forms. Cornerstone was helping her with her future, so nothing was off limits when it came to support needs. Her understanding also indicates that she felt like whatever choices she made, college or otherwise, Cornerstone would support her. Jesús similarly talked about how he felt the freedom to explore all the opportunities out there with Cornerstone; he was not pigeonholed into selecting a four-year college.

“Because before then I was like ‘college this, college that.’ But they literally gave me a whole resource that can go a different path aside from college. So that inspired me to do my own research and find out other things to do. So from that, now I’m interested in trade school and some other trade schools that I’ve been looking into.”

(Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021)

Jesús felt validated in making a different choice and could build upon that idea and create options for himself as he started narrowing in on potential postsecondary programs. His plan worked for him because of the individualized support he received at Cornerstone.

Nevaeh shared that the details Cornerstone provided about the college access process specifically were invaluable to her. She felt like getting information from Cornerstone was critical because there were so many things she did not know.

“But now, most of what I know about college is because of Cornerstone. We’ve had events solely on college, like in learning. For example, FAFSA, I did not know what that was, how to fill it out, anything. I didn’t know the difference between loans, grants, I don’t know. Things like that.” (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 27, 2021)

Sometimes, participants just needed someone to fill in the gaps. Most participants were first-generation college students. Being the first in their family to attend college meant they often could not rely on their parents to walk them through college application details. Their parents were learning right alongside them. NLK spoke similarly about asking questions and getting support with financial aid in a way that supported her and her parents in accessing information.

“So finding those little things, scholarship applications, or any of that sort, it does help. And I do really appreciate them helping me with that type of stuff. My parents didn't go to college, so they didn't go through the whole experience of stuff like that. So it's like me going through the process, [Cornerstone staff] are also teaching them.”

(NLK, personal communication, March 24, 2021)

The individualized focus of the postsecondary planning process is understandable because each student's postsecondary journey is different. Cornerstone meets this individualized process head-on through personalized coaching and support that participants rely on regularly. In many ways, this personalized support is a strength of Cornerstone's postsecondary support efforts. Nevertheless, as participants continued to share their understanding, it became clear that the individualized focus of postsecondary planning also presented a challenge for the connection and community-oriented Cornerstone program.

When discussing postsecondary programming at Cornerstone, participants mentioned individualized choices and support along with the personal challenges they had to sort through with their postsecondary plans. This focus on individualized programming was despite the fact that Cornerstone also implements postsecondary programming in groups, in similar ways to trek and service. Weekend events and summer college tours are done as a class or in small groups of 20-30 students. Yet, participants didn't speak of those pieces of postsecondary programming other than in passing. Their discussions also contrasted with the way participants described their most meaningful moments in service and trek as opportunities for connection and collective achievement. When reflecting on what was missing from their postsecondary journey, alum participants discussed how

much they wanted more opportunities to connect with others in Cornerstone and on college campuses.

Alum participants offered feedback on ways Cornerstone could create more immersive, realistic experiences to support them. Ela talked about how she would like to see Cornerstone build more intentional connections with the campuses they visited to provide a more in-depth exploration of life on campus. "We went during the summer, so we didn't really have much time to, we didn't get the experience of being on - in a college class, for example" (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021). She talked about how more connections with students and organizations on campus would provide a better college tour experience. "So I think it would be cool. I think a lot of college students love community organizations that focus on youth. So I think there's potential there to get participants more engaged rather than just going and seeing the campus" (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021). Ela wanted more of an experiential opportunity during campus visits; a chance to connect with the campus communities in meaningful ways. To her, because Cornerstone was a safe space, it made sense to offer the same opportunities for connection and collective achievement during Cornerstone's college tours as were offered in their summer camps and wilderness treks.

Ziah on the other hand, wanted more opportunities to intentionally connect with others while she was in Cornerstone. She felt like this opportunity to "practice networking" in the safe space that Cornerstone provided would support her in feeling comfortable reaching out in new environments after Cornerstone concluded. She talked about continuing to be pushed to connect with new people to support her in being ready to do that on her college campus.

“So, if I didn't put myself out there and speak to people, then I wouldn't have anyone to help me out. It's not just about making connections so you become better or get more opportunities. It really is helpful for that. It's about you being able to get comfortable enough to ask for help when you need it. There's not enough people, in my opinion. It's uncomfortable to ask for help. It's uncomfortable to admit that you don't have what you need or that you're vulnerable.” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

She talked about her struggles with finding support on campus and how she wanted to see Cornerstone prepare participants for the need to be vulnerable and ask for help before they transitioned to these new communities.

“So I had this problem, but I had no one to go to, and I am thinking I'm completely alone, freaking out because I can't pay for school. And there's so many people that I could talk to, that I tried talking to every single person multiple times. I left a million messages on the college's phone. I applied to so many scholarships. So definitely, knowing how to problem solve, giving them scenarios or like, 'hey, you lost this amount of money on your scholarship.’” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

Ziah felt alone on her campus at a time when she really needed others to support her. She indicates that her concerns were left unaddressed on her college campus. In her mind, had there been more opportunity to connect with others and problem solve scenarios at Cornerstone, she may have been less likely to “freak out.” For most of the Cornerstone program, participants express a sense of accomplishment, an understanding of how they are going to get through things, and a sense of connection and community with each

other, as highlighted in findings one and two. However, as participants focus more on Cornerstone's postsecondary programming, that focus on community changes. While participants counted on the support that Cornerstone staff provided, alum participants, in hindsight, reflected on a need for more opportunities to connect, practice coming together, and seek support. As alums continued to reflect, the individualism of the postsecondary access process while in Cornerstone transitioned to a sense of isolation and a loss of safety as they engaged with their college campuses.

Sub-finding 3: Higher Ed Transitions Create Lack of Safety and Isolation

As alum participants highlighted their experiences during the transition to college, the individualized understanding they felt in the college access and postsecondary planning process continued and intensified, becoming more of a sense of isolation as they entered predominantly white higher education institutions. Ziah pointed out that as a student of color and a first-generation college student, she became keenly aware of where her knowledge and understanding were lacking as a new college student.

“Cause me as a first-generation student, I am less prepared than somebody else who has already had that experience. At least, if that person is going to the college or university their parents went to, they at least have something in the back of their heads like, 'oh, I somewhat know what I am doing here.' Whereas I just get onto campus, and I'm like, 'welp, I'm alone. Time to find people.’” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

Ziah struggled to connect with the new environment and community she had become a part of in college. When she sought help, she was left confused and feeling like she was missing something.

“I wasn't expecting a lot of the like, college lingo, and atmosphere. So, I didn't know who to go to for help when I needed help. And I still don't, really. So, I'll need some advice on student loans. And I'll ask my financial aid advisor for my financial aid award sheet, and I'll ask them. They're like, 'oh, we don't do that. You have to go to the Bursar.' And I was like, I have no idea what that word is, who that person is, or where to talk to them.” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

Ziah came from Cornerstone, a community where she felt supported to be successful and could be herself and not feel judged. And then, on campus, Ziah felt like she was supposed to know things that she did not, and she felt judged because of it.

“So it would just be like, because of my first-generation status, my lack of knowledge of how things usually would go. I would get looks sometimes, or just like, they would give me an answer, but it's just like, 'you should already know that.' But who would I know it from, you know? Yeah, I got that feeling a lot.” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021)

Ziah felt judged because of her status as a first-generation student. She struggled to find people she could trust. She often felt like people were reluctant to help her at all on her college campus, as indicated by her discussion of the “looks” she would get or the use of words she didn't understand. Ziah's experiences highlight the way the deficit lens in education continues to impact marginalized students as they transition to college. Students of color resist the deficit lens placed on them in their P12 education only to have

it reinforced in a new and often predominantly white community in higher education (Patton, 2016). The higher education deficit lens perpetuates the whiteness-oriented understanding of what a “college-ready” student should be on campus and looks down upon students that don’t meet those expectations. Ela felt the deficit lens coming down on her at her college as well. She talked about feeling like she did not belong and could not find ways to connect with her college campus. She said the predominantly white institution she attended starkly contrasted with her experiences within a community of color at home.

“But, I was not prepared for, I can tell you this wholeheartedly, for being in a predominantly white space. I didn't know that was a thing. I didn't know what it consisted of, but I was quick to learn, and I was quick to get a sense of that culture shock. I was also not prepared to, I think, just being thrown into a new community and not have a sense of belonging.” (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021)

One of the things that Ela valued about Cornerstone was how she connected to and related to staff and how staff represented her community. Ela did not find that vital representation on campus in the faculty and staff she met. "Especially because now I look around and it's like everybody looks the same. Like everybody is white, or of another age than I am. It creates a huge disconnect" (Ela, personal communication, March 29, 2021). Ela’s comments indicate that she felt she was missing opportunities to feel valued for who she was at her college. And, the representation she had grown to appreciate at Cornerstone was nowhere to be found at her college. Ela found the differences striking between life on campus and what she knew from her community.

“Because going from (my high school) and just a black household, a Black country, native country, into Central University, it was tough. It was so tough. And Cornerstone was a safe space for, at least, as an Afro-Latina woman. And I did not think that the world or even college could be such a polar opposite experience from my high school experience.” (Ela, personal communication, May 2, 2021)

While Cornerstone had been a safe space, she could not find a similar sense of safety on her college campus.

Jonah's experiences similarly disillusioned him in college. While he praised the staff at Cornerstone for checking up on him and caring about his success, he felt that the "business" side of college did not create a nurturing campus community. "It seems mostly like a business, like they only just want my money, they don't even really care about me, and it's like if I fail, like I fail" (Jonah, personal communication, March 29, 2021). Jonah was looking for a community of people on campus to support him. He did not find that at his college and often felt like he wanted to leave college altogether. “You also get those professors who just don't care. It's a job to them that they still get paid at the end of the day, and I don't know. I just feel like professors are bitter. And they just make it, make me feel like I don't want to be in school anymore” (Jonah, personal communication, March 29, 2021).

Alum participants shared that they struggled with what they found when they arrived on campus and were challenged by what felt like an unsupportive community. When they felt unsupported, they often reflected on what they loved about Cornerstone. In some cases, they even articulated a desire to have ongoing connections with Cornerstone, to access the safe space and sense of family they were not finding on their campuses. Ziah

asked for more Cornerstone support as an alumna. “More consistent check-ins. For people who need it...Some people will be perfectly fine, but other people, they kind of need that lifeline. Cornerstone staffers are really, really useful in making that connection because you already have that bond” (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021).

Ziah indicates that the bond she has with Cornerstone staff can be that lifeline, that connection to a safe community. When her college campus caused her to struggle, she wanted to return to a space where she knew she would be accepted. Furthermore, TJ highlighted that arriving on a college campus did not mean you would no longer need help.

“I would say if you’re a college student, having those conversations that you had with your - whoever was their postsecondary coordinator at the time. I feel like those are still important to have as a college student, you know? You don't stop having questions. You don't stop needing help just because you're there now.” (TJ, February 25, 2021)

Ela and Ziah indicated that they couldn’t find people that they could trust to support them on their campuses. However, as TJ indicated, that doesn’t mean they could figure it out on their own. They still needed support, and alum participants often felt their campuses didn’t provide it. Alum participants had a hard time finding a safe and caring space on campus and did not discuss their community at college as a family. When they did not find the trust and acceptance on campus that they found at Cornerstone, their natural inclination was to connect back to Cornerstone to find the support they were missing. As Cornerstone continues to explore the best way to support alums in their transition to college, this fundamental understanding will be essential to return to.

Finding four identified a tension in the ways participants are experiencing Cornerstone alongside the systems and structures of education they navigate through.

Conclusion

As the findings conclude, we can see more clearly how participants understand Cornerstone as a safe space built on trust and acceptance, and how that space is in tension with the postsecondary journey's participants have experienced. Finding one points to how aspects of the Cornerstone program create opportunities for connection and collective achievement, particularly through opportunities to serve and wilderness trekking. Participants shared these pieces of programming as meaningful because of how they come to know and connect with each other and their communities and how those connections allow them to accomplish and overcome new challenges. As participants shared in finding two, this focus on community-building and the interconnectedness of each person in Cornerstone creates a safe space and sense of family. This sense of family is centered on trust, acceptance, and participants' sense of self. Finding three pointed to this sense of family and safety emerging in part from the way participants saw staff and alums in Cornerstone as guides and mentors. Participants also began to see alums as models for their future possibilities. All three findings communicate how participants see their experiences as interconnected and communal. As Ziah said, "we all fly together; we all fall together" (Ziah, personal communication, February 25, 2021).

Finding four focuses on understanding the postsecondary journey for Cornerstone participants. As participants shared their knowledge, the interconnectedness that was demonstrated throughout the first three findings got lost in the individualized understanding of postsecondary planning. Cornerstone was a crucial factor in the

postsecondary journey of participants, serving as a primary support as they created their postsecondary plans. However, the individualized focus left participants centered on those personalized plans rather than on the interconnectedness of the journey participants take with Cornerstone. Ultimately, the individualism of the postsecondary journey became a sense of isolation as participants transitioned to higher education. As Chapter Five will indicate, however, the strengths of Cornerstone present opportunities for the organization to refine its efforts to better support participants on their postsecondary journeys. By doubling down on the Cornerstone strengths of connection and a safe community of "family," Cornerstone can find greater success in its postsecondary programming. These same strengths present implications for other community organizations and higher education institutions to consider as they look to better support participants of color on their postsecondary journeys. Moreover, there is a need for future research on the ways collective achievement and impact can support safer spaces and a sense of connection for students of color on their postsecondary journey.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

We call it a postsecondary journey because it is one. It is a journey that incorporates who we are with whom we hope to become. Along that journey, we are surrounded by the support and communities we have engaged with, and we see before us the spaces and places we are entering. However, the journey is only fully known after we embark upon it. Cornerstone participants of color shared their knowledge of the postsecondary journey openly and honestly. Cornerstone can take the understandings and meaning making from participants and utilize their expertise to support the continuous improvement of their programmatic efforts. The design of this program evaluation was created with all of this in mind, lifting the voices of participants to improve the antiracist practices of the Cornerstone program. As a result, this program evaluation utilized a fourth-generation evaluation approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to keep the evaluation centered on the voices of participants but include other stakeholders, like program staff and leadership, in the process. The dual purpose of this program evaluation was first to lift and amplify the voices of participants of color that were a part of the Cornerstone program. Then, to utilize the knowledge offered by those participants to further continuous improvement efforts at Cornerstone, particularly as they explore moving toward a more antiracist set of practices. Creating a set of evaluation questions designed to explore the experiences of

participants of color in the Cornerstone program supported these purposes. These evaluation questions (EQ) are listed below.

- EQ1: How do Cornerstone students and alums of color describe their program experiences?
 - EQ1A: Which programmatic elements of the Cornerstone program are at the forefront of their understanding and meaning-making?
- EQ2: How do Cornerstone students and alums of color make meaning and connections between their experiences in Cornerstone and their postsecondary journey?
 - EQ2A: How do they describe relationships with staff, and if at all, how do those relationships support their sense of self and postsecondary journeys?

In this chapter, I highlight how participants answered these questions and how those answers emerged as the four findings discussed in Chapter Four. I will then explore how the findings intertwine with community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). In addition, I will discuss the implications of those findings and what recommendations I have for the Cornerstone program to support its continuous improvement efforts. I will close the chapter with future research suggestions for the Cornerstone and postsecondary programming communities.

A Review of the Findings as Answers to the Evaluation Questions

In this section, I will highlight how the findings from the discussions with participants answer the evaluation questions at the heart of this program evaluation. Each answer utilizes knowledge gained from the findings, as discussed in Chapter Four. In some cases,

the answer to the evaluation question emerged from one finding, and in others, the answer emerged from multiple findings.

EQ1: How do Cornerstone students and alums of color describe their program experiences?

As discussed in finding one, the two areas of programming that participants discussed as the most memorable were the wilderness treks and the community service opportunities. These particular program experiences were the most salient because students found a sense of connection with each other and because there was an element of collective achievement or impact to these programmatic experiences. They described both of these experiences as meaningful, as a way to build trust amongst each other, and as spaces where they could be themselves and feel a sense of accomplishment. Research suggests that how students described these experiences results from the strengths-based approach taken as students participated in trek and service opportunities (Benenson & Stagg, 2016). Scholars have found that service and volunteerism for high school and college students from marginalized communities can present opportunities for growth and identity development as students utilize their strengths and community cultural wealth to impact their communities and each other (Benenson & Stagg, 2016; Niehaus & Rivera, 2015). Participants stepped outside of their comfort zones during wilderness trekking. This lack of comfort also propelled them to rely on and trust in each other to get through the experience. Traditionally, people of color, notably the Black community, have been systemically excluded from many outdoor pursuits due to a history of oppression, financial barriers, and an unwillingness to step outside "one's known 'ethnic space,'" (Davis, 2019, p. 91). This historical exclusion may have impacted the way participants

came to experience wilderness trekking. Their understanding of it as an impactful achievement and something they needed to complete together may be due to their understanding of just how foreign of an experience it was, compared to their life experiences thus far. Furthermore, the trek was an opportunity to safely navigate through an endeavor that came with risk and uncertainty. While outdoor education opportunities like Cornerstone's trek have been shown to perpetuate whiteness in their efforts (Gauthier et al., 2021), participants did not experience trek as a way for them to ascribe to whiteness, but as a way to collectively navigate a challenge together. Beyond the specifics of service and trek, however, the experiences that participants discussed as meaning the most to them came from opportunities to connect and engage with each other and, in return, find opportunities to build trust and acceptance.

EQ1A: Which programmatic elements of the Cornerstone program are at the forefront of their understanding and meaning-making?

Participants were clear about why service opportunities and wilderness treks at Cornerstone were meaningful for them. In both instances, they found connection with each other deeply and meaningfully, and they could point to the impact or accomplishment of the experience collectively. It was something each of them achieved, yet all accomplished together. The focus by participants on what they were able to accomplish together indicates that students find meaning in programmatic elements that are collective in their focus and provide the opportunity for collective success or impact. These opportunities for collective learning were the most salient for students because they were not individualistic in their understanding. Researchers have highlighted how communities of color often center their cultural understanding on collectivism and

collective achievement versus white, Eurocentric culture focusing on individualism and independent achievement (Giufriada et al., 2012). By allowing participants to accomplish acts of service and wilderness trekking together, they validated the importance of focusing on the collective and encouraged the participants to focus on the success of all, not just the success of one. Even in students' and alums' understanding of how service opportunities connected them to their humanity, this collective understanding emerged as salient and vital when considering the Cornerstone program.

To extend this idea of collectivism as a central focal point of student experiences, we can utilize the knowledge that emerged in finding two to further exemplify collectivism in action in the Cornerstone program. Finding two focused on how students found a safe community and a sense of family in Cornerstone. The emphasis participants have on this feeling of safety, and the ability to find their "chosen family" at Cornerstone highlights what students found in Cornerstone that they had not necessarily been able to find in other places. At Cornerstone, students were able to embrace the way they were interconnected. They could focus on their relationship with each other and their collective power to achieve and accomplish. Participants were then able to carry this understanding of what a safe community looked like and a belief in the ability to create a sense of family in a new environment. This is evident in their discussions of the postsecondary journey and their understanding of a lack of safety and connection on their college campuses.

EQ2: How do Cornerstone students and alums of color make meaning and connections between their experiences in Cornerstone and their postsecondary journey?

Participants highlighted Cornerstone as a primary support on their postsecondary journey. As found in finding four, this support was often discussed as individualized and one-to-one support with staff members. While students found meaning in the collective experiences of service and trek, they did not highlight the same kind of collective opportunity for success when discussing postsecondary programming. The connection they found between Cornerstone and their postsecondary journey centered on the knowledge handed off and the valuable information that was given to them by Cornerstone staff. This indicates that participants make meaning of their postsecondary programming differently and are not experiencing that same sense of connection or achievement that they did in other programmatic experiences. The re-centering of individualized understanding and white, Eurocentric norms in postsecondary programming sets this program apart from Cornerstone experiences that participants highlight as the most memorable and meaningful. It may also re-center a deficit lens on participants. When focused on the individualized aspects of the postsecondary journey, participants often discussed the things they "did not know" or how they would have been "on their own" without Cornerstone. This unintentional messaging reminds participants of color that they sit within an education system that deficit orients them throughout their journey (Valencia, 2010). This deficit lens continues for participants as they transition to their postsecondary options and feel disconnected and unsafe on their campuses. Despite

this re-centering on individualism and whiteness, participants discussed finding points of connection on their postsecondary journeys, particularly with staff and alums.

EQ2A: How do they describe relationships with staff, and if at all, how do those relationships support their sense of self and postsecondary journeys?

Participants spoke of staff as trusted adults who supported them without judgment. They found the staff (often Cornerstone alums) relatable and found meaning in learning from staff with similar backgrounds and experiences. As discussed in finding 3, the representation that participants found in staff and other older alums in Cornerstone created opportunities for mentorship and role modeling. Research has backed up the importance of representation in supporting students of color along their postsecondary journeys. When students of color see staff and alums that look like them going after similar goals and wanting similar things, their dreams and hopes become more normalized, bucking up against the deficit lens of education (Jaykumar et al., 2013; Kiyama et al., 2015). Participants found connections with older alums particularly meaningful, as they could envision what was possible for their futures as they witnessed the journeys that alums experienced.

Community Cultural Wealth and Participants Experiences in Cornerstone

Participants shared their knowledge and understanding, providing answers to the evaluation questions designed to support the continuous improvement of the Cornerstone program. To dive deeper into the knowledge they have shared, it is important to also analyze the findings with the theoretical framework that was at the heart of this evaluation. This next section will discuss the findings through the theoretical lenses of critical race theory and community cultural wealth. This deeper exploration of the

findings will support the efforts of the Cornerstone program to move toward a more antiracist set of practices. It will provide context to the implications and recommendations later in the chapter. This section will highlight how the findings include evidence of using navigational, aspirational, social, and familial capital within the Cornerstone program. I will also highlight how students discuss Cornerstone as a source of informational capital, a newer extension of community cultural wealth's traditional six-capital model. Finally, there will be an exploration of resistant capital and how students' engagement in Cornerstone can also resist the deficit lens placed on them within the systems and structures they navigate.

Cornerstone as a Vehicle for Navigational Capital

Within community cultural wealth, navigational capital speaks to how students of color navigate social systems effectively, despite the deficit lens and embedded racism within those systems (Yosso, 2005). As participants discussed their experiences in Cornerstone, they often referred to the opportunities they had to navigate different social systems and structures due to Cornerstone programming. The first example participants highlighted was their ability to successfully navigate their wilderness treks as a community that brought safety and trust on their journey. As discussed in my discussion of EQ1, wilderness trek experiences have historically excluded communities of color, and outdoor experiences like National Parks, hiking, and mountain biking continue to exclude and marginalize communities of color (Davis, 2019). When participants completed wilderness trekking every year for three years, they successfully navigated a system from which people of color are often excluded. I found no evidence that Cornerstone offers these trek experiences intentionally as a disruption in the system's exclusionary practices,

or that students understand trek as a dismantling of systemic inequities. There is, however, evidence in Cornerstone's approach that trek is offered as an intentional way for students to practice the leadership skills they've developed in a challenging setting. Trek allows students to utilize their community cultural wealth and build upon it. In this way, Cornerstone validates the capital students carry, and resists the perpetuation of a deficit narrative. Beyond the successful navigation of trek through the use of their community cultural wealth, participants come through those experiences feeling a sense of accomplishment in achieving something they never thought they could. Furthermore, participants speak of how they navigate their trek experiences as a community. I think of Ziah's declaration, "we all fly together; we all fall together." Participants use their navigational capital and understanding of collective success and achievement to get through their wilderness trek experiences and develop a love and joy for what they went through together.

Beyond the trek experiences that participants shared, they highlighted how they utilized navigational capital to engage in community service with Cornerstone. When participants spoke of opportunities to serve in their community with Cornerstone as some of their more meaningful moments in the program, they discussed how Cornerstone helped them connect with their humanity. They also discussed how service helps them see their interconnection with the world and the communities they lived in. They also experienced these service opportunities together and were able to see the collective impact that a group of young people could have in their neighborhoods and for organizations that need assistance. They could also volunteer with, and for members of the communities they were a part of, which supported the dismantling of some of the

stereotypes they held of others. By making listening and reflection a part of service, Cornerstone supported students in navigating volunteerism in a way that stripped the concepts of saviorism away and allowed students to engage with the communities they served more meaningfully and authentically.

White saviorism asserts that white volunteers can enter a community in need with more knowledge and understanding of what must be done to help that community than the community members themselves (Coles, 2012). As students shared their experiences in service, they highlighted ways they believed Cornerstone supported a disruption of white saviorism in its approach to connecting students to service. Students also shared moments, however, that highlighted a perpetuation of whiteness understanding, as when Ela talked about painting over graffiti as part of a service project she participated in. This divergent set of meanings and understandings will be discussed further within the upcoming recommendations. Overall, participants discussed how they, as young people of color, felt like they had the power to impact their communities positively through their efforts together. Participants felt they were engaging in service by engaging with their humanity and the humanity of others. This understanding of humanity allowed participants to disrupt the notions of white saviorism and successfully navigate a system embedded in whiteness to impact their community. Ela highlighted how she saw the focus of community service as centered on people.

“I feel like if we want to help folks in communities, we need to humanize them. We cannot treat them like statistics, we can't treat them like concepts. They're real people with real lives. That's something that Cornerstone taught me to treat people with that

humanity, to empathize with people but also realize that they're real people.” (Ela, personal communication, May 2, 2021)

This focus on humanity, connection, and empathy allowed participants to engage with the communities they serve to understand better what was needed. It also allowed them to navigate those experiences together as a collective. By engaging in these experiences together, participants built a love for serving in their communities and carried that with them into their futures.

Within postsecondary programming, the very process of accessing higher education requires the utilization of navigational capital. In postsecondary programming, much of the navigational capital students used on their postsecondary journey came from the individualized support they received from Cornerstone staff. Cornerstone's safe community and sense of family made participants feel safer getting their questions answered and taking the next steps on their postsecondary journey. Because of this, participants pointed to Cornerstone as their primary source of postsecondary support rather than their schools or other community entities. Through discussions that helped students understand their next steps and information that was handed off to students about the financial aid, application, and enrollment process, participants were able to navigate the complex systems of higher education and continue their postsecondary journey. During postsecondary programming, however, the way students utilized their navigational capital looked different because of the individualized focus of their postsecondary journeys. Here, students accessed informational capital, an extension of navigational capital, from the Cornerstone staff.

Participants See Cornerstone as a Source of Informational Capital

Participants spoke over and over again about the way Cornerstone staff handed off new information about postsecondary planning to them. Whenever they discussed how Cornerstone supported their postsecondary plans and aspirations, they all mentioned how Cornerstone staff answered their questions and handed off important details about accessing postsecondary programs that they were not getting from other sources. Research highlights this inaccessible information as the hidden curriculum within the education system, a systemic inequity that disproportionately impacts students of color and first-generation students (Liou et al., 2015; Patton, 2016). Students of color are left navigating the postsecondary access process without the same access to information in their schools as their peers in white and more affluent communities.

Participants in Cornerstone indicated that they filled this gap in information by utilizing the Cornerstone program. In this way, participants accessed informational capital, an extension of navigational capital within community cultural wealth (Liou et al., 2015). Liou et al. (2015) highlight informational capital as accessing critical information that supports the navigation of systems and structures from which students of color are traditionally excluded. At Cornerstone, participants saw the staff members as a source of that critical information, and they gathered the details they needed from those staff to continue to navigate the postsecondary planning process successfully. Participants pointed to the lack of information shared in their schools. They also highlighted the challenges of accessing this information from parents or other family members, especially when they identified as first-generation college students. In my discussion with NLK, she was unequivocal that the trust she had in the Cornerstone staff far outweighed

her trust in her school staff. When she needed questions answered, she knew Cornerstone staff would "explain it to me without any problem with it, and I really do appreciate that because a lot of people will either get frustrated if they had to explain it further and further and further" (NLK, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Cornerstone staff represented an informational resource for participants that they could not access elsewhere. Moreover, the trust and acceptance that participants felt from the Cornerstone community made them more comfortable asking for help when needed. In this way, Cornerstone acted as a vehicle for participants to utilize their navigational capital within and as a source of informational capital. It's important to note that this informational capital was effectively utilized because of this sense of family, this safe counter space that Cornerstone had created. Information wasn't shared as a generalized checklist, but in a specific and individualized way that honored students' needs and concerns. Devonte felt Cornerstone would share knowledge in a way that helped him figure things out, based on his goals and needs, so he was still empowered to move forward as he saw fit.

"She knows that about me. So it may feel like she's nagging you, but it's only for the better, and I say that's what's good about Cornerstone toward the end of Cornerstone. They're letting you figure out what you wanna do. And they're ready to support you however they can instead of leading you to do something that you may not want to do. And then it changes your whole mindset on what you wanna do after high school." (Devonte, personal communication, April 26, 2021)

Devonte got the information he needed to move forward and felt like Cornerstone staff honored his plans no matter what. This is an example of how participants highlighted the safe community that Cornerstone provided and their trust in the people of Cornerstone. In turn, Cornerstone supported their ability to navigate these complex systems and get the relevant information that they needed. In this way, the Cornerstone community had become a part of the familial capital that participants carried with them on their journeys.

Social and Familial Capital for Participants at Cornerstone

In finding 2, participants discussed how the people of Cornerstone become a "chosen family" over time, based on the things they accomplished together, the trust developed, and the acceptance offered amongst each other. When connecting this to community cultural wealth, I see their discussions as examples of students building both their social and familial capital and using it in challenging situations. At its most basic level, Cornerstone offers social capital to students through the resources its program shares and the connections it allows students to make amongst staff and peers. Yosso (2005) highlights social capital as “networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (p. 79). Participants often spoke of the ways they relied on each other and the staff of Cornerstone as they navigated challenges within the program, as they expressed who they are and what they have been through and pursued postsecondary plans. This use of social capital at Cornerstone supported their success in the program and their plans for their future. Students' and alums' use of social capital supported their successful trek completion when they utilized the support of wilderness-trained staff to read a compass correctly. They accessed social capital when engaging in

community service opportunities that provided a greater understanding of the resources and opportunities available to those in need in their neighborhoods. They benefitted from social capital when they could apply for scholarships shared with them or inquire about internships that alums were offering. By being a part of Cornerstone, they built social capital through the connections and resources that Cornerstone shared.

When examining how participants spoke of their connections with each other and the community they co-created at Cornerstone, they often spoke of those connections as something beyond social capital alone. As discussed in finding 2, students overwhelmingly utilized concepts of family when discussing the people they came to know in Cornerstone. This "chosen family" was something participants felt proud to be connected to. Cornerstone and the sense of family it created for participants allowed them to feel like they could be authentically themselves and share things they had not shared with others. Yosso (2005) discusses the way racism, sexism, and classism have influenced understandings of 'family,' and she acknowledges that familial capital can come from beyond the "immediate family" (p. 79). She points to extended family and even friends as part of familial capital, depending on one's understanding of what one considers family.

At no point in our discussions did participants say that Cornerstone replaced their immediate family, or that Cornerstone minimized the role participants' immediate families played in their lives. Cornerstone did not become participants' familial capital, they just provided opportunities for students to add to that familial capital in a way that students embraced and valued. Familial capital in Cornerstone is evident from the way participants discussed their connections to each other and what it provided them. Yosso

(2005) discusses the way familial capital helps build connection and commitment to community and supports us in feeling like we can solve problems together. Participants spoke of how they relied on each other to overcome challenges. They spoke of how serving together in their communities helped them connect to humanity differently. The concepts and ideas they found most meaningful connected back to the familial capital they had built amongst each other.

As alum participants, in particular, talked about their connections to Cornerstone, they discussed the ways they remained close to their Cornerstone “siblings” and shared the understanding that even if time passes, they know they can always come back to the people they know in Cornerstone when they need support. In this way, the familial capital Cornerstone fostered amongst participants is and can continue to be an essential resource that participants should utilize along their postsecondary journeys. Ideas for harnessing this familial capital differently in postsecondary programming, in particular, are shared as recommendations later in the chapter. Beyond each singular form of community cultural wealth, Yosso (2005) also highlights how different forms of capital can coexist and work together to support students navigating systemic inequities in education. With this in mind, it is important to note how social and familial capital have also supported students' and alums' aspirational capital in Cornerstone. Aspirational capital was discussed in connection with alums in Cornerstone and their influence on students as they journey through the program. In this next section, I will highlight the ways aspirational capital is fostered in Cornerstone through alums as models and the collective achievements participants find in Cornerstone.

Fostering Aspirational Capital: Alumni Modelling and Collective Achievement

When Cornerstone enrolls a new group of students into their program in the seventh grade, they do so selectively. The program first receives nominations from community partners of students they believe could benefit from strengths-based programming that supports postsecondary planning and access to higher education. Considerations include characteristics exhibited in the classroom, income levels, and interest in leadership and community impact. There is also a heavy emphasis on postsecondary goals and plans for the future. As a result of the nomination and application process, most students selected for Cornerstone come into the program already carrying considerable aspirational capital. They have hopes and goals for their future and, in most cases, a desire to attend college. Yosso (2005) defines aspirational capital as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers,” (p. 77). As participants spoke of their experiences in Cornerstone, they discussed ways Cornerstone fostered that aspirational capital as students moved closer to graduating high school.

Participants often discussed their excitement for the future as they discussed connections and conversations with older alums in the program. These alums often also served as staff members at summer camp experiences or weekend events during the school year. Aspirational capital was nurtured in those conversations, as alums shared their own experiences along their postsecondary journey. Participants seemed to feel the most confident in their future when they learned of the twists, turns, and unexpected shifts that alums had taken on their journeys. Hearing that alums' journeys had barriers and obstacles but that those alums were able to navigate through those challenges successfully supported students in believing that they would get to where they wanted to

be even if challenges arise. Nicole saw herself in the journey a staff member (and alum) shared with her. She highlighted how that supported her when she said, "But it gives me people with new experiences because you get to listen to them and like 'oh, that's similar to like, what I wanna do so maybe I should like, take a page out of their book'" (Nicole, personal communication, March 20, 2021). Participants found themselves in the stories that alums shared with them. The understanding they gained from discussions with alums fostered their aspirational capital.

One way that participants nurtured their aspirational capital came through the perspectives gained by observing alums on their own postsecondary journeys. Furthermore, participants nurtured their aspirational capital through programmatic experiences that allowed for collective achievement. Participants often spoke of trek as an accomplishment they would never have done on their own but one they were genuinely proud to point to as an achievement. Participants saw this achievement as communal and expressed pride in what they and their fellow Cornerstone students could do together. This collective achievement also supported their feeling like they could accomplish whatever they put their mind to, particularly when they relied on each other to overcome obstacles and challenges. Trek represents challenges in life that seem insurmountable for students. As Nevaeh highlights, "Even though I didn't want to do this, I did it. Even though I didn't think I could do this, I did it" (Nevaeh, personal communication, March 27, 2021). As participants often explained, the connections they had with each other supported them to get through the challenges trek presented. This understanding of working together and accomplishing something they had never attempted fostered their aspirational capital by supporting their understanding of their

capabilities. When students completed the trek successfully, they felt a sense of pride in their abilities and could see how that sense of accomplishment could transfer to other challenges in their future.

Similarly, participants spoke of service opportunities connected to their future lives. In some cases, students found a passion for serving their communities and saw service as a lifelong commitment they would carry with them. As Jesús highlighted, “it definitely made me more confident in myself, definitely made me look towards my future and pretty much encompass the whole community and world building that they strive for. It instilled that into me” (Jesús, personal communication, April 5, 2021). Outside of finding a lifelong connection to serving their communities, students could also access ideas for their future careers through service. Ela and NLK pointed to how serving in their communities with Cornerstone supported their decision to study social work. Participants fostered their aspirational capital through Cornerstone by getting out and engaging with service in their communities. This aspirational capital was fostered alongside social and familial capital. In the next section, I will explore how resistant capital was intertwined within each finding discussed and how the counter-space that participants found in Cornerstone allowed for a nurturing of their community cultural wealth, which in itself is an act of resistance to systemic inequities.

Resistant Capital Within Cornerstone

Yosso (2005) highlights resistant capital as rooted in how communities of color have a history of standing in opposition to systems of oppression. Students continue to utilize resistant capital when participating in acts that challenge inequality (p. 80). Upon analyzing the experiences of participants at Cornerstone with critical race theory and

community cultural wealth, it becomes clear that within each finding, there were opportunities for participants to enact resistant capital in the ways Yosso (2005) discussed. First, participants found the collective experiences of trek and service particularly meaningful because of how they connected with each other and accomplished things together. Those collective opportunities stand in contrast to white, Eurocentric ideas of individualism. When participants focus on the joy of collective experiences, they resist the dominant narrative of individualism and independence as a key to success (Giufriada et al., 2012).

Similarly, participants found a safe community and sense of family in Cornerstone and owned that belief in "chosen family" despite the messages they received from society. By centering their experiences on this sense of family at Cornerstone, participants practice resistant capital toward definitions of family with historical connections to racist, sexist, and classist ideals (Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, participants found mentors and models in the staff and older alums they connected with, seeing themselves in the representation these staff and older alums brought into the program (Jaykumar et al., 2013; Kiyama et al., 2015). This opportunity to see others in roles and on journeys that participants want to take on supports their aspirational capital. It is also an enactment of resistant capital toward the deficit lens in education that labels students "less than" or "lacking" (Valencia, 2010).

Finally, despite a re-centering of individualism in the postsecondary planning process at Cornerstone, participants found support and access to critical information at Cornerstone as they prepared their postsecondary plans. In this way, students successfully navigated the systemic inequities that exclude people of color from postsecondary

options (Patton, 2016). These acts of resistance intertwined with each experience that participants discussed. The safe space that Cornerstone created allowed students to nurture their resistant capital throughout their time in the program. Furthermore, resistant capital was nurtured alongside social and familial capital, navigational and informational capital, and aspirational capital. Cornerstone nurtured and fostered several areas of students' and alums' community cultural wealth. There are indications, however, that more could be done to support participants on their postsecondary journeys. In the final sections of the chapter, I will review the implications that participants' experiences in Cornerstone present for postsecondary access programs, present specific recommendations for the Cornerstone program moving forward, and suggest opportunities for additional research.

Implications for Practice

Participants of color in the Cornerstone program shared several key points of knowledge related to their experiences. For this program evaluation, I will focus on three main implications for practice in the strengths-based, college access and postsecondary planning field. First, participants indicate that creating counter-spaces like Cornerstone can foster students' community cultural wealth because of the safe community and sense of family created. Second, by working to re-center on collectivism versus individualism, organizations can create additional opportunities for students of color to build upon their community cultural wealth, while also disrupting the whiteness embedded in the postsecondary access process. Finally, participants' experiences indicate that for students of color, successful strengths-based programs must include a continuous analysis of their approach for the ways that whiteness emerges in their practices.

Creating Counter-Spaces to Foster Community Cultural Wealth

Cornerstone participants experienced Cornerstone as a counter-space to the deficit-oriented education system, in part due to the way Cornerstone supported a sense of family and trust and acceptance amongst students, alums, and staff. For postsecondary and college-access programs, creating counter-spaces could provide students with opportunities to build a support network amongst each other. In Cornerstone, participants indicated that this counter-space emerged as a result of three practices. First, staff modelled trust and acceptance from the very beginning. Participants felt like staff were authentic, honest, and real with them in ways that they didn't find in other spaces. Second, when participants took a risk and shared something true about themselves, that truth was honored and validated. This validation came from staff as well as other students. Finally, as a result of that validation and acceptance, students felt comfortable exploring their sense of self, and using their strengths and capital to further their success in Cornerstone, and in their communities. Each organization/program will need to explore how to best facilitate this sense of safety in their programs. Staff should be trained in effective trust-building practices and should reflect on the ways students are often invalidated and given deficit messages in the education system. Finding opportunities that push students to rely on each other, and facilitating dialogue and reflection amongst students can support a sense of community and trust amongst each other. As participants suggested, by following these practices in their own work, other organizations could create similar counter-spaces of safety for their students.

Centering on Collectivism

Participants connected the most to experiences that provided connection and a sense of collective achievement or success. Here, the indication for programs is to center on collectivism in their programmatic elements, to support a reframing of the individualistic narrative of college access that centers on whiteness. When participants spoke about the postsecondary programming at Cornerstone, their understanding of it as individualized support was critical to accessing key information and an indication of a re-centering of whiteness. This one-to-one counseling is an essential practice offered by many different types of colleges access and postsecondary planning programs. Beyond the individual support, however, a focus on the individual postsecondary journey, centered on student merit and hard work, perpetuates whiteness in the postsecondary access process and reinforces a deficit-oriented understanding of the experiences of students of color (Giufreda et al., 2012). To combat the whiteness perpetuated within the postsecondary journey, organizations should first highlight it for what it is. The postsecondary journey is personal, yes, but a personal journey does not have to be one that disconnects us from each other and our abilities to succeed together.

Organizations should highlight the complexities of the postsecondary journey, along with the history of higher education and for whom it was created. By separating this aspect from the journey, staff can then point out that when students of color work together within their communities to access postsecondary programs, they are disrupting the education system and its deficit lens. Second, if organizations have supported the creation of a counter-space that feels safe, they can utilize this sense of safety and connection to help students reflect on the ways they are journeying together, even if their

journey lands them on different campuses. Staff can highlight the ways they can utilize their community cultural wealth to support each other, and have students reflect on how this communal journey could continue once students arrive on their campuses. When students can see that “we all fly together, we all fall together” can be a part of the postsecondary journey they will step onto their campuses knowing they aren’t alone. They will know that they aren’t supposed to work through their challenges on their own, they are supposed to rely on each other, and they are supposed to seek out a new community on campus that they can rely on as well. This understanding will support a collective view of the postsecondary journey, propelling students forward with that same sense of collective achievement that Cornerstone participants highlighted.

Organizations’ Ongoing Interrogation of Whiteness within their Practices

Participants highlighted many positive impacts of Cornerstone as a strengths-based, postsecondary planning and college access program. However, there were also experiences shared that remind us of the way whiteness is embedded in our societal systems and structures. Participants shared the way the deficit-lensed education system left them with a sense of distrust and lack of connection. Participants saw the postsecondary journey as individualistic and their experiences on campus as isolating and unsafe. Even within service opportunities, participants pointed to the ways whiteness emerged in a project requiring the removal of graffiti – an act of vandalism under standards of whiteness, but an art form and act of resistance in other worldviews (Dickinson, 2008). These examples of whiteness emerging in Cornerstone indicate a need for strengths-based, postsecondary planning and college access programs to practice continuous interrogation of their practices, partnerships, and processes.

Strengths-based approaches cannot rely solely on their focus on student strengths alone. They must also disrupt the deficit lens and understandings of whiteness that emerge outside of the program's immediate sphere. Strengths-based programs must critically examine the curriculum and practices they utilize for deficit discourse and the perpetuation of whiteness. Beyond these areas of programming alone, organizations must also critically evaluate the partnerships they establish, the communities they serve, and the higher education institutions their students transition to. Organizations need to address specific incidents of whiteness in practice, both to help students of color understand it in everyday interactions and to support their ability to disrupt whiteness as it happens through the utilization of their community cultural wealth. Staff of strengths-based programs should be supported in regularly reflecting on whiteness within programming. I would recommend starting with a full audit of current programming for the perpetuation of whiteness and white supremacist culture. Depending on the organization and its staff expertise, this may involve collaborating with organizations or consultants that focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, or that have expertise in interrogating white supremacy within programs. Continued collaboration with organizations that hold this expertise should be utilized until staff feel appropriately skilled to continue these efforts on their own, and the more experienced consultants/partner organizations deem it appropriate. After the initial audit, I would also recommend a bi-annual revisit of any new programming and documentation. A website like Okun's (2021) whitesupremacistculture.info may be useful in the long term for this type of action. This website lists many resources and examples of ways organizations can interrogate their efforts for the perpetuation of white supremacist culture.

Furthermore, staff should be prepared to acknowledge whiteness when they see it in practice, as well as validate students' understandings of whiteness when they highlight it within programmatic experiences. Through this continual reflection and interrogation, along with the validation of student experiences, strengths-based programs can work toward a more antiracist set of practices and minimize harm for students of color. These three implications are important for the strengths-based, postsecondary access community to consider as they look to better support students of color. In order to narrow in on the best course of action for the Cornerstone program in particular to consider, I will next share four recommendations for their use as they look to improve their antiracist practices.

Recommendations for the Cornerstone Program

While implications for practice can undoubtedly be utilized by the staff at the Cornerstone program to support their efforts of continuous improvement, I wanted to share some specific recommendations with Cornerstone that centered on the knowledge offered by participants. According to the participants that shared their knowledge, these recommendations are designed to offer opportunities to disrupt whiteness within programmatic elements by refocusing their efforts on what works well while remaining student-centered. In this section, I will share four recommendations that emerged from discussions with participants of the Cornerstone evaluation. First, Cornerstone should embrace the concept of "chosen family," in order to validate student understanding of their experiences and disrupt concepts of "family" that perpetuate whiteness. Second, Cornerstone should add additional experiential learning opportunities within its postsecondary access programming to align specifically with the value participants place

on opportunities for connection and collective success. Third, Cornerstone should continue to refine its approach to supporting and engaging alums after their arrival on campus, to better address the isolation and lack of safety alum participants described. Finally, Cornerstone should complete its own interrogation of programmatic discourse and strategy, to better align their framing with antiracist language and understanding.

Cornerstone Should Embrace the Concept of “Chosen Family”

As a former staff member of the Cornerstone program, I remember engaging in discussions about the concept of family and how students discussed their connections to each other as familial bonds. At the time, some staff members were resistant to students articulating this sense of family at Cornerstone. There was concern that focusing on a sense of family minimized the connection to immediate family back home. Instead, staff tried to encourage the utilization of terms like friends and mentors instead of siblings and family. When utilizing critical race theory and community cultural wealth, this reluctance to validate participants’ understandings of family re-centers whiteness-embedded narratives of what family "should" be and minimizes the support networks they have built amongst each other during their time in Cornerstone. Every participant I spoke with discussed the people at Cornerstone as family. The shared experiences of Cornerstone participants allowed for a deeper connection amongst each other than they had found in other spaces and systems they were navigating. Cornerstone should validate this connection for what students come to know it as, family. Cornerstone has created a counter-space where students build their familial capital through connections with Cornerstone staff and each other.

As Cornerstone staff continue to build their antiracist practices, they should include aligning their understanding of family with students and alums. By acknowledging and accepting the sense of family students and alums find at Cornerstone, they can disrupt the dominant narratives of family that have been influenced by racism, sexism, and classism (Yosso, 2005). To support this alignment and acceptance, I would recommend the following steps be taken. First, staff should examine and reflect on their own understandings of family, and where those understandings came from. They could also research the different cultural understandings of family and how family is built and utilized in different communities. To support students' understanding, staff could include intentional opportunities for student dialogue that critique traditional notions of family and allow students to define what they mean by "family." They could also include opportunities to reflect on what the familial connections students have found in Cornerstone have brought them and how they see those familial bonds continuing after students graduate.

Outside of these strategies, engagement of students' immediate families and communities should be examined for its intentionality and alignment with this understanding of "chosen family." Staff could loop families in on the connections being built at Cornerstone, and help families understand how students' "chosen family" will continue to support them alongside their families at home in the future. Staff could also create goals for family meetings as well, particularly in the height of the postsecondary access process. For every three meetings with a student, perhaps the fourth could include parents or caretakers at home, to bring them up to speed on where students are at. Cornerstone already holds larger family meetings almost every year, but in the same way

that support becomes personalized for students, it should be included in some sense for families. By building relationships with students' immediate families at home while nurturing the "chosen family" students are building within Cornerstone, staff will validate the ways students understand family, and support students in carrying that familial capital with them on their postsecondary journey.

Lastly, if students build a community of family at Cornerstone, they may have other opportunities to find a sense of family in new spaces. Cornerstone should support alums with finding new spaces that center on trust and acceptance, in the hopes of finding a safer community to connect to outside of Cornerstone in the future. These spaces could be programs at specific colleges that rely on trust and acceptance, cultural centers that create a safer space for dialogue about experiences, or workforce programs that emphasize collaboration and collective achievement. By understanding the importance that a "chosen family" holds for students and alums, Cornerstone can better support the familial capital students are building and support them in finding other impactful connections on their postsecondary journeys. This support of familial capital can provide alums with a greater understanding of how to utilize it and where to engage with more of it in their futures. Ultimately, this sense of family comes from students and alums experiences together. These experiential opportunities are what evaluation participants pointed to as their most meaningful moments in Cornerstone. In order to bring postsecondary programming up to the level of importance that participants placed on other areas of programming, Cornerstone should explore ways to align their knowledge of experiential learning with the postsecondary journey.

Engage with Experiential Learning in Postsecondary Planning

As soon as participants shared their knowledge in interviews and focus groups, I realized that there was a difference in the way participants spoke about programmatic experiences like trek and service with the way they spoke about postsecondary programming at Cornerstone. It took a lot of work to pinpoint exactly what the difference was, outside of some experiences being discussed as the best and most meaningful and others being discussed as task-oriented and more of a checklist to complete. It was not until a dialectic circle with staff members of Cornerstone that I was able to contextualize the difference. Even further, it was a staff member that I was speaking with that pinpointed the difference succinctly. She articulated the difference between programming centered on community and programming centered on the individual. At that moment, I was extremely grateful for the way fourth generation evaluation (Lincoln & Guba, 1989) allows for the regular engagement of stakeholders, as the perspectives they shared were instrumental to the process.

With this idea of the collective versus the individual, I share the second recommendation for the Cornerstone program's consideration. Suppose participants found the most meaning in sharing experiences with each other at Cornerstone. In that case, the postsecondary programming at Cornerstone should also include opportunities to connect and achieve together. By adapting programming to include more opportunities for experiential learning, participants can support each other through the challenges that the postsecondary journey presents. These experiential opportunities should be meant to supplement the individualized counseling and support that participants have come to rely on. Instead, these experiential opportunities should add depth and context to the

postsecondary journey and allow participants to reflect on their experiences together. In the same ways that they came to rely on each other's strengths during programmatic experiences like trek and service, they can be given opportunities to similarly rely on each other in postsecondary access programming. Additional experiential learning opportunities also aligns with how Lopez and Louis (2009) saw the strengths-based model in action. Experiential learning opportunities allow students to use their strengths in immersive environments. Postsecondary programming should make space for these experiential learning opportunities to complement individualized support. These additional experiential learning opportunities can be broken down into two categories. First, participants should receive opportunities for collective achievement and progress during postsecondary planning. Second, participants should be given additional opportunities to engage in authentic dialogue about what it means to them to access higher education opportunities.

There are many ways that Cornerstone could adapt postsecondary access programming to allow for more collective achievement and progress. The simplest scenario would be taking a closer look at its college tour programming. The college tour experience is a week-long excursion that centers on admissions visits and campus tours at several locations throughout the northeast. Participants did not highlight this experience as one of the most meaningful and important aspects of the Cornerstone program. Instead, they focused on the individualized support received during postsecondary programming. While the week-long college tour experience is undoubtedly valuable to students, there are several ways that it could include more intentional opportunities for collective achievement. The first option would be to explore how to engage students in

planning for the college tour. Students could be split into teams, and each team could be responsible for a different tour day. They could then be given contact information for campus admissions, faculty members, the cultural center, and first-year programs offices. In the months leading up to the tour, each team could work with campus representatives to create a day of activities. Staff members would need involvement to ensure there was no overlap in activities and to help students problem solve as challenges arise. However, by supporting students in creating the experiences that matter to them, that sense of collective achievement can be found when the day happens, and everyone benefits from it.

Another option could include utilizing alums on college campuses to support the creation of experiential activities. Alums could highlight key programmatic departments that could engage in immersive activities or utilize the student activities offices to recreate some of the more exciting programs and events on campus. A final option worth noting would be creating group challenges on campus to replicate the experiences of first-year students. Students could do a relay race or scavenger hunt on campus that mimics what they would have to find on their first day of classes. Students could be given materials to "decorate" their rooms for college or handed a budget to use at the bookstore for their fall supplies. Through engagement with campus staff and Cornerstone alums on campus, many options could emerge that would allow for collective success and experiential learning.

Outside of creating more experiential opportunities during postsecondary access programming like the college tours, Cornerstone should also add intentional reflection and dialogue opportunities as students get into the heart of their postsecondary journey.

Participants have shared that Cornerstone has become a safe community for them and that they have created a sense of family amongst each other. Because of this, participants feel comfortable being themselves and sharing things they would not share in other spaces. Allowing students to share their hopes and fears with Cornerstone as they take steps along their postsecondary journey may allow them to ask questions or articulate concerns they were afraid to share in other spaces. While some of this discussion may happen in one-on-one sessions with Cornerstone staff, providing space for students to process together could create a stronger sense of community within the postsecondary access process. These opportunities for dialogue could be in debriefs after specific activities or as part of the nightly "Insight" opportunity that participants highlighted as an important space for learning and reflection. Cornerstone should also make space for critical conversations about the deficit lens in education and the systemic inequities in the postsecondary access process. Participants felt safe having challenging conversations at Cornerstone, and many pointed to Cornerstone as the only space making room for reflection and debriefing. Staff should be trained to facilitate these challenging conversations, focusing on the strengths and community cultural wealth students are building and carrying with them to support them through the challenges they will face.

One activity that used to be completed on the college tour was an escape-room scenario, where students are blindfolded and boxed into a space with no exits. They are supposed to figure out how to get out of the space and ask for help if they need it. The key here is asking for help. When they do, they are led out by staff and other students that already exited. This activity then leads to a reflection on the ways students are hesitant to ask for help, but that sometimes the only way to solve a problem is to ask. It can be used

to help students reflect on the safe community and sense of family they found at Cornerstone, emphasizing how to find a similar sense of community and safety on their campuses. As was shared in the findings, alum participants asked Cornerstone to consider sharing scenarios that might be faced and how to overcome the sense of isolation many of them felt on predominantly white campuses. In postsecondary programming, this could look like alums sharing scenarios that have happened to them, or that they saw happen to another student, and then students would have to discuss in small groups what they would do in that situation. By continuing to make space for authentic dialogue around the transition to postsecondary opportunities, Cornerstone may support future alums in feeling better prepared for what they will face on their campuses. While these previous recommendations have centered on what Cornerstone can do to support students within their program, the next recommendation will focus on how to support alums after they transition to postsecondary opportunities.

Engaging with Alums on Campus to Support Connection and Community

As discussed in finding 4, alum participants shared their desire to reconnect with Cornerstone for support in moments of isolation and struggle on their college campuses. This next recommendation for Cornerstone focuses on addressing this desire by finding ways for Cornerstone to extend its safe community and sense of family to the campuses and programs that alums transition to. Participants found a counter-space in Cornerstone that was safe and accepting of who they are. It would then seem natural that as alums faced a sense of isolation and lack of safety on their college campuses, they would somehow want to return to that counter-space. While Cornerstone cannot set up offices on each campus that their alums transition to, they can extend the safe community and

sense of family that students have found. To achieve this, Cornerstone should explore ways to connect with and amongst alums on college campuses and find programs or departments with a similar focus on trust and acceptance to support alums in building a new safe community outside of Cornerstone.

Participants shared their intrinsic connection to older alums in finding 3, highlighting how they were seen as models for their futures. Cornerstone should embrace this understanding and continue to explore ways for current participants and recent Cornerstone graduates to engage with older alums on the college campuses they attend. By creating intentional opportunities for current participants and younger alums to engage with older alums, they will again be allowed to see themselves in the older alums and know that if the older alums have found success, they will too. Recently, Cornerstone began exploring ways to connect directly with students on campuses, bringing groups of alums together to share resources, build connections and reflect on their experiences. As Cornerstone continues to pilot these opportunities, an emphasis on connecting older alums to younger alums could prove fruitful. Alums could share spaces and organizations that have become opportunities for connection or a sense of safety on campus. Alums could support answering questions and sharing resources, extending the informational capital that Cornerstone has provided. Young alums would see the possibilities ahead of them as they hear about the challenges older alums have overcome. Finding connections with students of color from similar backgrounds and experiences on predominantly white campuses can support a sense of belonging, contribute to retention, and minimize student isolation (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Participants have already shared the sense of connection they feel toward older alums, making this recommendation more of a reflection of what participants are looking for than anything else. One way to meet this need for students in Cornerstone would be to look for intentional ways for students and alums to interact during the college tour experiences. This may prove challenging, as college tours usually occur during the summertime, but if planned intentionally, it could provide vital perspective for current Cornerstone students, and a chance for alums to share their truths about their postsecondary experiences. It could be as simple as meeting a couple of current alums in the campus dining hall for lunch, and then having a Q and A on the lawn in the campus quad. It also presents another opportunity for students to have ownership in their college tour preparation, as they could reach out to alums directly, and invite them to this opportunity in advance. Another idea for alum interaction with current students is asking for alum volunteers to support a FAFSA night at Cornerstone, with a space in the schedule for alums to share their challenges with college affordability and how they solved them. Finally, to support opportunities for alums that may attend college farther away, Cornerstone could request video testimonials from alums about specific postsecondary journey moments, or to share a virtual tour of their campus cultural center, Greek life offices, or science labs. As participants shared in the findings, they find connections with alums invaluable, and these connections support their aspirational, social, and familial capital.

An opportunity to explore on campus is a peer-to-peer mentoring program, incorporating on-campus activities and virtual outreach over text and social media to keep things simple and streamlined. Research has highlighted how encouraging peer

networking opportunities and peer mentoring for students of color supports a sense of connection and increases student engagement on campuses (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Quaye et al., 2014). To start, I would recommend selecting one or two key campuses that seem to have a critical mass of alums and recent graduates planning to enroll there. As students confirm their final postsecondary choice in the spring, alums could be paired, beginning relationship building in the summer. Peer mentors would meet their mentees through a Cornerstone facilitated event before the new academic year begins. Once classes start, peer mentors complete 1-3 virtual outreach attempts in the first month of classes, and then one attempt each month thereafter, to offer support and highlight important events or deadlines on campus. This virtual outreach could be a text message, social media direct message, or video call. To support in-person connections, Cornerstone staff could be present on campus 1-3 times per semester, to implement structured activities, and offer space for one-to-one discussions between mentors and mentees. Before implementing a peer-to-peer mentoring program, however, Cornerstone should consider what compensation for older alums might look like. Because older alums would do the bulk of work as they mentored younger alums on their campus, Cornerstone can explore supporting them with stipended roles, scholarship opportunities, or even college credit options for their time and efforts.

In addition to building out more intentional opportunities for connection amongst alums on campuses, Cornerstone should also act as a bridge or guide for alums in finding programs on their campuses with a similar focus, sense of community, or student population to the Cornerstone program. Research has highlighted opportunities for students of color to build connections and community on predominantly white campuses.

In some cases, students have found connection and a sense of belonging from cultural organizations and cultural programming on campus (Quaye et al., 2014). Other research has highlighted the use of service-learning opportunities and holistic support programs to support a sense of community for students of color on campus (Museus, 2014).

Cornerstone should continue to build bridges with campus organizations and programs that provide opportunities to connect and build community utilizing a strengths-based approach that combats the deficit lens in higher education. An example of this type of program is the Lesley University Urban Scholars Initiative (USI). This scholarship program for first-generation, low-income students supports social-emotional learning, builds their understanding of career options and development, and removes financial barriers with significant scholarships and stipends for participants (Lesley University, u.d.). The small cohort of students selected works with staff and older cohorts in the program to build community and create a space that centers on trust and acceptance. In this way, students of color that identify as first-generation college students may find a safe community similar to Cornerstone at Lesley University through USI. USI is just one example of a program on a predominantly white campus where Cornerstone could build a bridge to for interested students. These partner opportunities are important in addressing the lack of support and connection participants spoke of on their campuses, but Cornerstone must also be mindful of connecting alums to programs they know will be student-centered, strengths-based and antiracist in its practices. As I close out recommendations for the Cornerstone program, I will share the need for Cornerstone to more deeply interrogate their practices and discourses for the ways whiteness is being perpetuated, creating potentially harmful experiences for students of color.

Intentional Interrogation of Programmatic Practices and Discourse

Participants overwhelmingly shared the ways in which Cornerstone became a counter-space of safety and family for them. Despite this overwhelming positive understanding of Cornerstone by evaluation participants, it's important to note that participants also highlighted the ways in which whiteness is still embedded in some practices and experiences at Cornerstone. This is not to say that there is an intentional use of whiteness understanding by Cornerstone, or that Cornerstone encourages students of color in ascribing to whiteness understanding during the postsecondary planning process. However, what is important to consider is the impact that the perpetuation of whiteness has on students of color in Cornerstone, and the ways in which intentional framing, discourse and disruption of whiteness can minimize that perpetuation moving forward.

I would encourage an intentional review of each aspect of programming at Cornerstone, from the first communication with students to their successful completion of their postsecondary journey. Ideally, this interrogation would be supported by an equity in education consultant or antiracist educator whose expertise can be utilized outside of the knowledge that is carried by the predominantly white leadership of Pathways, MA, Cornerstone's parent organization. There are community members that can support training and collaborating with staff on this endeavor, including an alum of the Cornerstone program that currently works as a consultant for a firm specializing in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives. I recognize that this is a significant and labor-intensive practice but given some of the experiences discussed by students and alums, it is an important one as Pathways, MA moves toward a more antiracist practice. This interrogation could begin by systematically exploring the ways in which the Cornerstone

program is discussed with nominators, community partners and families. Leadership should be mindful of when discourse and framing centers on the students and what they are missing, versus the program and the supports it offers for students as they navigate the education system and its deficit lens. Do nominators understand that this opportunity is not an intervention, but a way to support students in actualizing their strengths and capital in a system that discounts them? Do families understand that Cornerstone is not supporting students because they are “needy,” but in fact because they already possess a wealth of strengths and talents that will be nurtured and built upon at Cornerstone? While Cornerstone staff may feel that this is implied in their messaging, it will be important to ensure that there aren’t additional implications that reinforce whiteness and a deficit lens.

Outside of external language, an interrogation of internal programmatic framing and discourse is also necessary. Evaluation participants did not highlight their wilderness trek or summer camp experiences in ways that ascribed to whiteness, but it will still be important for Cornerstone to examine how it discusses trek and summer camp programming. Cornerstone should ensure that how they discuss their efforts, as well as how their programmatic partners in wilderness trek programming discuss programming, aligns with a strengths-based practice. Examining language and approaches that focus on students as lacking understanding in relation to their white peers, or highlighting challenging behaviors on trek in comparison to white students’ behaviors on a similar trek is ignoring the systemic inequities and the historical trauma that impact experiences in the wilderness for communities of color (Davis, 2019; Gauthier et al., 2021). With service opportunities, Cornerstone should interrogate partnerships for the volunteer opportunities they offer and the ways in which they discuss the communities they serve.

If graffiti removal is on the list of service opportunities available at one partnership, as Ela highlighted, Cornerstone should engage in dialogue with the community partner about the purpose of that project, and the cultural understanding of graffiti in a community.

In postsecondary programming, Cornerstone should interrogate their individualized approach to support, ensuring that it acknowledges both the individual tasks that students must accomplish, along with the community of support and collective impact that students' postsecondary planning involves. In addition, an examination for where critical conversations are happening within programming will be important. Do students have space to wrestle with education both as part of the system that oppresses and marginalizes, and as a space for potential empowerment and liberation for students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 3)? Examining each area of postsecondary access programming for where it remains centered on students and their understanding, versus where it re-aligns with the individualized nature of college access will be important. I would also ask that within postsecondary programming, as well as other programmatic elements, Cornerstone examine where students have opportunities to co-create their experiences, and where their voice may be missing. To remain centered on students, students must be included in the development of program strategy and implementation. Overall, a piece-by-piece interrogation of current practices, as well as a strategy for interrogating future opportunities, will be important for continued progress in building the organization's antiracist efforts. This important interrogation effort represents the conclusion of Cornerstone's recommendations for consideration. To close out this

chapter, I will share some brief ideas on opportunities for future research to support understanding for students of color in strengths-based programs like Cornerstone.

Future Research Considerations

The knowledge that participants shared during this program evaluation allowed for several key findings to emerge while also creating opportunities for additional considerations. As findings were analyzed, several opportunities for additional exploration emerged. First, I will highlight two research considerations for Cornerstone to consider as they continue to work toward a more antiracist set of practices. Then, I will highlight two potential research considerations for strengths-based college access and postsecondary planning programs.

This program evaluation aimed to gather perspectives and knowledge specifically from students of color. The Cornerstone program had yet to focus its evaluation and assessments specifically on students of color before, despite serving a population where most students identified as such. By addressing this gap in knowledge for Cornerstone, the program evaluation provided an opportunity for Cornerstone to center its efforts on the experiences of students of color specifically. That is not to say that all students of color experience the Cornerstone program similarly. Moving forward, I encourage Cornerstone to explore ways to disaggregate knowledge from its various populations and continue to build upon its understanding of students' experiences in its program. Cornerstone has a significant Haitian population and Cape Verdean population, for instance. Gaining insight into the experiences of immigrant students and families in Cornerstone can continue to build upon the knowledge produced in this program evaluation.

Programmatically, I think Cornerstone would benefit from learning more about how students connect to opportunities for collective achievement to better understand what it is about those programmatic elements that students find meaningful. The more Cornerstone understands how these collective experiences impact students and what students are taking away from those experiences, the more they can find ways to build similar experiences for their students. While participants brought forth ideas about connection and collective success without prompting, Cornerstone would benefit from explicitly discussing those concepts with students to dive deeper into how they see those moments as impactful experiences. In addition, as Cornerstone recognizes the sense of family participants find in Cornerstone, they could gather additional understanding from students about how this sense of family emerges and what it is about their connections at Cornerstone that shift perspectives from friendship to family.

Outside of Cornerstone, this program evaluation highlights a need for two areas of research in the postsecondary field. Participants found opportunities for collective success and community impact among their most meaningful and memorable experiences at Cornerstone. These opportunities created deeper connections amongst participants and supported the safe community at Cornerstone. Secondary schools and higher education institutions could benefit from exploring how collective achievement and community success support safer spaces and a sense of connection for students of color on their postsecondary journeys. By embracing ideas of collectivism on their campuses, there is potential to create educational spaces that feel safer for students of color.

Participants also highlighted the way Cornerstone allowed them to create a sense of family amongst each other. Participants built upon and nurtured their familial capital with

a “chosen family” at Cornerstone. As Yosso (2005) highlighted, familial capital can include notions of family beyond the immediate and extended family to include key community members, friends, and mentors. As familial capital continues to be explored, there is a need to gain insight into how different communities and cultures might come to define family. This program evaluation speaks specifically to the need to explore how different generations may define family, and thereby, familial capital. While some notions of family are cultural, as generations evolve and develop their worldviews, they also develop their own distinct understanding of what constitutes family and, thereby, what their familial capital will be made up of. When "chosen family" is at play, how does this impact our understanding of familial capital? Per Acevedo and Solorzano’s (2021) theoretical exploration of the use of community cultural wealth to navigate the deficit-oriented education system, what are the ways that “chosen family” as familial capital can act as a protective factor against racism? These future research considerations allow Cornerstone to deepen its understanding of the experiences of students of color. In addition, future research in the strengths-based, postsecondary access field should find additional perspectives in exploring collectivism and concepts of family in their efforts to support students of color. To conclude the chapter and the evaluation, I will next share final thoughts on how the findings, implications and recommendations can move us all forward with an eye toward liberation.

Evaluation Conclusion

Strengths-based approaches in education evolved as a response to the deficit lens that education places on students of color (Valencia, 2010). The Cornerstone program was created to support marginalized students in accessing postsecondary opportunities and

positively impact their communities. Because Cornerstone has never specifically evaluated the experiences of students of color in the Cornerstone program, this program evaluation was designed to amplify the voices of students of color as they shared their experiences in Cornerstone and within their higher education institutions. Through a fourth-generation evaluation approach and a theoretical framework of critical race theory and community cultural wealth, this program evaluation worked first to share the experiences of students of color. In addition, this program evaluation utilized the knowledge that emerged to support Cornerstone in building a more antiracist set of practices within its programming. The evaluation focused on four findings that participants brought to the forefront of their experiences. First, participants highlighted trek and service as opportunities for collective achievement and community impact. Second, participants found a safe community and a sense of family in the Cornerstone program. Third, students saw staff and alums as both mentors and models of future possibilities. Finally, participants found postsecondary programming at Cornerstone to be individualized. This individualized focus transitioned to isolation as students arrived on their college campuses, unsure where to get the support they needed.

As the findings were analyzed more deeply using the theoretical framework of critical race theory and community cultural wealth, it was concluded that participants in Cornerstone found opportunities to nurture and foster their community cultural wealth, with opportunities that engaged their navigational, social and familial, aspirational and resistant capital. This use of capital within Cornerstone was due in part to the counter-space that students co-created. This counter-space felt safe for students and centered on trust and acceptance. It was a space that combatted the deficit-oriented education system

that participants were navigating. When examining Cornerstone with critical race theory, there is evidence that within postsecondary planning and programming, a focus on individualized support can be both valuable and reinforce whiteness understandings of individualism, perpetuating a deficit lens on students of color. Furthermore, students' and alums' understanding of a sense of family in Cornerstone should be validated as their truth. Staff should examine their own biases regarding the concepts of family, knowing that traditional concepts include racist, sexist, and classist connotations (Yosso, 2005).

This fourth-generation program evaluation provides new insight and understanding of the Cornerstone program by sharing the experiences of students of color. By centering the voices of participants in the program evaluation, Cornerstone can create action items that respond directly to what participants shared. Outside of Cornerstone, this program evaluation presents student-centered ideas for educational entities to explore within strengths-based postsecondary access programs. Emphasis on opportunities for collective success and achievement could support programs in building community and connection. In addition, considering "chosen family" when exploring familial capital for students of color may present new opportunities for validating the strengths and capital students carry with them on their postsecondary journey. Ultimately, participants shared their understanding of collective success as invaluable to their experience at Cornerstone. This concept of collective success for students of color supports the validation of their strengths, their ability to persevere through challenges together, and their belief in the future possibilities ahead of them. "We all fly together, we all fall together," says Ziah. For me, this statement is at the heart of the Cornerstone program evaluation. Beyond the ways it supports Cornerstone in thinking through its antiracist practices, it reminds us all

of the interconnectedness we share, and that our liberation from white supremacy is tied to each other. Together we succeed, or not. But we're all in this together.

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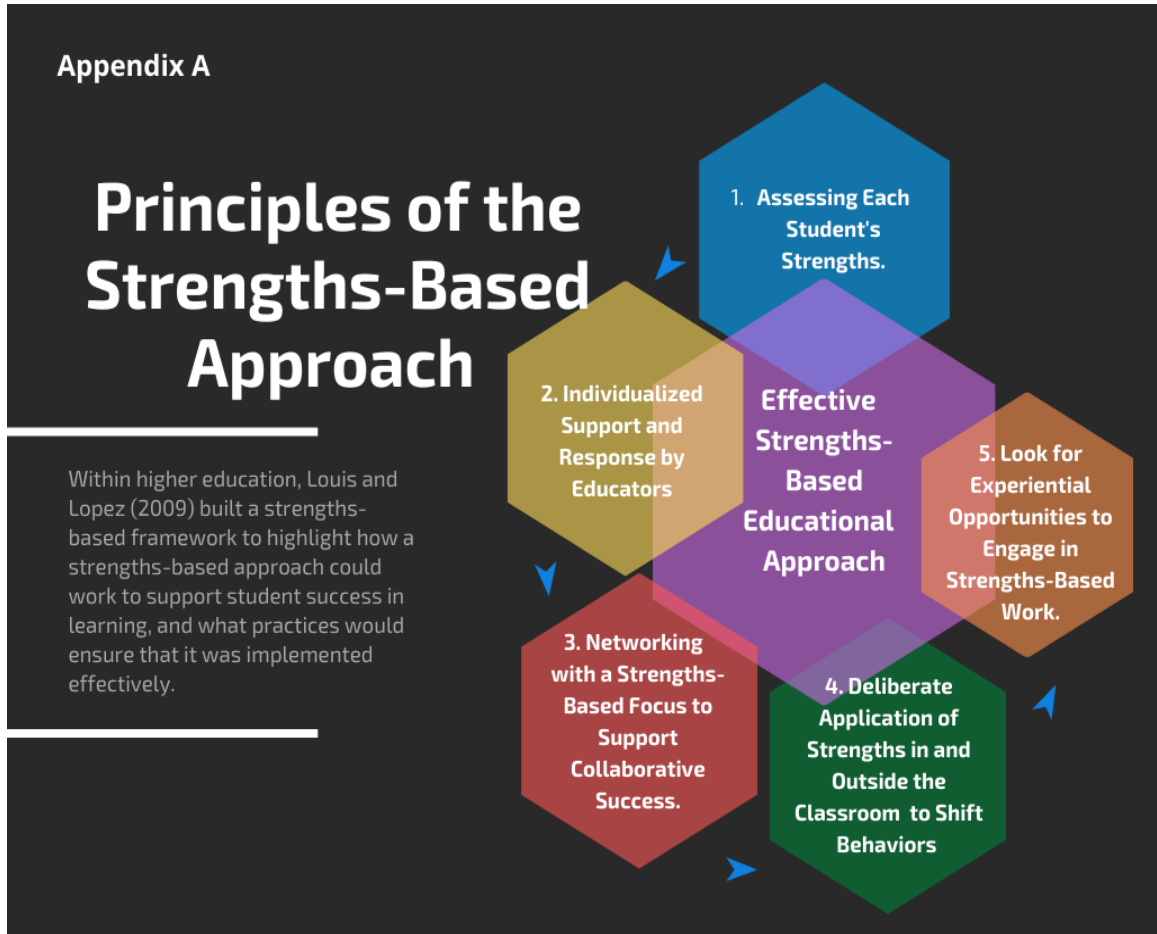
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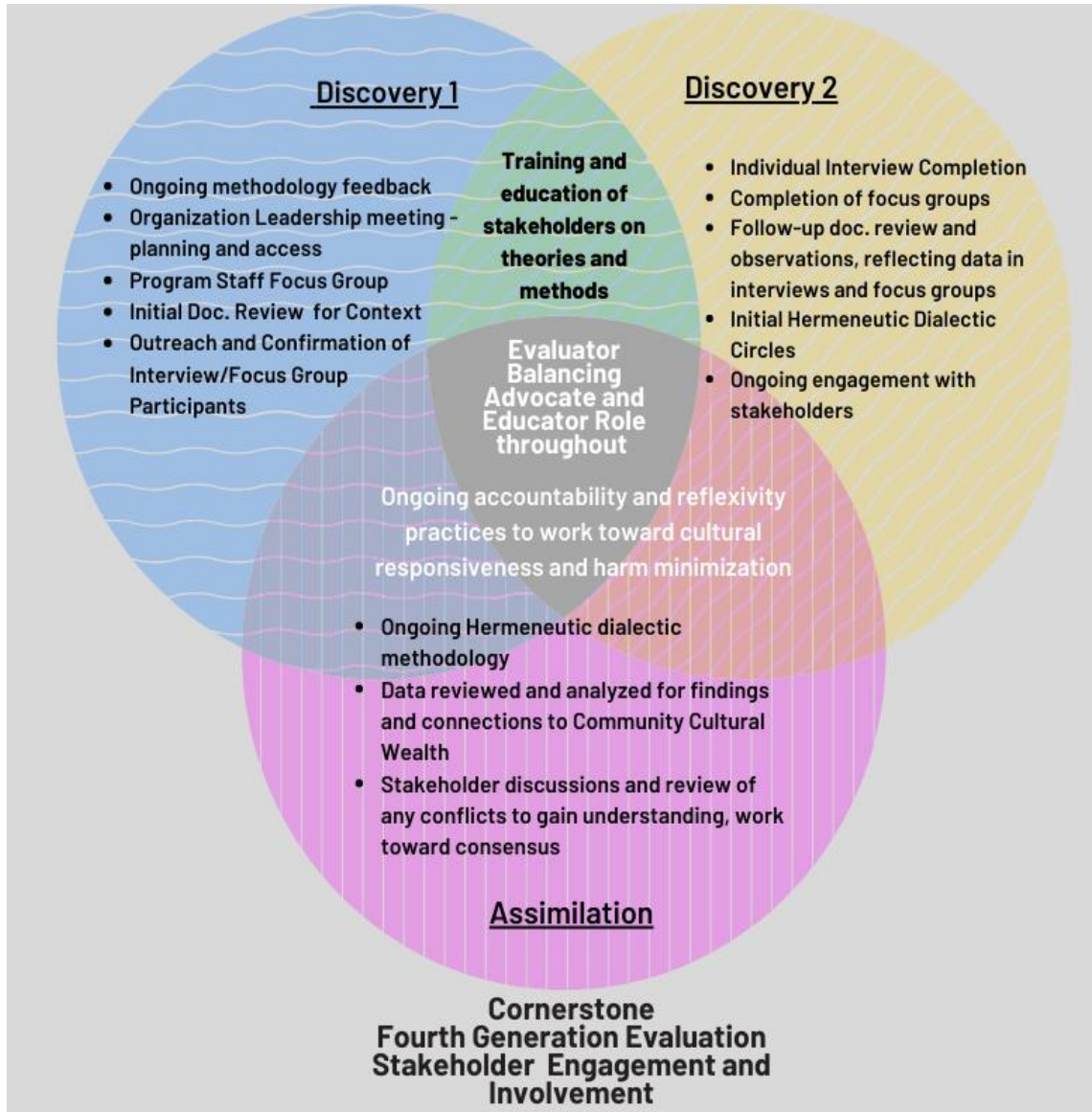
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Appendix A: Diagram of Strengths-Based Practices



Appendix B: Fourth Generation Evaluation Venn Diagram



Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

Study Title: *Strengths-based Approaches in Community-based College Access for Students of Color*

IRBNet #: 1667648-1

Principal Investigator: *Allyson Gunn, EdD Candidate*
Allyson.gunn@du.edu

Faculty Sponsor: *Dr. Christine Nelson, Assistant Professor*
christine.nelson@du.edu

Study Site: [REDACTED] (or virtual completion, based on current COVID protocols for DU and the partner organization at the time of data collection).

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you do not have to participate. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate.

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not you may want to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to give your permission to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

NOTE: If a parent/guardian is non-English speaking, please contact the principal investigator, and translated materials and informed consent forms will be provided, to ensure that full understanding of the research study is possible.

Purpose

If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to complete both a 60 - 75 minute individual interview and a 90 – 120 minute focus group with other [REDACTED] students/alumni. The purpose of these interviews and focus groups is to gather information about your experiences as a student of color in [REDACTED]. The information you share will help [REDACTED] program improve their efforts to support and work with students of color as they determine their postsecondary plans. All participants of the study will be compensated for their time with a \$10 gift card of their choice to either Chipotle or Starbucks.

As a participant, you may choose to refuse to answer any question or address any topic within the interviews and focus groups. You may also choose to stop your participation in the study at any point. All participation is completely voluntary.

Risks or Discomforts

Potential risks, stress and/or discomforts of participation may include a loss of privacy or confidentiality breach, due to the organizations small size and interconnectedness. In addition, the topics discussed may produce emotional stress and discomfort, as students may relive a painful experience during their time in ■■■, or may feel discomfort in their discussion, based on what is shared about their experiences in ■■■.

Recordings/videos of the interviews and focus groups will be completed, in order to ensure that all information is documented for review, and nothing in the discussions is missed. These recordings/videos will be kept until transcriptions can be completed and will be securely stored in a password protected external hard drive. These recordings/videos will not be shared with other researchers and will not be used in presentations. Participants will be given the opportunity to review the transcriptions of their recordings and may request that certain portions be deleted. The data transcribed from these recordings will be used as appropriate in interpretations and recommendations that may be shared in publications and presentations.

If any of these risks produce emotional stress participants are invited to reach out to the Massachusetts 24 Hours Mental Health Crisis and Support Line at 1 (877) 382-1609.

Benefits

There are no expected benefits to the participants of this study. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your status in the ■■■ program.

■■■■ and the ■■■ program will benefit from this study as the research will support organizational improvements and uplift the voices of students of color within those improvement plans. What's more the community can benefit from the study as it will bring new knowledge to programs looking better support students of color in their postsecondary journey.

Confidentiality of Information

The information collected in the interviews and focus groups you participate in will remain confidential, meaning that your name will not be associated with anything you said. A code number will be created that will allow us to link all of your responses without others knowing the responses are yours. The link between your identifiers and the research data will be destroyed after the records retention period required by state and/or federal law.

Limits to confidentiality

All of the information you provide will be confidential. However, if we learn that you intend to harm yourself or others, including, but not limited to child or elder abuse/neglect, suicide ideation, or threats against others, we must report that to the authorities as required by law.

Your name will not be used in any report. Identifiable research data will be encrypted and password protected. Your responses will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password protected file. Only the research team will have access to the file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed.

With your permission, I would like to audiotape/video interviews and focus groups so that I can make an accurate transcript. Once I have made the transcript, I will erase the recordings. Your name will not be in the transcript or my notes.

You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study. Even though we will tell all participants in the study that the comments made during the focus group should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside the group.

Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to deduce your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you.

Information that identifies you will only be used for future research or shared with another researcher after obtaining your consent. If for instance, [REDACTED] wants to re-examine a particular theme or message that was discussed in a new way, you will be notified via email that this is an intended use of your responses and ask for your consent in doing so.

The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Representatives from the University of Denver may also review the research records for monitoring purposes. Government or university staff sometimes review studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

Data Sharing

De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community at large to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information (e.g., your name, date of birth) that could identify you before files are shared with other

researchers to ensure that, by current scientific standards and known methods, no one will be able to identify you from the information or samples we share. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data.

Incentives to participate

Each participant will be given a \$10 gift card upon completion of their interview and focus group. The participant may choose between a gift card to Starbucks or Chipotle. Participants will receive their gift card via email at the conclusion of their interview or focus group.

Consent to video / audio recording / photography solely for purposes of this research

This study involves video/audio recording, and/or photography. If you do not agree to be recorded, you can still take part in the study.

_____ YES, I agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

_____ NO, I do not agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

Questions

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Allyson Gunn, EdD Candidate, at Allyson.gunn@du.edu or [REDACTED]. Alternatively, you may contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Christine Nelson, Assistant Professor, at Christine.nelson@du.edu.

If you are not satisfied with how this study is being conducted, or if you have any concerns, complaints, or general questions about the research or your rights as a participant, please contact the University of Denver (DU) Institutional Review Board to speak to someone independent of the research team at 303-871-2121 or email at IRBAdmin@du.edu.

Signing the consent form

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form, and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

Printed name of subject

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of LAR

Signature of LAR

Date

Appendix D: Assent Form, Minors Over Thirteen Years of Age

Title of Research Study: Strengths-based Approaches in Community-based College Access for Students of Color

IRBNet #: 1667648-1

Researcher: Allyson Gunn, EdD Candidate, Allyson.gunn@du.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Christine Nelson, Assistant Professor
christine.nelson@du.edu

Study Site: [REDACTED] or virtual completion, based on current COVID protocols for DU and the partner organization at the time of data collection).

What is a research study?

A research study is a way to find out new information about something. We would like to learn more about the experiences of students of color in the [REDACTED] program as they take steps toward their postsecondary journey, in order to utilize those experiences to continue to make improvements within the [REDACTED] program, and how they can work to better support students of color.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. It is up to you. You can say okay now to be in the study and change your mind later. All you have to do is tell us when you want to stop. No one will be upset if you don't want to be in the study or if you change your mind later. You can take time to think about being in the study before you decide.

Why are you being asked to be part of this research study?

You are being asked to join the research study because you are a current participant or alumni in the [REDACTED] program, you plan to attend college or are currently attending college, and you identify as a student of color. About 6 other [REDACTED] program participants will be in this study.

If you join the research study, what will you be asked to do?

If you agree to join this study, you will be asked to answer questions and share your thoughts on topics in an individual interview and a focus group. These will be completed in 2 visits, no more than 1 month apart from each other.

- You will be asked to come see the researcher during the study times at [REDACTED], or virtually on zoom, and you will need to stay 60-75 minutes for the individual interview, and 90-120 minutes for the focus group.

- We will ask you to share your experiences at [REDACTED] and how those experiences impacted you.
- We will share topics and questions in advance of the interview, giving you the opportunity to think about these topics in advance, and giving you a chance to share feedback on any questions or topics that you might be uncomfortable discussing.

Will any part of the study hurt or be uncomfortable?

We think that sharing your experiences as a student of color may be uncomfortable and hard to do at times. You may experience stress or strong emotions when reliving your experiences as we talk.

Will the study help you or others?

We may learn something that will help other young people at [REDACTED], particularly students of color in [REDACTED], to have a more impactful and successful experience.

Do your parents or guardians know about the study?

This study has been explained to your parent or guardian, and they said that we could ask you if you want to be in the study. You can talk this over with your parent or guardian before deciding if you want. You do not have to be in this study even if your parent or guardian thinks it is a good idea. It is up to you.

Will anyone else know that you are in this study?

We will not tell anyone else that you are in this study. You do not have to tell anyone about the study or the things you shared in your interview and focus group. The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Representatives from the University of Denver may also review the research records for monitoring purposes.

Who will see the information collected about you?

The researcher will remove your name from your responses to keep your information safe throughout this study. The information collected about you during this study will be kept safely locked up. Nobody will know it except the people doing the research.

The study information about you will not be given to your parents/guardians or the staff [REDACTED]. The researchers will not tell your friends about the study.

Your individual identity will be kept private when we write our final report. Other researchers may want to use the information we collect during this study for their research to help other children. We may allow them to use your information without talking with you again.

What do you get for being in the study?

You and/or your parent or guardian will receive a \$10 gift card to either Starbucks or Chipotle for your participation in the study.

What if you have questions?

You can ask any questions that you have about the study at any time. Just tell the researcher or your parent/guardian that you have a question. You or your parent/guardian can contact the researcher, Allyson Gunn any time during the study by calling [REDACTED] or emailing Allyson.gunn@du.edu .

Options for Participation

Consent to video / audio recording / photograph soles for purposes of this research

This study involves video/audio recording, and/or photography. If you do not agree to be recorded, you CAN STILL part in the study.

Please initial your choice for the options below:

___ **YES**, I agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

___ **NO**, I do not agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form.

Participant Signature

Date

Appendix E: Interview and Focus Group Protocols

The interview/focus group protocol worked as a guide for the semi-structured sessions between evaluation participants, and the evaluator.

These discussion-based interviews and focus groups allowed me to introduce topics or themes that the participants could speak to, giving them some control over the what was discussed and for how long. I asked follow-up questions based on the points and knowledge shared during those discussions.

Stakeholders and participants reviewed the topics in advance, and could opt out of any topic that they were uncomfortable with.

Protocol for student and alum focus groups came from the initial themes that emerged in the individual interviews, allowing students to dive deeper into specific topics that came up during interviews.

Protocol for Program Staff Focus Group
Topic 1: Strengths of the Cornerstone Program
Topic 2: Challenges/Barriers to Success
Topic 3: What role do relationships play in the success of Cornerstone?
Topic 4: What do we already know about Cornerstone?
Topic 5: What do we wish we knew, or had more information about?
Topic 6: Students of Color in Cornerstone and their experiences - what have you observed?
Topic 7: Feedback and suggestions for interviews and focus groups

Protocol for Current Student Interviews and Focus Group

Individual Interviews – Protocol for Current Students	Focus Group – Protocol for Current Students
Topic 1: Tell me about your experience as a Cornerstone student.	Topic 1: Talk about what it was like to be in Cornerstone.

Topic 2: What were some of your best moments in Cornerstone?	Topic 2: Let's Talk About Key Program Activities. Trek, Service, Debriefs/Insight.
Topic 3: What were some of the hardest moments in Cornerstone?	Topic 3: What is Hard About Cornerstone? Specific Mentions of The First Year, and Cornerstone in COVID-19
Topic 4: Talk about the people in Cornerstone.	Topic 4: What is it about Cornerstone that kept you coming back?
Topic 5: What did Cornerstone teach you about yourself and the world around you?	Topic 5: Talk about the people in Cornerstone.
Topic 6: What messages do you get from the Cornerstone program about who you are as a young person of color from Boston/Brockton?	Topic 6: How does Cornerstone see you and understand you as a young person of color from Boston/Brockton? In what ways does C5 not see you or understand you as a young person of color?
Topic 7: How has Cornerstone supported your journey and thinking about college access and postsecondary planning?	Topic 7: How does Cornerstone support you in developing your plans, and understanding where you fit, as you prepare for life after high school? Talk about what supports you have in postsecondary planning outside of Cornerstone.
Topic 8: What is missing from Cornerstone that would make it better for you?	Topic 8: What does Cornerstone still need to work on in order to meet your needs? How can Cornerstone meet your needs post-COVID-19?

Protocol for Alum Interviews and Focus Group

Individual Interviews – Protocol for Cornerstone Alums	Focus Group – Protocol for Cornerstone Alums
Topic 1: Tell me about your experience as a Cornerstone participant.	Topic 1: What are the things you remember most about your experiences in Cornerstone?
Topic 2: What were some of your best	Topic 2: What has really stuck with

moments in Cornerstone?	you, or impacted you?
Topic 3: What were some of the hardest moments in Cornerstone?	Topic 3: What messages do you remember getting from Cornerstone about planning for your future, and what was possible for you?
Topic 4: Talk about the people in Cornerstone.	Topic 4: Talk about the people in Cornerstone.
Topic 5: What has stuck with you from Cornerstone?	Topic 5: Talk about your time in college. Has it been what you thought it would be?
Topic 6: What did Cornerstone help you understand about yourself as a young person of color from Boston/Brockton?	Topic 6: Talk about your time in college. Has it been what you thought it would be?
Topic 7: Talk about your time in college. What parts of it were you ready for? What parts of it weren't you expecting?	Topic 7: What does Cornerstone need to be better at? How can they continue to improve the way they support students of color that participate in Cornerstone?
Topic 8: Based on what you know now, what does Cornerstone need to be better at, in order to best support the students of color that are participating in it?	

Appendix F: IRB Approval Confirmation



DATE: December 20, 2022

TO: Allyson Gunn
FROM: University of Denver (DU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1667648-3] Strengths-based Approaches in Community-based College
Access for Students of Color

SUBMISSION TYPE: Other

ACTION: ACKNOWLEDGED

EFFECTIVE DATE: January 6, 2021

NEXT REPORT DUE: January 6, 2024

Thank you for contacting the University of Denver Institutional Review Board (IRB) regarding the status of your research. No further action on submission 1667648-3 is required at this time.

The following items are acknowledged in this submission: the date for the Next Report Due has been administratively extended.

We will retain a copy of this documentation and this correspondence for our records.

If you have any questions, please contact the University of Denver Human Research Protection Program (HRPP)/Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (303) 871-2121 or at IRBAdmin@du.edu. Please include your project title and IRBNet number in all correspondence with the IRB.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within the University of Denver (DU) IRB's records.