

**Alumni & Community Cultivating Engagement for Student Success (ACCESS) Study
Research Brief**

University of California Los Angeles

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To protect the privacy of individuals and institutions mentioned, pseudonyms and generalized descriptions have been used throughout this brief.

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Abstract

Previous research by the UCLA Community School revealed a discrepancy between high immediate college enrollment rates (82%) and lower 6 year college completion rates (31%) among graduates. Despite increased emphasis on college readiness initiatives, a challenge persists in identifying strategies that support students of color through their transition into and completion of higher education; indicating the need to understand how a community school prepares minoritized students for long-term postsecondary success. By investigating UCLA-CS alumni pathways and experiences, our study explores the factors of college persistence. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study analyzes college enrollment records of UCLA-CS students who graduated from 2017 to 2020, and conducts interviews to study secondary and postsecondary experiences—focusing on UCLA-CS initiatives that impact student success. The study uses focus group data from current 12th grade students to gather reflective insights on alumni trajectories. Using Community Cultural Wealth and Spheres of Influence as guiding frameworks, initial analysis reveals that alumni and students need support strategies that better resonate with both groups; such as proactive outreach from the school to build and maintain connections that expose students to diverse postsecondary options and mentorship to support students’ transitions. The findings demonstrate the need to build and sustain alumni-community connection to best leverage the shared assets and experiences of alumni and students.

Keywords: Education, Alumni, Reciprocity, Community Schooling, College Access, Cultural Relevance, Community Cultural Wealth, Proactive Outreach, Alumni-Community Connection

Introduction

Innate to Students of Color are characteristics and skills that supplement success outcomes within and beyond the educational system (Yosso 2005). In a society that frames cultural traits as deficits, these tools are more often unactivated as students navigate higher education institutions. Primary educational institutions bear the responsibility of propelling youth towards success. However, due to barriers of inequitable education and systematic racism, communities of color are pushed to the margins of education—inhibiting students of color from being admitted to and graduating college at the same rate as their white counterparts (CITE: The Condition of Education 2020). To combat this, the responsibility of propelling youth towards success is dependent on the three most prevalent sectors of a student's life: School, Family, and Community (CITE: Epstein OSOF).

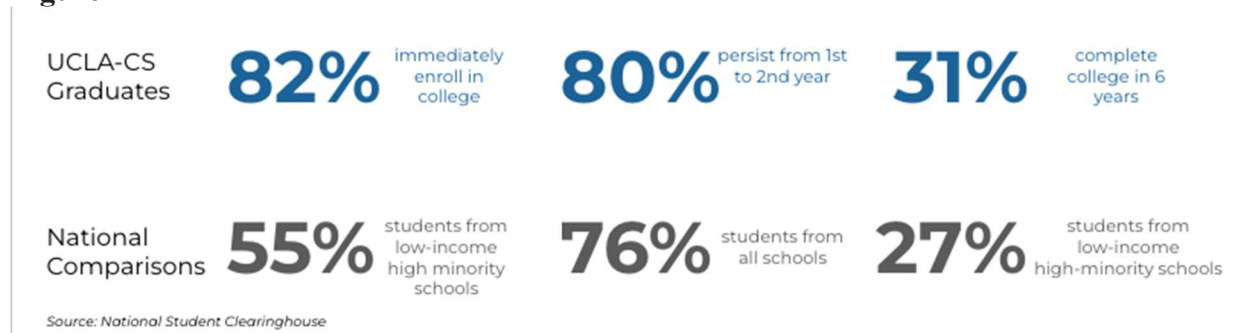
Community schooling is an effective strategy for synthesizing students' Overlapping Sphere of Influence (CITE: Epstein OSOF) to foster holistic development. By considering students' circles of support and material conditions, community schools provide equitable educational opportunities that improve the success outcomes of its students. In an article exploring lessons learned from community school practitioners, Jane Quinn and Marin Blank note community schools' "deliberate responsiveness" to the needs and strengths of its students, families, community members, and educators. A culturally responsive educational modality "organizes" schools' resources and community around "student success" (CITE: Quinn and Blank). Connecting back to Yosso's framework of Community Cultural Wealth, community schools derive their effectiveness from its students' cultural assets by building on the strengths of community members – tapping into resources that may have gone unactivated otherwise.

UCLA Community High School (UCLA-CS) in Los Angeles has a demographic of primarily first generation students of color. In an effort to confront educational barriers faced by these students, UCLA-CS and Research Practice Partners from UCLA collaborate with on-site educators to put students at the "forefront" in solving "real world problems that the school cares about" (CITE: Trinchero in <https://communityschooling.gseis.ucla.edu/research-2/>). UCLA-CS tracks alumni post-secondary pathways as a means of measuring college-going trends. The university-partnered school has demonstrated effectiveness in its college admission rates when compared to national statistics, with around 80% of UCLA-CS students immediately enrolling in college after graduation and persisting into their second year (CITE: Quartz et al., 2020) (see figure 1.) However, the six year college graduation rate of UCLA-CS alumni stands at 31%. UCLA Research Practice Partners past, present, and emerging are dedicated to exploring asset-based methods of raising the higher education retention rates of UCLA-CS alumni.

Building on the findings of previous Research Practice Partners, The Alumni & Community Cultivating Engagement for Student Success (ACCESS) study explores the possibilities of UCLA-CS alumni involvement in increasing access to and retention within higher education systems. In investigating Culturally Responsive Mentorship, Oyaga et al. found that centering personal relationships, cultivating critical consciousness, and sharing college knowledge were three essential pillars for effective mentorship (2023). Furthermore, they presented the reflection that the researchers did not fully relate to the lived experiences of UCLA-CS students due to differing socio-economic positionality (Oyaga et al. 2023). Because

alumni of UCLA-CS share similar positionalities to those of current students, The ACCESS study aims to increase intra-community student support by activating alumni engagement.

Figure 1



Literature Review

Our study aims to explore the post-secondary pathways of UCLA-CS alumni as well as potential avenues for community and alumni engagement networks that can potentially increase access to and retention within higher education pathways. Extant research of Alumni Pathways revealed two categories of topics pertinent to the ACCESS study: alumni engagement and shared partnership benefits.

A primary concern that persists for first-generation students is how to ensure they have access to adequate resources and information so that they can transition smoothly from high school to their chosen post-secondary pathway and achieve success throughout their post-secondary journey. While educators and researchers always place emphasis on addressing areas of deficiency in various aspects of the high school experience, our team is dedicated to researching strategies for enhancing students' knowledge and skills within the parameters of existing resources and assets. Specifically, alumni hold a position that has not received adequate attention from the school, but there is significant potential for them to positively impact students who are currently in the same position that they once were. Additionally, creating a sustainable connection between the school and alumni in order to leverage assets effectively will foster a reciprocal community, resulting in benefits that better support both former and current students.

Kevin Dean (2021) in *Honors Alumni Re-Activation through Interpersonal Engagement: Lessons Learned during COVID*, references alumni engagement as an “underutilized resource” that was uncovered during the educational shift that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dean (2021) states that alumni provide a unique “motivational force” for current students as they encourage skills such as relationship building, networking, and “communal longevity.” Simultaneously, Skrzpek in *Formalizing Alumni Mentoring in Social Work Education: Lessons Learned From a Three-Year Program Evaluation*, explains how alumni engagement extends beyond professional development, stating that alumni mentors focus on “informal interactions” that develop “life skills” (Skrzpek, 2022). Both sources corroborate the benefit of alumni engagement in academic and holistic development of students.

The need for relevant college-going information dissemination for underrepresented students is essential for students' success within their post-secondary pathways. This is most clearly highlighted in *Unveiling the Promise of Community Cultural Wealth to Sustaining Latina/o Students' College-Going Information Networks*, by Daniel Liou (2009). This study

reveals that “student access” to “college-related information” plays a significant role in attaining collegiate post-secondary success. This is key to ensuring that “low-income students of color” can access the life opportunities that attending college provides. In connection with the ACCESS study, RFK alumni provide a highly valued unique positionality of having lived similar experiences as current students. RFK alumni are potentially the most equipped agents in communicating post-secondary education and success to current students.

Simultaneously, there exists motivating factors of alumni contributions. The following literature explores the shared community benefits that serve as potential motivation for all stakeholders to engage in school-community-alumni relationships. Fostering Educational Resilience and Achievement in Urban Schools Through School-Family Community Partnerships found how school-family-community networks often act as “protective factors” for marginalized students that experience outside stressors. Effective networks foster educational resilience within students, ultimately promoting their long term academic success (Bryan 2005). Furthermore, a study conducted in Chile explored the alumni specific benefits of school-family-community partnerships, mentioning how alumni gained opportunities of community involvement and sustained professional development.

To expand on this literature, our research will delve into what can generate reciprocity between alumni and current students to best center students’ academic success. We will explore the existing and potential tactics of equipping current students and alumni with a supportive network. We aim to promote student success with being admitted to and retained within college going pathways.

Our study is grounded upon two main theoretical frameworks. The first being Tara Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth framework, which discusses identifying various areas of capital that communities and people of color inherently possess in their educational journeys (Yosso, 2005). The ACCESS study intends to explore the ways that RFK alumni leverage aspirational, navigational, familial, resistant, social, and cultural capital within the scope of UCLA RFK Community School partnerships. RFK alumni within post-secondary institutions are actively utilizing their Community Cultural Wealth as they succeed and persist through collegiate settings. The ACCESS study aims to explore ways of channeling RFK alumni’s Community Cultural Wealth back into the campus community to support current students.

The second theoretical framework guiding the ACCESS study follows Joyce Epstein’s theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (Epstein 1995). The three main “Spheres of Influence” are school, family, and community, with the student being at the center. An internal model of this theoretical framework explores the interactions and overlap of these three spheres of a students’ life. Cohesion among the three spheres is essential for a consistent understanding of educational importance within students (Epstein 1995). Connecting back to the intention of the ACCESS study, these two frameworks ground our search for overlap between alumni contributions and community partnerships. UCLACS alumni offer the unique perspective of sharing similar lived experiences with UCLACS students themselves. In alignment with the aforementioned frameworks, the ACCESS study will seek key tactics of sharing alumni assets with current students. In doing so, the ACCESS study aims to leverage relationship building among students, faculty, and alumni, laying the foundation for an influential network of community connections.

Methodology & Data Collection

The ACCESS study seeks to not only analyze the pathways of UCLA-CS alumni, but also to understand the lived experiences coupled with their educational endeavors. To fully grasp the academic and holistic factors of student educational outcomes within the context of UCLA-CS students' Community Cultural Wealth and Spheres of Influence, a mixed methods study is conducted. The findings are drawn from three sources of data: the Postsecondary Paths Database, semi-structured interviews with alumni, and focus group activities with current senior students at UCLA-CS.

To capture an overview of alumni's post-secondary trajectories, we used the Postsecondary Paths Database, gathered by UCLA-CS using data reports from the National Student Clearinghouse and follow-up data collection such as an alumni survey. The database records college plan and postsecondary pathway data of students who graduated from UCLA-CS. Building upon the prior study where the post-secondary paths of three cohorts of students (Class of 2014, 2015, 2016) are examined, we continued to map out the post-secondary trajectories of the following four cohorts of students (Class of 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). Specifically, we looked at the data recorded of the school system type that students of those four cohorts enrolled in from academic term 2017 Fall to 2023 Summer.

Using programming language R, we created a Sankey Chart to visually represent the general trends of educational post-secondary pathways of UCLA-CS alumni from the classes of 2017-2020. The chart expands on the existing model, illustrating how students transition from high school to various post-secondary institutions (Quartz et al., 2020). This visual tool allowed us to identify common patterns, obstacles, and potential opportunities for improvement in promoting higher education access and retention for future UCLA-CS students. The quantitative analysis laid the groundwork for understanding alumni post-secondary trajectories. Through this mapping process, our goal was to uncover trends that could guide efforts to support educational opportunities and success for UCLA-CS students. In addition to quantitative data, we also gathered qualitative insights from structured interviews to gain a well-rounded understanding of the educational experiences of our alumni.

Qualitative approaches were utilized to better understand the anecdotal lived experiences of UCLA-CS Alumni, unveil methods of improving access to and persistence within higher education for UCLA-CS, and analyze the potential reasonings behind decreasing persistence rates. Tailoring our recruiting decisions to engage participants with inclusive experiences, particularly alumni who have pursued various postsecondary pathways, we gathered quantitative data and then conducted qualitative research through semi-structured interviews with alumni, focused on the participants' high school experience, transition to higher education, and stories navigating college. LinkedIn and the UCLA-CS database were used to identify RFK alumni study candidates. Subsequently, a Google Form was distributed with a sign up survey that documents aspects of alumni high school experience and college experiences.

Our study additionally explored student needs by collecting student centric data during campus visits. Using a focus group format, the team presented the existing UCLA-CS Portraits of Persistence in the College Transition Class instructed by members of the ACCESS team. A list of reflection questions are disseminated and collected for data purposes.

Using qualitative coding methods, the ACCESS team reviewed the materials two times: the first round involved conducting data analysis using deductive coding, followed by a subsequent round of inductive coding. A coding tree was created to better conceptualize the

connections between experiences, lessons learned, and themes. The findings of both the qualitative and quantitative analysis are synthesized to produce the final result.

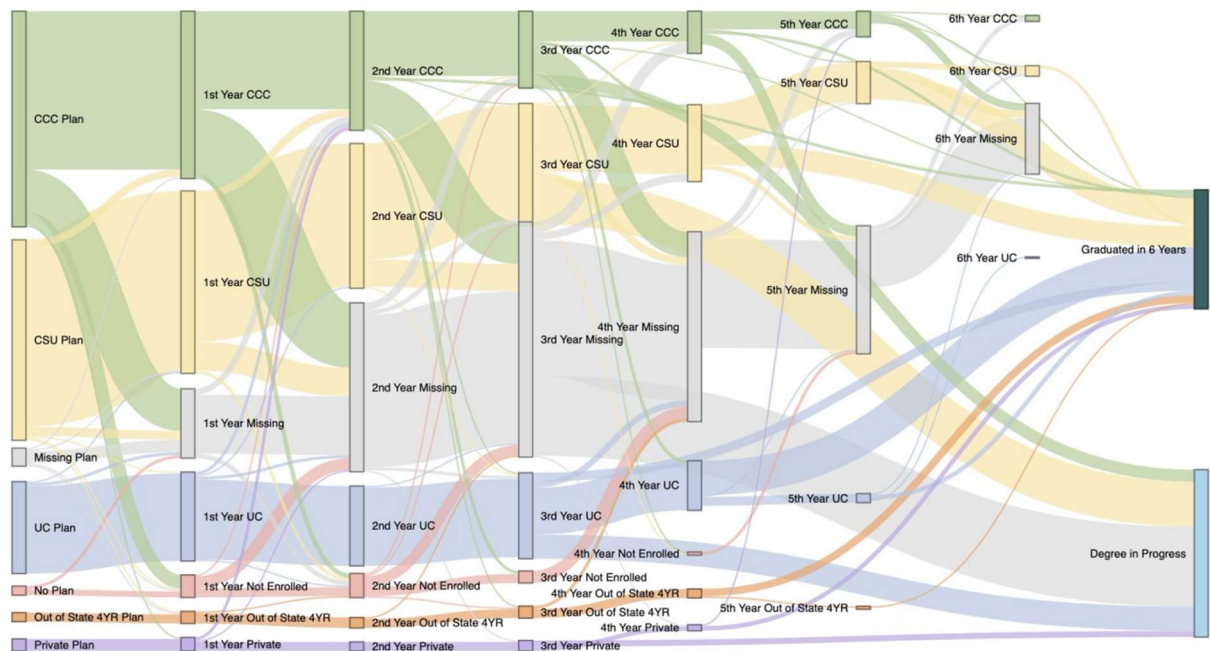
Findings & Discussion

Post-secondary Trajectories|Challenges & Solutions

To understand the postsecondary trajectories of former students of UCLA-CS, we created a Sankey Chart to visualize the quantitative data. The graph displays the flow of students from their plan in the senior year of high school to different types of higher education institutions including UC, CSU, CC, etc. In Figure 2, those institution types are categorized by color; each pillar is a “node” representing the institution students planned or enrolled in; the nodes are linked by bands where the width of bands, proportional to the flow rate, indicate the volume of students moving towards each type of institution (Quartz et al., 2020).

Figure 2

Postsecondary Trajectories, Class of 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020



Note. As the majority of students in the Class of 2020 are still working towards completing their degree by Summer 2023, the Sankey Chart has been edited to indicate their ongoing status as "Degree in Progress." This approach helps to prevent any confusion and ensures that these data points are properly accounted for in the analysis.

In the analysis of the Sankey Chart, the width of connections between pillars reflects the retention of students within the college system as they progress through different stages. We found that, in a similar pattern to the previous cohorts, variation exists in many students' pathways, more in CC and CSU than in UC (Quartz et al., 2020). Overall, the connections also shrink notably from the second year after high school graduation, suggesting a decline in student enrollment or retention within the initial institution. Despite a growing number of high school graduates pursuing higher education, only a fraction of students manage to complete a degree within six years of graduating from high school. From the Sankey Chart, we see the transitions in students' pathways from one system to another. To further investigate the reasons behind these

transitions and address the significant amount of missing data, we identified students with various post-secondary paths and conducted interviews with alumni who represent each unique segment of the chart to gain a comprehensive understanding of their educational journeys.

Qualitative Interviews with UCLA-CS alumni provide insight into the potential factors contributing to the statistical dwindling persistence rates of UCLA-CS alumni, as shown in the Sankey Chart. By using this qualitative approach, we are able to better understand the stories of hardship and success that influence the data represented in the Sankey Chart. UCLA-CS alumni post-secondary experiences can be organized by identifying shared trends regarding hardships and their corresponding solutions. We found that the struggles endured and their corresponding solutions are linked to various Community Cultural Wealths innate to being a first generation student of color.

Building Circles of Support

A common struggle shared among UCLA-CS alumni was feeling isolated and unsupported when initially beginning college. Alumni communicated a general lack of holistic support in the form of friendships, as well as a general lack of academic direction—both of which were overcome by proactively building a circle of support—seeking community and institutional guidance.

“Alex”, a 2018 alumnus and first generation college student of color, described feeling “isolated” during his first year at a public university in North California as he struggled to connect with peers of differing experiences. Alex recounts his experience:

“The only people I was actually able to connect to were people similar to my background, but that was only a group of like two other people compared to everyone else there... It was like I was talking to people from a different world. I couldn't really communicate with anyone... And so it just became very like—I just felt I was getting very isolated. I felt very alone. Then because I was just feeling that way, I really didn't bother to go ahead and make proper connections. So, my grades ended up slipping”

Alex notes a causation between his lack of connection to similar peers and his grades slipping. When asked to elaborate, he described having “poor mental health” and simply “not knowing how to break out” of the situation because he had never experienced it before. Due to life circumstances, Alex pivoted educational paths and attended a community college where he later transferred to and graduated from a four-year university in California. Although it was difficult for him to build sustained friendships at the community college, he harnessed his social capital by fostering like minded relationships in community college. Alex’s story is an example how building community with those of similar backgrounds is essential for sustaining one’s mental health and college persistence. In finding his community at the four-year university, Alex found his own path towards educational success. As students of color who are the first of their families to attend higher education, many UCLA-CS alumni did not arrive at college equipped with the same generational knowledge and tools as their non-first generation college student peers. Furthermore, due to limited access to higher education, marginalized students of color often experience a disconnect of experience with their peers.

A similar connection between building holistic relationships and sustaining college persistence can be found in the following alumnus’ journey. “Linda” graduated from UCLA-CS in 2017 and immediately enrolled in a four-year university in California. She spoke openly about her experience struggling with the transition from high school to college, specifically how she

“didn’t really have anyone” and “had a hard time making friends.” Despite this, Linda harnessed her aspirational capital and was determined to improve her college experience. After establishing a solid friendship in her second year, she dedicated the remainder of her college career to ensuring first years had community by working as a resident assistant. Linda directly attributes her college persistence to building a support network with her friend, even going as far to say, “If I didn’t make my friend that second year, I probably would have ended up dropping out of school.” Similar to Alex, Linda makes a direct connection between a lack of community and a struggle to remain academically retained.

Both alumni describe how isolation and loneliness negatively affected their first year college transition. Simultaneously, both alumni also noted that their college experience improved after building community and friendships with people they can not only relate to, but rely on for holistic support. However, building circles of support extend beyond peer to peer interactions. UCLA-CS alumni also noted the importance of incorporating institutional assistance into one’s circle of support.

When asked how Linda overcame the multiple hurdles of her first year college transition, she recounted seeking support from her college counselor frequently. She visited her counselor not only for guidance figuring out class schedules, but also for general support while she was struggling with imposter syndrome:

Interviewer: *"what tools did you use [to] overcome those hurdles of first year?"*

Linda: *"Definitely going to the counselor a lot. I—I was having a hard time kind of, you know, figuring out what my class schedules would be, but also in general, like, you know, I think I had a hard time trying [to go to] tutoring or anything like that because I just felt like I wasn't being studious or like good enough."*

A similar experience is shared with “Gracy”, a 2018 alumnus, as she describes how her college experience took a turn when she reevaluated her long term career goals. Despite having aspired to be a dentist since she was a little girl, she realized that her passions and interests lay elsewhere other than biology. She consulted institutional support to help find her direction again. Gracy describes how she “didn’t know what was next” when she had lost a “direct” path to follow. However, she asked her counselors and professors for guidance. Because she took the initiative to seek institutional support, she notes that faculty was “able to guide [her] again.”

Alex also recounts the importance of seeing an academic counselor after receiving the same advice from his older brother. Similarly to Gracy, Alex found that—although he enjoyed working with numbers—he was disinterested in general Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) classes. While Linda shares that it was difficult for her to seek tutoring because of her feelings of imposter syndrome, Alex encourages students in that same position to seek institutional guidance, stating:

"It does help to talk to the academic counselor 100%...Even if it's just the general counselor where you don't know where you want to go or what you want to do or where you're losing passion...they can properly guide you"

There exists a common sentiment that alumni run into phases of academic uncertainty that can negatively impact their college persistence rates. The alumni trends reveal that phases of uncertainty can lead to heightened feelings of imposter syndrome for first generation students of color. All three aforementioned alumni found the solution to this hardship in seeking

professional support. Ultimately, the alumni stories reveal the importance of building both holistic and academic support to continue to persist on their college journeys

Navigating Finances

Working a job throughout school for financial sustainability was another common experience shared by alumni participants. Because of this, financial security is not only a motivating factor for pursuing higher education, but a common struggle shared among alumni who worked extensively throughout their higher education journeys.

“Leyda”, a Hispanic 2017 UCLA-CS alumni and a four-year college graduate, spoke thoroughly about her experience with balancing an intensive work schedule on top of academics and personal wellness. When asked what obstacles she faced throughout her time in college, she mentions money as a primary struggle:

“I think I have two main ones. The first one being money. I think this is not talk[ed] about enough with high school students, but money's a huge part of most [peoples' problems in college].”

Leyda explains how, with her parents and family still in Mexico, she’s always had to work from a young age—helping out in a restaurant with her extended family to “make some money” and “have money for personal stuff.” Upon entering college, she struggled with sustaining both her financial and personal wellness at once:

“It was actually really hard to manage everything because at some point I was doing two shifts per day. I mean, there was this one semester that was just chaotic. I would have my first shift as a baker from six am to eleven am and then go to [the] classroom from eleven am to seven PM. And then from seven pm to one am, I would do my other shift at the cafe. And then [from] one am to three am, I [was] studying in the library. And I would go home, shower, and then get up and do the same thing over and over again. So it was really difficult for me to use time management more than anything.”

Leyda’s daily routine for that challenging semester was simply not sustainable for her long term well-being and college persistence. Despite that, she needed to work in order to support herself financially. However, after realizing the need to sustain her own well-being, she harnessed time management skills to prioritize balance in her life.

“I realized I was putting everything else before my mental health and ... myself in general...And the semester after that I started making sure...I was gonna at least have some time for myself throughout the day and that it wasn't gonna be like that all week. So then I started learning [time] management...and then slowly I started getting better at it. And that kind of, that was the same thing that happened with money. Throughout that time, I started saving money.”

She speaks on the connection between improving her time management, and thus improving her financial management skills. Notably, she speaks about the importance of preserving herself. She furthermore took initiative and sought institutional support from the TRIO-SS program, which she credits much of her success to.

Leyda’s struggle was not in isolation, several other alumni explained their need to work throughout college despite the strain it may cause on their academics and personal lives. However, she overcame the struggle of balancing work, school, and a personal life by tending to her needs as an individual.

Meanwhile, “Beth”, a first generation Filipino-American immigrant, 2018 alumni and a four-year university graduate—found enjoyment in her job at the university library by building

community with her colleagues. She notes how her colleagues not only became her friends, but acted as mentors that supported her in greater capacities than institutional supports:

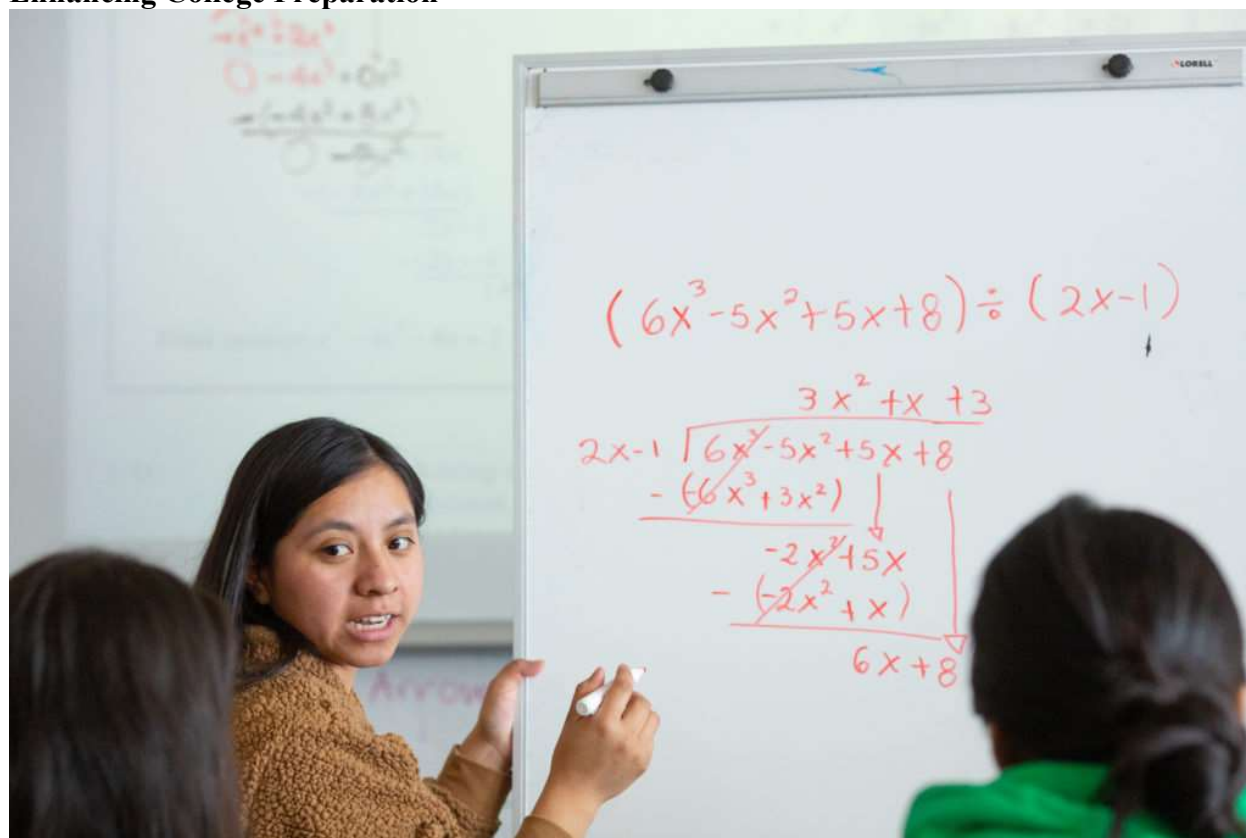
“I was fortunate to have a lot of older college friends that would help me to navigate that. Also, I worked my second year—I worked at [the] Learning Research Center at our university library...So I had a lot of staff members that [were] able to help me and also coworkers [that said things like] ‘take this class, you know, it counts for a lot.’ So yeah, I think just the people around me [were] able to help me a lot and give me advice on how to navigate my academics.”

Both alumni speak on how they overcame financial hardships by finding methods of incorporating work into their lives outside of financial gain. While Leyda incorporated work into her process of learning about time management, Beth found community and guidance in her job. They used their social and aspirational capital to seek support in balancing work among other duties.

Taking initiative

To best understand the decreasing persistence rates reflected in the Sankey Chart, we sought to understand the hurdles that first generation students of color endure throughout their postsecondary education. Furthermore, when conducting the focus group to gauge current UCLA-CS students’ curiosity and needs about college discussions, one student expressed interest in how alumni overcame the struggles of their higher education journey. We found that with great struggle came even greater motivation and aspirational capital to succeed. UCLA-CS alumni overcame the struggles of higher education by taking the initiative to harness their assets and problem solving skills. Only in overcoming the hardships associated with being a first generation student of color were they able to harness their innate assets to succeed. Their identities as first generation students of color equipped them with the community support they required for their various experiences.

Enhancing College Preparation



Emphasis on Dual Enrollment Programs and Practical Skills

During interviews, participants shared valuable insights on how current and future students at UCLA-CS can maximize their high school experience to better prepare for various post-secondary opportunities. Alumni strongly recommended that UCLA-CS promote dual enrollment programs, which enables high school students to access college-level courses. This not only enhances academic knowledge but also allows them to earn transferable college credits with fewer restrictions. Many alumni emphasized the advantages of offering college courses on the high school campus; thus eliminating the need for students to travel and enabling them to take classes during regular school hours. The convenience and accessibility of dual enrollment ensures that the time and effort invested in advanced classes yield secure, fruitful results.

In contrast to Advanced Placement (AP) classes, which mandate passing a rigorous final examination with a score of three or higher for college credit, dual enrollment allows students to enroll in actual college courses to earn both high school and college credit simultaneously. This flexibility makes enrolling in college courses particularly advantageous for students. Exposure to college-level material provides students with valuable knowledge, experience, and transferable credits, facilitating a more efficient post-secondary educational experience.

Furthermore, Alumni identified the financial advantages of dual enrollment, as it could reduce the amount of time spent in college, effectively saving money on tuition fees. The less time students are enrolled in college, the lower their total tuition costs, which can greatly alleviate student debt and financial burden on families. Completing college in a shorter period also enables students to begin their careers and start earning an income sooner. Beth shared how dual enrollment benefited her academically and financially:

"I think, like personally, college classes would have helped a lot...For me, it was more of an option of like, should I take this AP class or should I invest my time more in college classes? With an AP class, you have to pass the test. But with a college class, you just have to pass the class and you get credit for that...If you're someone that needs financial aid, those classes are free for you if you take them during high school from a community college. You can transfer those units to your university, and that saves you a lot of money because it's free during high school."

"Eddy" is a Latino, bilingual, first generation Mexican-American who graduated from UCLA-CS in 2019 and a four-year university in 2022. He also found invaluable benefits of dual enrollment. "I think the most beneficial thing was having college classes offered on the school campus," he explained, "Not having to go to the college itself and having teachers help students sign up during class was really helpful." Eddy highlighted the advantages of college courses over AP classes. "AP classes are harder to pass because it's all about that final exam, whereas college classes are easier because you don't have a single exam determining your credit." He also shared how dual enrollment helped him transition smoothly into university life and shorten his time there. "Taking those college classes was really important. They helped me transition and made my time at the university shorter because I was able to get units transferred. It only took me three years to finish school."

Besides promotion of dual enrollment, alumni have also identified specific areas of knowledge that, if incorporated into high school curriculum, would enhance students' readiness for their post-secondary endeavors. One key area that was identified is financial literacy, which alumni expressed as a major concern. Gracy also emphasized,

"Education is crucial because I lacked financial literacy skills...They don't teach that in school. I believe it would have been beneficial to have a seminar during high school discussing topics like taxes and budgeting. It took me a significant amount of time to understand these concepts, but I believe it would have been helpful if they were taught in school. Understanding where your money is being allocated is crucial."

Financial literacy may not be immediately applicable to high school students, but having a foundational knowledge for future experiences is essential. Findings suggest that it is better to have a working knowledge of financial management when faced with unexpected financial situations.

Alumni emphasize the importance of teaching students practical life skills related to roommate relationship building, homesickness, course registration, seeking assistance, and adjusting to college life. They recommend encouraging students to take actions and get involved on campus, such as attending college orientations to establish connections early on in the process. It is worth noting that the school already has taken actions to improve college persistence, such as the college and career transition curriculum and employing more college counselors to address essential skills and suggestions provided by the alumni (Murrillo et al., *forthcoming*).

Lack of Validation and Promotion for Diverse Options

As we delved into exploring how alumni understand their success in post-secondary journey, our findings highlighted the various advantages of pursuing higher education, such as improved career prospects and increased income potential. Eddy, specifically, shared his stories of achieving success by actively participating in college preparatory and honors programs in high school and graduating from a four-year college early.

“Colleges...it is an option...I would say like I was pretty successful in...going through college and...after college. There are people who get college degrees who do fine. And without one, honestly I don't think I would have because for my job...[does] require a degree so it's something that will definitely help you and help with your economic status.”

Although college is a valuable pathway for students, it is only one option among diverse possible trajectories. Both alumni and current students share the experience of hearing “you have to go to college” growing up at home and school. Alex mentioned that the school “made it sound like four year institutions were the only option. And they never emphasize community college.”

“Sunny”, a 2018 UCLA-CS alumni and a four-year university graduate, identified the issue of how some students were not able to best leverage the assets and experience in high school because of the limited access to resources and opportunities.

“They didn't propose other options...I feel like your college is important, right? But there's trade school, right?...There's just other options. And I feel like as a college counselor, I think that it's important that you give out options, you know, give options to the students. Because not everyone's gonna wanna go to a four-year university...No one has their stuff figured out...That was my experience at least. I just hope that now the two...college counselors are better there, that they're very supported and that they're very open-minded and encouraging.”

Alumni express frustration with the one-size-fits-all approach that prioritized four-year institutions over other options including community colleges and trade schools. Findings suggest that the expectation to push students to attend four year colleges have led to teachers and faculty selectively providing information to certain students but not the others. Alumni express concerns about perceived disparities in treatment among students at the school, noting inconsistencies in the provision of resources and opportunities. Sunny, who maintained a fair academic standing and attended a four-year institution, recognized the opportunities provided to her by teachers. However, she also acknowledged that her peers did not receive the same level of opportunities. Witnessing this inequality in access to resources and opportunities, Sunny emphasized,

“Maybe they don't have the best GPA, but that doesn't mean that they don't deserve to even hear about the opportunities, right?”

In the initial years of Leyda's high school journey, she experienced feelings of anxiety stemming from her bilingualism. She expressed being grateful for the support provided by her friends and certain teachers, but also recognized that the intense focus on college within the school created an overwhelming environment where students may feel a lack of autonomy. She argued that the school should empower individualized pathways and create a welcoming space for students to have agency to make decisions that are best for themselves, for they have everything they need to succeed within them.

“They're always, they always categorizing in that way... I feel like if high school just to stop doing that and give the chances to everyone...Not because you're having a bad time or like your grade in one of the classes is low or something.”

Providing resources and support to select students only perpetuates systematic disparities between marginalized students of color and their peers, effectively contributing to the widening achievement gap. Ensuring equal access to college and information of alternative pathways can help marginalized students, regardless of their background or academic performance, achieve

their fullest potential. Alumni assert that students should be making the final decisions about their educational and career pathways, regardless of whether they have a solid academic standing or intend to attend a four-year college immediately after high school. It should not be a deciding factor of what resources and chances are provided to them.

Maintain and Leverage College Preparatory Programs

Another key finding from alumni interviews is the positive impact of college preparatory programs on student preparedness and success. These programs not only provide academic skills and knowledge, but also foster confidence and a sense of community; thus preparing students to navigate the challenges of higher education effectively. They provide institutional support to further equip marginalized students of color with the tools needed for success.

Eddy told us that he was part of the Fulfillment Fund, along with other programs like Gear Up and Better Angels, which provided him with crucial information and support.

"One of the reasons I actually have the job right now is because of [the] Fulfillment Fund, through a networking event they had."

Eddy's experience with college preparatory programs was transformative, significantly shaping his academic and professional journey.

"They were there...giving information about FAFSA, how FAFSA works," he recalled. The programs provided valuable guidance regarding financial aid options and emphasized the importance of effectively conveying the stories of low-income students in their college applications. "Their focus was mainly on getting low-income students to tell their story in the college applications in a way that would potentially get them into one of the good schools," Eddy explained. These preparatory programs also played a significant role in Eddy's success, helping him gain acceptance to all the UCs and Cal States he applied to. This approach to college access directly tackles the deficit focused framework often associated with marginalized communities by harnessing tangible lived experiences and stories to strive towards success.

Sunny also emphasized the importance of Gear Up in her academic journey. "Gear Up helped me a lot. I think Gear Up really kind of kept my focus on college and they really prepared me...with the field trips that we used to take to colleges, those helped a lot." She highlighted how these field trips and the overall support from Gear Up played a significant role in her preparation for college.

The findings identify the value of college preparatory programs as more than just disseminators of information and resources. These programs provide a supportive community where students can discover their unique strengths and thrive, surrounded by peers and mentors dedicated to helping them define and achieve their own success. Program staff analyze individual situations and offer practical advice to help students effectively address any difficulties they may encounter, academically and socially.

The ongoing support and community offered by these programs have effectively equipped students for the academic challenges of college while fostering a sense of confidence and resilience that is still beneficial in their professional endeavors. The enduring impact these programs have on students' academic and personal growth is a clear indication of their value.

Motivation to Return



Enhancing Outreach and Alumni Engagement:

The interview findings suggest that alumni have a strong desire to contribute back to their community's wealth and build college-going capacity within their community. Specifically, participants stated that in order to strengthen the connections between current students and alumni, it is crucial to prioritize proactive outreach. Alumni stressed the importance of maintaining connections with previous students. Despite having graduated from the UCLA Community School, alumni expressed a desire to stay in touch with their former teachers. They value the sense of care and support from the school and faculty, particularly those who had a significant impact on their lives during their time as students. Alumni appreciate when teachers reach out to check in on them and show a continued interest in their well-being. Our findings indicate that when the school does make an effort to contact alumni, the response is typically positive, with many alumni willing to offer their support and assistance to current students. For example, Leyda mentioned how she returned to the school multiple times to help current students after being contacted by her former teacher.

"I usually get a[n] email from [a staff member], and then she's asked me like, 'hey, we have this college panel coming in, would you like to be part of it? ... We need a speaker to talk about college experience' ... Usually, when it's in my hands, I just ask for the time off. And I go to the school and talk to the students in person. And then if there's a particular person that [the staff member] knows that wants to study internal architecture, she'll contact them with me and then give them my email and social media if anything. And then they can ask me any questions through it."

A few alumni all expressed their commitment to giving back to the UCLA-CS community in various ways to support current students who followed in their footsteps after they

embarked on their own academic journeys. Being aware of such intentions and dedication, we want to explore what obstacles contribute to the challenges in maintaining a strong connection with alumni who express a desire to return to the school and utilize their resources as valuable members of the community. Interview findings further reveal a noticeable deficiency in proactive outreach initiatives from educational institutions towards their alumni. This lack of engagement has proven to be a significant obstacle in establishing lasting and meaningful connections. One alumni reflected on their experience, saying

"I reached out to [a staff member] like three times but she never replied back."

The majority of interviewees mentioned they hardly ever hear from the school, and even if they reached out to some of the faculty, the potential connection building gets impeded by the absence of response. Another participant told us,

"They never even bothered reaching out to me either. This is the only time."

Several other participants echoed that the recruitment outreach email for this study is the first time they have experienced proactive outreach from the school. This further sheds light on challenges regarding the inconsistent and unsustained communication between the school and its alumni. In addition to the absence of proactive outreach from the school, there are other obstacles hindering the potential connection between alumni and UCLA-CS, such as differing availability and schedules, unstable work-life balance, and individual life arrangements. However, alumni also emphasized that it is never too late to repair these connections. The outreach from our study team exemplifies a strategic effort by the school to reconnect with alumni. This initiative should be viewed as the start of a broader commitment to strengthening these connections through continuous engagement and assistance. We hope this initiative serves as the foundation for stimulating more engaging intra-community support between current students, alumni, and UCLA-CS faculty. Simultaneously, since UCLA-CS as a K-12 school is dedicated to providing education and support to current students, our findings highlight the potential benefits of fostering research-practice partnerships to address challenges by utilizing the resources available through collaboration with graduate and undergraduate students at UCLA. By embracing a university-assisted community school approach, schools can improve their outreach efforts and establish stronger networks of support for their alumni, promoting ongoing engagement and collaboration. During interviews, alumni identified specific actions and contributions to enhance the school community, which will be addressed further in this report.

Teacher Impacts: Transformative Influence

In addition to proactive outreach, teachers play a significant role in motivating alumni to reconnect with the school, share their experiences, and utilize their strengths. Our study finds that when students encounter challenges at school, supportive educators have the ability to assist them in a transformative manner, fostering lasting memories and resilience for their future endeavors.

Linda:

"In a big way, they brought out a...better side of me, and I really enjoyed that...they kind of made me see...the good in people because I haven't had the best experiences."

Linda's high school experience was profoundly impactful, largely due to the support and influence of her teachers. Initially reserved and hesitant to step out of her comfort zone, she found her voice and passion through her history classes at UCLA Community School. Recognizing the intersection of academics and social justice, Linda credited her teacher for encouraging her to join the Coalition of Educational Justice club. This involvement broadened her perspectives and prepared her for college. Her teachers played a significant role in shaping her character, instilling values of self-advocacy, accountability, and empathy: "They taught me...so much about...speaking for myself and correcting wrongs and... making sure that we're acknowledging things that happened, and being responsible."

Maintaining strong connections with her teachers, even after they had left the school, Linda emphasized the profound influence they had on her and the meaningful experience she shared with those teachers. "I do try and stay connected with my teachers at least who got me interested in the thing that I do...The teachers at UCLA-CS have definitely impacted my life in a big way," she noted.

Gracy:

During the interview, Gracy expressed her gratitude towards many teachers, specifically her 8th-grade math teacher, for the significant influence he had on her academic development. She mentioned that he recognized her potential when she did not see it herself, empowering her to acknowledge her strengths and envision a future filled with possibilities. "I'm really grateful that I had...teachers that kind of saw a future in me. You know, they believe in you."

Gracy also highlighted the collective support she received from the majority of faculty, emphasizing the nurturing environment she was a part of during her school years. "A lot of the community there did believe that I was gonna do big things so I think that was one of the biggest... green flags about the school to support." This sense of community, especially a supportive community is what Gracy shared her appreciation for. She indicated how her teachers believed in her and motivated her to strive for success. "I think when I say community, I feel like everybody believed in me." The encouragement and belief she received from her teachers and the broader school community not only influenced her academically but also fostered a sense of community and support that she continues to carry with her.

Inspired by the transformative power she received from her teachers, Gracy aspires to make a positive impact on future generations. Referring to her teachers as a source of inspiration, Gracy aims to make a positive impact on the community by supporting upcoming generations and assisting them in acknowledging their strengths and potential for a bright future.

Leyda:

"I'm grateful for everything they did. They've done amazingly with the generations before me and after me," Leyda expressed. She indicated how her teacher's guidance has greatly contributed to shaping the person she is today. The influence of her teachers was profound, enough to inspire her to always stay in touch and ask how they were doing.

Leyda went on to discuss how her teachers consistently provided her with encouragement and motivation. "They were not judgmental and never saw anything that would prohibit me from doing what I wanted to do. They saw potential in me and always pushed me towards it," she recalled," she explained. They believed in her abilities and consistently encouraged her to strive for success. Their unwavering support helped her to step out of her comfort zone and expand her horizons within a nurturing environment.

Reflecting on moments of self-doubt, Leyda acknowledged how her teachers' belief in her capabilities helped her overcome obstacles and make important decisions, such as pursuing higher education. Their positive reinforcement not only impacted her academic journey but also played a significant role in her personal growth and decision-making process. "Sometimes you wonder, 'Why didn't I talk to this person? Why didn't they push me enough?' But thinking back, it's amazing how they impacted my decision to go to college and move forward," she shared.

Findings suggest that many students experienced challenges in high school when they were extremely vulnerable and diffident because of language difficulty, feelings of isolation, or imposter syndrome. Even though some teachers may not be aware of, the presence of a responsible mentor and a healthy, encouraging teacher-student relationship is essential and impactful with a far-reaching bonus that consistently supports students in their following journey. Sometimes it is years of caring and supporting, while sometimes it may just be a single sentence that students will remember so firmly and use that phrase as energy to help them thrive. Teachers not only act as the driving force that propels individuals forward when they lack confidence in themselves, but also empower students to transform their mindset, recognize their values, and discover the true, shining version of themselves.

The interviews also highlight how the positive impact of teachers extends beyond individual students, nurturing a culture of spreading kindness within the school community. Students are inclined to maintain relationships with teachers who have made a significant positive impact on their lives, making them more receptive to the school's efforts to keep in touch.

Furthermore, as teachers have the ability to create lasting and meaningful connections, students are motivated to embody this spirit and inspire others. They express the willingness to thank teachers back by nourishing other students through mentorship that have brought them those influential and pleasant experiences.

As Gracy stated, *"I wanna make an impact to other, like future generations. That kind of motivated me to like come in today."*

In the academic setting, teachers serve as mentors who provide nurturing support, offer guidance, instill discipline, and create lasting memories for students, memories that will be replayed for multiple times in their minds at different stages of life. It is crucial for the teachers, counselors, and school staff to recognize the significant impact they have on students and the potential influence they hold in shaping young minds. When a teacher nurtures a student's development, the impact becomes a lasting source of strength and learning. This act also cultivates the growth of empathy and care, leaving a positive influence on both the student and the teacher.

Representation of Similar Experiences

Alumni expressed the desire to provide support for current students because their current students' lived experiences and struggles are reflective of their very own. The framework of Community Cultural Wealth emphasizes the assets inherent to marginalized students of colors' cultural identity. In essence, educational success can be achieved by harnessing the various capitals that marginalized students of color innately possess. Alumni have the unique positionality of sharing similar cultural backgrounds and lived experiences with current students, as well as having already accomplished academic success by harnessing their Community Cultural Wealth. The alumni we interviewed shared that they feel motivated to return to UCLA-CS in various capacities because they strive to see students like them succeed. They understand their struggles, see their experiences, and relate to them—providing them with the best positionality to provide personalized support.

This desire to support students with similar experiences is demonstrated by Leyda. Leyda identifies as bilingual in English and Spanish. However, her journey of learning English was not an easy one, as she relied on her trusted friends and faculty at UCLA-CS. When asked what motivated her to participate in the ACCESS study, she explained how she wants to see other bilingual students succeed despite the hardship of adapting to communication methods.

"I know there are still students coming in who their first language is Spanish. They're learning the language and I think that's a huge part of why I like doing things like this. Of course, I'm happy to help everyone. But if those people see that someone else made it through college, maybe that will inspire them. That [it] doesn't have to be an issue if you don't speak the language...you can still [have] an accent. I'm not speaking it to perfection, but at least I'm able to do this type of stuff and I have a job, so I think what motivates me is giving them a chance to be inspired and not give up and just keep going."

She explains how although she's happy to help any student, she feels a special connection to students whose first language is Spanish. She hopes that by seeing her, someone who has

successfully undergone the English learning process, current students in a similar position are inspired to strive for educational success.

Alex expressed similar feelings when asked the same question—that he wanted current students to feel seen in their hardships and know that things can turn out well in their favor. He expresses how he sees the best way of supporting students is by sharing his own experiences and how he overcame hardship.

“I have been wanting to go back to RFK. Even like just talk about my experience saying that: It's hard, but you know, you want it, you'll fail a lot. And sure you're gonna—you're gonna fail a lot in life, but the goals that you want are doable. So I just kinda want to share my experiences and I felt this was probably one [of the] best ways to do that [to] go ahead and share what I went through.”

Alex knows personally what the struggles of those in his own community feels like, and wants to transform his own experiences into lessons to be shared with others like him. He also acknowledges the importance of having a community to relate to and rely on in times of need.

I grew up in that community and back in high school, I really didn't connect with my peers...I just didn't realize it at the moment, but a lot of us were going through similar stuff and a lot of us have [gone] to a four year [college] and then we had to come back to a community college. And I kind of just want to go ahead and tell the students that if that happens to you, don't think it's the end of the world, just keep moving forward... [I want to] give more advice, I guess, to the future generation to [so that they don't go] as blindly as me and the rest of my class kinda did.

Alex shares that during his time at UCLA-CS he wasn't aware that his peers were experiencing many of the same hardships as he was. His desire to support current students is rooted in wanting to provide the assets and assistance that he didn't receive during his time at UCLA-CS, so that the students now and emerging are supported in the ways he was not.

Ultimately, the alumni of UCLA-CS have harnessed their innate Community Cultural Wealth to propel themselves towards academic and holistic success. With the empowerment of their communities, selves, and circles of support, their identities as first generation students of color became their greatest asset throughout their postsecondary education. With this, alumni are motivated and eager to share their gained knowledge and perspectives. They are also make the best mentors and support systems for current and future students due to their lived experiences since leaving UCLA-CS.

Conclusions and Implications

The ACCESS team envisions future UCLA Research Practice Partners (RPPs) building an active, reciprocal alumni partnership and database using alumni suggestions from the interviews. The team also envisions the College and Career Transition class adapting the lessons learned from collecting alumni' lived experiences. Furthermore, we recommend further RPPs utilize the ACCESS study as a foundation for connecting engaged alumni and current students in real time. Many alumni emphasized the desire for proactive outreach and hands-on student support, some of whom even offered future professional development opportunities.

Therefore, the school must provide students with inclusive information regarding diverse post-secondary trajectories so they are well equipped to make decisions for themselves. Alumni suggest that the school should empower students to consider other choices like trade school, while “emphasiz[ing] how community college could be a good outlet because four-year isn't for everyone.”

Due to unpredictable life circumstances, students may not have a concrete future plan by the time they graduate from high school. Providing exposure to alternative options is a culturally responsive method of ensuring students of all lived experiences has the opportunity to succeed with their own agency. Whether students do not think a four-year institution is a good fit for them, or they are simply unsure about where life will take them next, other options like community college “can be a start.” It is essential for the school to normalize diversity and provide students with comprehensive education about the options available to them. Overall, students “ultimately should choose where they wanna go...it’s up to the students.”

How can the school and UCLA as the university partner can leverage our findings to enhance student support and foster lasting relationships with alumni?

- ***Organize panel discussions*** or host alumni speakers to present, facilitating opportunities for alumni to engage in meaningful conversations with current students.
- ***Coordinate a reunion event for alumni***, bringing together graduates from various years to reconnect with their former classmates and teachers. This event will provide an opportunity for alumni to network, share resources, and exchange opportunities. Consider establishing a yearly reunion with additional monthly or bi-monthly check-in meetings organized by alumni.
- ***Provide community services opportunities for UCLA-CS alumni***. Graduates of the program may encounter difficulties in finding volunteer or internship opportunities. Therefore, the school could potentially invite them back as interns or community service volunteers to offer mentorship to current students on college application processes such as Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) and financial aid applications, as well as resume building. If feasible, the school could also develop an internship program to provide training to alumni before they transition into roles as assistant college counselors.
 - *Hold Alumni-lead coaching sessions on college application and provide writing/resume assistance*
- ***Reach out to alumni to explore potential opportunities for field trips and internships***. Some alumni have expressed interest in hosting current students for field trips at their respective schools or companies. Additionally, there are alumni who are considering starting their own businesses and are open to providing internship opportunities to students.

Limitations

Throughout the course of the ACCESS study, we encountered hardships in engaging alumni with postsecondary journeys varying from the four year direct admit pathway; thus, qualitative findings may not be entirely reflective of the student population. Of the seven alumni who engaged in qualitative interviews, only one of which had a “non-traditional” post-secondary journey having attended two four year institutions and a community college.

Reflecting on the experience of conducting research within a Critical Race Theory framework, we regret not prioritizing seeking and classifying identities early in the process to better understand intersections of identities & experiences. To work alongside and serve marginalized communities of color is to be culturally responsive and acknowledge the ways in

which identity interacts with various oppressive systems in society. Understanding the identities of the alumni participants is essential in drawing conclusions about their experiences.

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