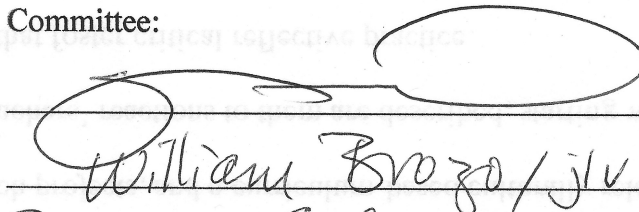


MIC'D UP: A CRITICAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO AFRICAN AMERICAN
MALES, SCHOOL COUNSELORS & THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AT A PWI

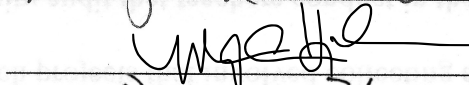
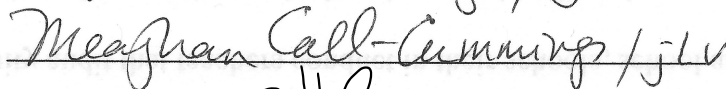
by

Robert L. Graham
A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty
of
George Mason University
in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
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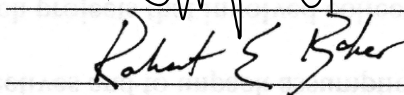
Committee:



Chair



Program Director



Dean, College of Education
and Human Development

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Spring Semester 2020
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Mic'd Up : A Critical Narrative Inquiry Into African American Males, School Counselors
&
The First-Year Experience At A PWI

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

By

Robert L Graham
Master of Arts
California State Polytechnic University at Pomona, 2012
Bachelor of Arts
Howard University, 2001

Director: Dr. Jenice View, Associate Professor
College of Education and Human Development

Spring Semester 2020
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Dedication

This is dedicated to my people, both the ancestral who are now among the stars and the diasporic Africans who currently bring peace and joy to the world as they, like me, try to make sense of this gift of life on Earth. Specifically, this is dedicated to Mom, Gigi, Nedra, Roy, The Grahams, The Greenups, The Kirklands (and Asia & the boys!), The Williams, The Littles, Creative Difference, Forever Friends, and the rest of my community that has given me strength, joy, love, support, patience, and the gift of never-ending belief. This is also dedicated to those whose touch I can feel on my shoulders, in my heart, and in the memories that sustain me: Dad, Nana, Papa, Cousin Phillip, and Uncle Don. A special dedication goes to my beautiful wife, Maryvonne, who has brought me love, joy, peace, laughter, companionship, and support to carry on through this harrowing journey. I love you all!

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Abstract

**MIC'D UP : A CRITICAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO AFRICAN AMERICAN
MALES, SCHOOL COUNSELORS & THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AT A PWI**

Robert L. Graham, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 2020

Dissertation Director: Dr. Jenice View

College degree attainment holds outsized potential benefits for African American males across quality of life domains. Given that many African American males from urban school districts are first-generation college students and thus come from social circles that lack insider knowledge of the college-going experience, high school counselors are particularly important resources for these students as they look to make successful transitions to PWI's. Educational literature speaking to the dynamic relationship between high school counselors and college-bound African American males becomes disconnected in educational literature after graduation. Using critical narrative inquiry as the methodology, this study sought to deepen our collective understanding of counseling for college by bringing together the personal, educational and professional experiences of three high school counselors from urban school districts and three

undergraduate African American male students from urban school districts at George Mason University. Results from conversations, a sharing circle, and participant reflections revealed counseling practices that were driven by counselor world views, formative personal and professional experiences, and varying school contexts. Results also revealed students who had received appropriate college access assistance and a need for additional preparation and support for the actual college experience in high school and on the university level.

Chapter One: Background, Purpose, and Overview of the Study

In July of 2017 the story of Johnathon Carrington's journey from valedictorian of Washington D.C.'s Dunbar High School to graduate of Georgetown University made its way into the education section of The Washington Post (Brown, 2017), and it was punctuated by this quote from Johnathon, "I don't think I'm going to fail everything, but I think I'm going to be a bit behind." Carrington had been a superb student at Dunbar High School, earning the distinction of valedictorian of his 2013 graduating class. Despite his stellar academic performance in high school, and despite the campuses being separated by fewer than four miles, there are notable contextual differences between Dunbar High School and Georgetown University that made Carrington's prediction of travails accurate. Dunbar High School enjoys a rich history as the nation's first Black high school and a place where the best and brightest African Americans came to learn and teach before the desegregation of public schools (Stewart, 2015). Like Johnathon Carrington, today's Dunbar features a student body that is almost entirely Black, economically disadvantaged, and from the same neighborhood cluster (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2018; Orfield & Ee, 2017). Dunbar also has a school population that largely scored below expectations on recent math and English proficiency exams (District of Columbia Public Schools, 2018). Established in the late 18th century

(Georgetown University, 2018), Georgetown University is widely well-regarded in terms of academics, however, and in contrast to Dunbar's history as an enclave for Black educators and students, Georgetown University's early funding relied on Black slave labor and trade (The Georgetown Slavery Archive, 2018), a campus tension-inducing fact made widely public during Johnathon Carrington's tenure there. With a yearly tuition of \$52,000 it is also expensive, has an acceptance rate of just 17%, and at 7.2% (Forbes, 2018), it features a Black student population that is under-representative of the local and national Black populations. Johnathon Carrington's stated challenges during his transition from Dunbar High School to Georgetown University included: academic struggle for the first time, fitting in on campus among mostly White and wealthy students, difficulty with math courses, and issues with time management (Brown, 2017). Across the country there are African American males like Johnathon Carrington who have done well enough in urban high schools to be granted college admission, only to have their persistence challenged by elements of their transitions to predominantly White institutions (PWI) such as inconsistent institutional support (Haywood & Sewell, 2016) academic rigor, the relationship between effort and grades, and campus racial composition (Harper & Newman, 2016); Johnathon Carrington's story is only unique in that it was told.

Statement of the Situation

A college degree is more important now than ever as it pertains to wealth, health and happiness outcomes (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Holland, 2017; Hout, 2012; Ruthra & Flashman, 2017), especially for those from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds such as African Americans males from low-income homes. That being said,

Black male college degree attainment rates are the lowest across race/ethnic and gender lines (Harper and Newman, 2016; Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Simmons, 2013). Additionally, at 78.5%, African American males are the least likely demographic to return to college after the first year (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019), indicating an attainment trend that begins early in the collegiate experience. Despite a wealth of educational literature on attrition and college readiness, the conversation around increasing degree attainment rates for African American males remains complex and without a clear way forward (Barnes & Slate, 2014; Howell, Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2009; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Venezia & Voloch, 2012).

Given that many African American males from urban school districts are first-generation college students (PNPI, 2018) and thus come from social circles that lack insider knowledge of the college-going experience, high school counselors are particularly important resources for these students as they look to make successful transitions to PWI's (Gilfillan, 2018; Smith & Zhang, 2008). Despite their joint task, educational literature speaking to the dynamic relationship between high school counselors and college-bound African American males becomes disconnected in educational literature after graduation. Studies focus largely on college enrollment and access (Simmons, 2011), and later the tracking of persistence statistics (Mathewson, 2017; Kowalski, 2017, July 19) without exploration of counselor interaction with experiential student data of school and district alumni to inform their professional practice. Additionally, many high school counselors feel their graduate programs leave them unprepared to assist students with the transition experience (Gilfillan, 2018). There

is thus a national situation in which PWI-bound African American male students are working toward achieving positive first-year outcomes at PWI's with the support of high school counselors that have little experiential data beyond high school graduation to draw from and often insufficient training for the task in general.

Historical Context

The most common educational dynamic in which college-bound African American males find themselves is that between urban school districts and PWI's (NCES, 2018; Schott Foundation, 2015). It is this interaction that is the setting for this research project, a present dynamic that has been shaped by a historical arc of racialized life and education for African Americans (Ficker, 1999; Span, 2005). Between the years 1619 and 1865, the first 250 years of the African American experience, the instruction of and acquisition of literacy by African Americans were opposed or restricted by policy throughout the American colonies and states (Butchart & Roller, 2004; Span, 2005). In this historical period, formal Black education was sporadic, with a proliferation of schools dedicated to African Americans occurring near and after the Civil War (Butchart & Roller, 2004), including the opening of a teacher-training school for free Black girls in the very region that is the setting for this study. The opening of this school in 1851 was a part of a national pattern of secondary education being available almost exclusively to Black women in the antebellum United States.

Formal racialization of African American education, the positioning of students based on race (Phoenix, 2004), found footing in the case of *Roberts v. Boston* in March, 1850 (Ficker, 1999), a ruling that upheld segregated education based on what the Boston

Public School Committee claimed to be divine pragmatism based on essential differences determined by God. The committee offered that, "The distinction is one in which the All-wise Creator has seen fit to establish; and it is found deep in the physical, mental, and moral natures of the two races" (Ficker, 1999, p.302).

Though eventually decided to be separate and unequal in 1954 through *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka* (Klarman, 1994), designated schools for Black children filled educational voids that in many cases provided positive experiences for students, educators, families, and communities (Walker, 2000), providing evidence of the possibility of strong, purposeful education of Black students in challenging contexts. For example, Washington D.C.'s Dunbar High School, all Black between 1877 and 1955, often scored first on city-wide tests among both Black and White schools, and most of its graduates went on to college during a period when most Americans did not (Morris, 2015). The Roberts decision set a precedent for a half-century of decisions that would maintain the legality of separate schools for Black students, finding society-wide application of segregation in 1896 with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Ficker, 1999). *Plessy* began as an issue in the courts of Louisiana over the constitutionality of separate train cars for Black and White riders, and with assistance from arguments used in the Roberts decision, became the legal basis for segregation in American life. American life and schooling would be legally segregated until the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (Klarman, 1994) decision desegregated the nation's public schools.

Though *Brown* legally desegregated America's schools, it did not change American hearts, stimulating White resistance and backlash (Henig, 1997; Klarman,

1994) that manifested in a myriad of ways, such as innovations in educational exclusion in communities that remained committed to separate schools for Whites and Blacks (Fuquay, 2002), and the pushing out of Black educators from the newly desegregated profession (Fultz, 2004). Though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided enforcement measures to support Brown (Delpit, 1988), the forced desegregation of America's public schools set in motion a dynamic that is still in place in urban school districts across the country, including in the districts of study here (Henig, 1997). Owing to factors such as White flight and anxiety about rapid racial change (Henig, 1997; Tatum, 2010), desegregated urban districts have become largely Black or Brown, while others are segregated by neighborhood (Dougherty et al, 2009). The exclusion of Black students from the nation's higher education institutions paralleled that in K-12 and necessitated the founding of separate Black postsecondary institutions (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). This exclusion led to fights in and out of the courtroom for access to universities that would eventually become today's PWI's (Picott, 1958; Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). So it is that K-16 and beyond, African American students are being educated in public schools that were designed to exclude them. Many students overcome this historical foundation, while many others of similar backgrounds do not.

Participant Schools and Districts

Participants in this study represented schools in the following districts as either alumni or school counselors: Hampton City Schools in Virginia, New York City Public Schools, and Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland. Hampton City Schools is the school district serving the residents of Hampton, VA (HCS, 2020). The

participant representing Hampton City Schools was an alumnus of Hampton High School. Owing to a combination of the city's population size of 136,255 (Data USA, 2020), the joint military base at Langley (Hampton VA, 2020), current and growing city diversity (Data USA, 2020), and the 90% minoritized student body of Hampton High School, I have classified the school as being in an urban characteristic context (Milner, 2012). Recognizing that there are a myriad of definitions and ways that the term "urban" is used in educational research, and that the lack of common understanding around the term makes discussion difficult, Milner offered an evolving typology of urban education as a tool for contextualizing schools. Schools that Milner classified as existing in urban characteristic contexts are not located in big cities and may be found in either suburban or rural areas. These schools, "may be beginning to experience increases in challenges that are sometimes associated with urban contexts such as an increase in English language learners in a community (p.560)." Hampton High School and the surrounding community have the task of accounting for the needs of diverse populations while in the midst of the national significance that comes with housing the Langley joint military base. The participant representing New York City Public Schools was a school counselor at a public high school in Brooklyn that I will classify as being in an urban intensive context. Milner (2012) described schools in urban intensive contexts as, "concentrated in large, metropolitan cities across the United States, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta" (p. 560), making my application of this term to a public high school in Brooklyn, New York appropriate. The remaining participants represented three Prince George's County Public Schools as alumni and high school counselors. Bordering

Washington DC, Prince George's County is described as having an urban atmosphere on its official website (PGC, 2020). Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS) is one of the 25 largest school districts in the country (PGCPS, 2020), with a student population that is 55% African American and 36% Hispanic/Latino. Given the district's size, shared border with the nation's capital, and demographic make-up, and one of my participant's description's of it as "semi-inner city," I have classified its context as urban emergent (Milner, 2012). Milner described schools in urban emergent contexts as typically existing in large but not major cities, while sharing some of the same characteristics and challenges as those in urban intensive contexts.

George Mason University

In order to answer the research questions that guide this study, I partnered with three African American male students who are current undergraduates at George Mason University and alumni of schools in Hampton, VA and Prince George's County, MD. Owing to its close proximity to Prince George's County, George Mason University is a geographically local university for PGCPS students. It is an in-state school for students from Hampton City Public Schools, as a member of the Virginia public university system (SCHEV, 2019). Given those connections and the fact that it is my home institution, George Mason was an appropriate university to include in this inquiry. The university, which is located in Fairfax, VA and fewer than twenty miles from Washington D.C., is a large and public PWI with a Fall 2018 total enrollment of 37,316 (GMU, 2020a). Of this total enrollment, 3,979 students were classified as Black or African American, an enrollment number that put this population at 10.6% of the university's students and in a

position of underrepresentation in a state that was nearly 20% Black or African American (Census, 2018). Competing narratives are told around campus regarding the experience and success of George Mason's Black students. There is an unsubstantiated narrative floating about the campus community of a Black undergraduate student population that is thriving and doing at least as well as the White students. This story is in line with external analyses touting the university as a top spot for Black students based on a 6-year Black graduation rate of 65.9% that is equal to its White students (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017) and higher than national averages for Blacks and all ethnic groups combined. This narrative is unsubstantiated because data on students categorized as Black at George Mason have not been disaggregated to account for ethnicity, country of origin, and immigration experience. Another narrative also exists, this one of a Black student population that is underprepared for the academic and social climate of this university whose geography places it at the intersection of Virginia and Washington D.C. This study aimed to contextualize those competing narratives through direct conversation with students.

Along with filling an educational gap in Northern Virginia, George Mason University's origin story (GMUa, 2019) includes early decisions-makers making choices that were hostile to African American student success. The university was founded as a branch of the University of Virginia system in the late 1950's to serve the needs of a growing regional citizenry that was geographically outside of the reach of the existing state universities. The university was given its distinct name, George Mason University, in 1959, a tribute to a founding American who simultaneously spoke out against the

institution of slavery and who enslaved Africans (National Park Service, 2017). This celebration of a conflicted enslaver aligns with other American mixed signals regarding racial equality and education such as the idea of separate but equal and the irony of Georgetown University hosting African American students while owing its foundations to slave labor and trade. At present, a large statue of its namesake stands tall on the campus of George Mason University, overlooking Black students, faculty, and staff as they traverse the grounds.

In addition to George Mason University's confusing symbols, and despite not officially being segregated, the university's early lack of intention around race meant that it was a nearly all White institution in 1971, 14 years after it began operations (GMUa, 2019). Of its 2,456 students, 16 were Black, and of its 164 faculty members, 2 were Black. The pattern of admissions and hiring prompted the assertion by the Virginia State Advisory Committee (VSAC) that, "George Mason College was conceived of, by, and for the white community of Northern Virginia and not for the entire Northern Virginia population" (George Mason University, 2019). The assertion was followed by a recommendation by the VSAC that an African American be elected to the university's advisory board and adjustments be made to the university's performance standards to incentivize racial diversity. Despite the fact that remedies were ordered and that it was founded 200 years after its state system's flagship university, George Mason University was a PWI with the benefit of White students as its founding structural purpose.

Counseling For College

Though not theirs alone (ASCA, 2019; Holland, 2017), it is the task of African American males from urban school districts and the school counselors in their high schools to transcend a history of exclusion and inequitable practices in American higher education. Even with records of academic success in high school, first-year African American male students at PWI's can experience struggle with adjusting to factors such as academic rigor, the relationship between effort and grades, and campus racial composition (Harper & Newman, 2016). There are also students that experience less tumultuous first years at university, attributing their positive transition experiences to factors like student organizations (Harper & Newman, 2016), first-year seminars, pre-collegiate programs, and high school counselors (Smith & Zhang, 2008). Positive African American student perceptions about the helpfulness of high school counselors (Blair, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2018; Gilfillan, 2018; Smith & Zhang, 2008) denote an openness to the advice of these professionals, and research indicating that school counselor interventions promote college success of those underrepresented on the postsecondary level (Gilfillan, 2018) presents an angle from which college preparation may be made more strategic. Thus, examining the impact of pre-collegiate counselors on the first-year experience holds potential to expand the conversation about increasing African American male student persistence, including which student success and struggle factors they communicate to students in preparation for post-secondary study and why.

Professional school counselors describe the college counseling work they perform (Moore, 2015) as assisting with postsecondary transitions and "reinforcing the students'

academic potential to succeed in college” (p. 109). They have earned master’s degrees in school counseling (ASCA, 2019), and they are certified to assist students with academic, career, social, and personal needs. The existence and nature of state laws mandating the maintenance and ratio of school counselors varies by state (ASCA, 2019), with some states leaving such decisions to local educational agencies. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of 250 students to every counselor (2019). The national ratio is 464 to 1, Maryland’s 373 to 1, New York’s 391 to 1, and Virginia’s is 385 to 1 (2019). In addition to well-being and college admission competencies, the ASCA (2019) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2018) have articulated programmatic and individual competencies related to college preparation such as guidance that helps students prepare themselves academically for a range of academic possibilities, assisting students with connecting abilities and interests with future educational opportunities, addressing needs of underrepresented groups, and encouraging student participation in pre-collegiate programs like Upward Bound.

Given student openness to high school counseling, the need to increase African American college persistence, time constraints on high school counselors, and stated professional development needs, there is potential utility in exploring the content of college preparation guidance for areas where impact may be increased without adding to the workload of counselors. There is also potential utility in expanding the tracking of students beyond persistence statistics, to involve the inclusion of student experience data on the subjects of transition to the university and persistence.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to contribute to American social justice, a future reality in which equal opportunity exists to pursue one's aims, by helping to meet the educational needs of African American males, a group that has had its educational aspirations repressed since the time of the American colonies (Span, 2005). Specifically, the purpose of this study was to better understand the lives and first-year college experiences of African American males from urban school districts at PWI's in order to provide experiential data that could be used to inform the practice of the professionals who provide this population with college preparation guidance. Additionally, this study sought to understand the life and work experiences of urban high school counselors in order to help them and related policy makers make appropriate and strategic decisions regarding approaches to work and professional development. By connecting the stories and work of these populations, there was increased opportunity to improve educational outcomes on the post-secondary level, including retention, degree-attainment, and academic performance.

An additional purpose of this study was to further humanize both participant populations to increase the likelihood of more strategic, equity-driven future educational research on the subjects of college preparation, urban education, and African American male education. In their history of having education denied them under threat of physical violence (Span, 2005), and later that denial replaced with educational opportunity gaps that are projected upon them as cultural failure (Strayhorn, 2010; Toldson, 2010), African

American students have been dehumanized since colonial times (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008), despite the gains of the civil rights era that signaled an end to the idea of racial superiority (Cabrera, 2018). Dehumanization operates as a precursor of discriminatory practices and worse, as evidenced by associations made between humans and non-humans in justifications of the Jewish Holocaust and American slavery (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008).

Providing an opportunity for college preparation professionals from urban school districts to tell their own stories contributes to their humanization (Freire, 1972) and appreciation of their work. It is their charge to support the educational aspirations of largely underprivileged students in often under-resourced contexts, yet the scope of their work is largely misunderstood and the stories of the people behind the work remains unknown. Amplifying the voices of African American male students as part of a larger project of humanizing African American males holds the potential for educational institutions to transform themselves from institutions that support this population as an add-on or retrofit, to ones that have their support as part of their central missions.

Research Questions

In order to serve the research purposes of this study, the following questions were crafted: How do the personal and professional experiences of school counselors from urban public schools deepen our understanding of the ways that they approach their work with college-bound African American male students? How does the college guidance received during high school help us understand the transition experience of African American male students from urban public schools to George Mason University? In what

ways do the narratives of school counselors and students from urban districts indicate alignment between preparation for college in their schools of origin and the African American male first-year experience at George Mason University?

The Importance of the Study

While landmark policy shifts such as those triggered by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and *Brown v. The Board of Education* (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994) have signaled progress, the educational landscape in the United States has yet to become one of equal opportunity and benefit (Klarman, 1994). The struggle for self-determination through the promise of an education continues as vestiges of past policies and attitudes influence today's educational systems and practices (Horsford & D'Amico, 2015). Though more veiled in their genesis than past obstacles to college education, existing challenges with college preparation, campus fit, degree attainment, and student satisfaction are on-going sources of struggle for African American males and other marginalized populations (Harper, 2012; Schott Foundation, 2015). However, there is good reason to struggle. Notwithstanding the cultural tradition of education-seeking for emancipatory purposes, the list of associated positive outcomes related to college degree attainment has many practical, universally understood manifestations, and the returns on a college degree are large in multiple domains including finance, health, and happiness (Ruthra & Flashman, 2017). The importance of college degree attainment for lifetime economic prosperity continues to grow as the American labor market shifts further away from professions requiring high school educated employees and toward workers with postsecondary education (Carnevale, Jayasundera, Gulish, 2016). Lifetime earnings for bachelor's

degree holders compared to holders of high school diplomas and those with some postsecondary education (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011), indicate an advantage in economic prosperity in return for the investment in college degree attainment.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Statement of Positionality

I approached this inquiry through the lens of an African American man seeking to use my privileges to support and advocate for marginalized people struggling for equality and justice. My privileges include in part: having an advanced education rooted in a private school foundation, being raised in a stable and stress-free two-parent home, being male, being able bodied, being straight, being a U.S. citizen, having a Christian orientation, being English-speaking, speaking as my primary discourse an esteemed brand of English, being raised in a middle-class home, and being supported in my endeavors by a coalition of loved ones. I was raised in a family of educators and people that give of themselves through service. I have thus developed values that reflect such an environment, including love and sacrifice for those who require champions for their voices. I am an advocate for African American youth as they pursue education that may be transformative. Through research, one of the many arms of my advocacy, I seek to bring further new narratives that challenge the images and notions that have sustained low expectations and inequalities regarding African American youth, particularly the deficit positions traditionally taken by educational researchers (Harper, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Critical qualitative inquiry rejects positivist assertions that research is an endeavor that may be undertaken through an ideologically neutral lens, resulting in a singular, absolute truth which can be generalized and applied to the world at large. Critical qualitative inquiry instead considers the inevitably subjective lens of the researcher, the context in which the research is conducted, the power dynamics affecting the objects of inquiry, the history which frames the endeavor, and the implications of methodological and procedural choices made in the name of inquiry. Lather (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) describes critical qualitative research as representing “inquiry done for explicit political, utopian purposes, a politics of liberation, a reflexive discourse constantly in search of an open-ended, subversive, multivoiced epistemology” (p. 5). This representation is in line with Denzin’s (2017) call for critical qualitative inquiry that furthers pursuits for social justice and that fights “inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice” (p. 8). Given the fact that this inquiry was an arm of my advocacy for equitable educational and life experiences for African American males and the marginalized, my framework for this study was a critical one that is in line with the approaches of both Lather and Denzin. In the process of addressing my research questions, I gave venue to underheard students and their guidance counselors so that they might improve their own conditions (Freire, 1972). In speaking to a multivoiced epistemology, as put forth by Lather (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) I intentionally featured the perspectives and approaches of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other underheard scholars throughout this project.

Critical Narrative Inquiry As Methodology

This research project involved the use of narrative inquiry as the methodological approach to answering the research questions. I made the choice to use narrative inquiry because of its congruence with my critical lens in its potential to amplify the voices of the marginalized, to humanize those that have been oppressed, and to give a platform for participants to articulate how forces around them shape their decision and sense making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Narrative inquiry falls under the umbrella of qualitative research (Ravich & Carl, 2016). Bruner (1987) posits that it is not logical thought that dominates human cognition, but the construction of narratives or stories. In the act of constructing autobiographical narrative, the narrator and protagonist are one in the same, and what is produced is a series of interpretations rather than a record of experiences (Bruner, 1987). Given this perspective on the way that humans make sense of their experiences, narrative inquiry stands as an intuitive and potentially insightful mode of inquiry.

Narrative inquiry's roots can be traced back to the emergence of sociological practices around personal life records at the Chicago School in 1920's and 1930's, and to anthropological work around the life histories of other cultures during the same time frame (Butler-Kisber, 2010). After decades of marginalization in favor of quantitative approaches, interest in personal narratives, perhaps buoyed by liberation movements of the 1960's and 1970's, gained momentum with their power to give voice to the silenced and to challenge dominant discourses (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Narrative inquirers engage in the collection and telling of stories, writing about lives and human experiences with a

commitment to their participants' interpretations of events (Bruce, 2008). Narrative research, like other qualitative methodologies, pushes back on the idea of the objectivity of knowledge (Kim, 2008) and allows for deeper understanding of the lived experiences of its objects.

Definitions

The following definitions indicate the ways that key terms were used throughout the dissertation.

African American- This term refers to individuals who possess the shared psychological and historical memory of descendants of victims of U.S. slavery (De Walt, 2011).

Brotha- A pronoun used by a Black man or woman to refer to a Black man. Its use indicates cultural solidarity and respect.

College preparation- Guidance aimed at college admission and success including assistance with activities such as strategic course selection, test skills preparation (DCPS, 2017), applying for scholarship and financial aid, and school selection based on individual student needs and interests.

School counselors - School professionals whose scope of work includes assisting students with college preparation.

Sista- A pronoun used by a Black man or woman to refer to a Black woman. Its use indicates cultural solidarity and respect.

Transition- The process of adapting to the educational and social demands of university life (Maunder, Cunliffe, Galvin, Mjali, & Rogers, 2013).

Urban characteristic- School that are not located in big cities and may be found in either suburban or rural areas. These schools, “may be beginning to experience increases in challenges that are sometimes associated with urban contexts such as an increase in English language learners in a community (Milner, 2012, p.560).”

Urban emergent- Schools typically existing in large but not major cities, while sharing some of the same characteristics and challenges as those in urban intensive contexts (Milner, 2012).

Urban intensive- Schools that are “concentrated in large, metropolitan cities across the United States, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta (Milner, 2012, p. 560).”

Chapter Two: Review of Relevant Literature and Theory

The purpose of this study was to better understand the lives and first-year college experiences of African American males from urban school districts at George Mason University in order to provide experiential data that may be used to inform the practice of the professionals who provide this population with college preparation guidance. Additionally, this study sought to understand the life and work experiences of urban high school counselors in order to help them and related policy makers make appropriate and strategic decisions regarding approaches to work and professional development. This chapter is a review of literature that informed this narrative inquiry into the lives and experiences of African Americans males transitioning to PWI's and the school counselors that have supported them prior to university matriculation. The literature is divided into thematic sections: school counseling for college, college-readiness, university transition, and campus climate, with relevant theory included.

Procedurally, I used my home university library's online database to search the terms "guidance counseling," "college-readiness," "university transition," and "campus climate," moving from articles that explored these themes generally to those of particular interest to this study. The search results were examined chronologically to gain a sense of how each field of inquiry developed over time. Literature that shaped the direction of

each field of inquiry was examined for methodological approach, findings, and impact on African American males from urban school districts.

School Counseling for College

The tracking of student persistence statistics through the first year of college by school districts to inform high school counseling (Mathewson, 2017; Kowalski, 2017, July 19) indicates perceived professional connection and responsibility to students beyond college enrollment and access despite the prominence of the topics of enrollment and access in literature on the subject of guidance counseling (Simmons, 2011).

Complicating the drive to inform college preparation counseling through persistence statistics are the contextual realities of high school counseling (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Malone, 2013; Simmons, 2011; Woods, & Domina, 2014). For example, professional school counselors for Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS, 2020b) are tasked with providing "counseling services that are comprehensive in scope, preventive in design and developmental in nature in the areas of academic achievement, college and/or career readiness and personal/social development for all students." These descriptors speak to the competing priorities, role ambiguity (Astramovich, Hoskins, Gutierrez, & Bartlett, 2013), and heavy workloads of school counselors nationally (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Malone, 2013; Simmons, 2011; Woods, & Domina, 2014), and counselors are further constrained by student caseloads that typically exceed recommendations (Woods & Domina, 2014) from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (Gilfillan, 2018). Further complicating the work of high school counselors, and

despite the potential for increased positive impact on the transition experience of African American male students, is the fact that many of these professionals feel their graduate programs have left them unprepared to assist students with the transition experience (Gilfillan, 2018; Harris, Hines, & Hipolito-Delgado, 2016), a recognition of the need for professional development on the subject.

Cultural Capital as School Counseling Theory

A running thread in literature on the subject of school counseling in urban settings and settings with minoritized student populations is the use of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) as explanatory theory. Cultural capital is a social stratification concept that was introduced by French scholar Bourdieu, and in broad terms it refers to cultural traits that bring reward to those who possess them in arenas such as education systems (Davies & Rizk, 2018). Davies and Rizk (2018) used a narrative approach to understand the many ways that the concept of cultural capital has been used in studies conducted since its introduction to the English speaking world in the 1960's. The authors determined that the concept's application evolved in three generations. The first generation of studies interpreted Bourdieu's concept as one highlighting a familiarity by certain segments of society with the cultural norms of the dominant class. This familiarity with the norms and practices of the dominant class translates to inheritable familial benefits in societal spheres such as education.

The second generation, arising in the 1980's through the early 2000's, made connections between cultural capital and the attainment of status (Davies & Rizk, 2018). A notable researcher from this second generation of cultural capital scholarship is

DiMaggio (1982), who linked cultural capital to educational attainment by looking at the effects of cultural capital on high school grades. Upon examining cultural capital variables such as parental education level and arts engagement, he determined that there was a positive relationship between cultural capital and high grades earned. DiMaggio's scholarship offered a turn in the conception of cultural capital, offering the idea that exposure to cultural elements could change an individual's life outcomes, a challenge to Bourdieu's assertion that the benefits of cultural capital were solely the possessions of those who had inherited them via family or social circle.

The third generation, today's generation of cultural capital studies, is building on the work of Annette Lareau (Davies & Rizk, 2018), who explored the "class-influenced capacities of families to align their practices with school requirements (p.339)." In particular, Lareau looked at the ways that middle-class families, often with mothers in the lead, activate their cultural knowledge to navigate educational systems and make informed decisions around things like homework strategies, student activities, and school choice. The building on this cultural capital work by the third generation goes beyond informed system navigation and into realms such as the effects of cultural capital on admission to elite universities and college persistence, two outcomes of particular relevance to this study.

Literature and studies on the subject of guidance counseling in urban settings and school settings with minoritized student populations occupy their own territory when it comes to applying cultural capital theory, many of them offering that school counselors can fill the roles of arbiters of cultural capital that parents of privileged classes play on

behalf of their students (Bryan, Farmer-Hinton, Rawls, & Woods, 2017; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Duncheon, & Relles, 2018; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Simmons, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). For example, researchers Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, and Holcomb-McCoy (2011) describe a dynamic in which families navigate schooling, and as this navigation deepens, families of lower income become increasingly less equipped to provide students assistance, owing to limited experience with subjects such as college preparation. As a result, adults working in schools, such as school counselors, become students' dominant sources of cultural capital, and students with the most contact with school counselors have the best educational outcomes.

College Readiness

One topic of interest in inquiry into the transition experience of African American male students from urban districts to PWI's is that of their college readiness, given the determination's potential as an influencing variable. In terms of definition and predictive value, college readiness is an unsettled topic within the field of education (Porter & Polikoff, 2011). What becomes evident after a plunge into studies on the subject of college readiness, is that there is no universal meaning assigned to the term. What we instead have is an array of working definitions that suit the contexts of particular educational institutions and research agendas (Adelman, 1999; Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012; Barnes, & Slate, 2014; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Venezia, & Voloch, 2012).

A standard approach to understanding college readiness is the tying of college readiness to students' high school curricula, a connection made ubiquitous after the release of Adelman's 1999 report, *Answers in the toolbox: Academic intensity, attendance patterns and bachelor's degree attainment*. For the longitudinal study performed for the National Center for Education Statistics leading to the *Toolbox* report, determining what college readiness meant as it related to degree attainment was the goal and the context. This study resulted in a definition of college readiness that is tied to the rigor of students' high school curriculums. Though GPA and aptitude tests were found to be important indicators of future academic success, it was curricular strength and its effect on the need for future remediation that emerged from the study in a marked way, seeming to make moot the effects of socio-economic status and race. Adelman's college readiness suggests a continuum; college readiness would mean the degree to which a student had been prepared by a sufficiently rigorous high school curriculum. A follow-up, replicating study (Adelman, 2006), revealed a corroboration of the import of curricular rigor, while also isolating highest level of math taken as the biggest indicator of college readiness and college degree attainment odds.

The findings from Adelman's two longitudinal studies (1999, 2006) led to a push in the national conversation around college preparedness toward curriculum rigor, influencing the actions of public education systems; university admissions policy makers; and educational researchers. A 2012 study (Long, Conger, & Iatarola) looked to determine whether this push warranted a policy shift in the state of Florida, and the findings led to a different definition of college readiness in the context of the state's

public high schools, four-year post-secondary institutions, and community colleges. The researchers determined that academic rigor in any high school subject area was a harbinger of eventual degree attainment, especially when rigorous courses are taken by the tenth-grade year. This was a shift away from the touting of a generally rigorous curriculum with a keen eye on highest math level. Results from this longitudinal study opened college readiness strategy-making to new considerations such as remaining conscious of the diminishing returns of student schedules loaded with multiple rigorous courses, preparing students to take rigorous courses by the tenth grade to maximize future impact, and opening the door to students taking rigorous courses in subjects where their interests reside. Plainly speaking, the findings opened the door to a redefinition of college readiness, to mean having taken at least one rigorous course in high school, preferably by the tenth grade. Though demographics were found to be of little impact in the relationship between rigor and outcomes, the nature of school attended was meaningful, as poor schools had fewer college ready students. That being said, the intersectionality of race and SES means that Black and Hispanic students must be considered when discussing policy and practices of low-performing and high-poverty schools (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

The broad conversation around college readiness reveals a collection of definitions and perspectives that are context specific and a tendency to define college readiness without a full treatment of the effects and/or realities of SES. This subjectivity on the topic of college readiness means that student populations will be affected differently by researcher choices and the subsequent application of findings by policy

makers. While subjectivity is inevitable, it is important to keep in mind that being considered “college ready” becomes the result of researcher and policy-maker perspective. Jackson and Kurlaender’s (2014) study of college readiness and completion in the California State University system (CSU) was a move toward acknowledging a relationship between college readiness, race and SES. Perhaps reflecting a need to account for the broad mission of educating California's diverse masses, another definition of college readiness emerged; CSU defined college readiness as ready to take college English and math. Despite the innocuous seeming nature of this definition, the study revealed a college readiness context that found readiness and related educational outcome disparities along racial and SES lines, with the greatest advantages for White students and those above what is considered low-income. College readiness in the CSU system meant ready to take college math and English courses, and the demographic deemed most ready was White, male, and not from a low-income household.

Readiness Patterns

Perhaps the most consistent finding and/or pretext of college-readiness literature is the pattern of too many students being deemed not college ready, regardless of the college readiness definition being applied. This theme plays out across multiple metric types. In terms of high school academic proficiency as measure of college readiness, 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests of reading and math proficiency (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013) revealed fewer than 40% of high school seniors reading at grade level and fewer than 30% performing at grade level in math. Once students across the country arrive at college, many find themselves taking remedial math

and/or English courses (Barnes & Slate, 2014; Howell, Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2009; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Venezia & Voloch, 2012). Remediation as a fact of life in the move from high to college is an additional financial burden for students and their families. Remediation also hurts graduation chances (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), and it is a potential source of confusion for students who perform well in high school only to find themselves deficient in math or English upon taking college placements exams (Howell, Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2009). While there are many programs in place to help students prepare for their college experience (Howell, Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2009; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), high remediation rates exist and point to patterns of systemic misalignment between secondary and post-secondary systems.

Exacerbating the phenomenon of students not being college ready is the fact that those found to be least ready tend to be our nation's already underserved, students that are poor; Hispanic; Black; and/or some combination of these categories (Howell, Kurlaender & Grodsky, 2009; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Despite the popular ideal of education as equalizer, SES and race follow students from K-12 into post-secondary institutions and continue to hold predictive value in terms of educational and life outcomes.

African American College Readiness

Literature that features Black student voices (Strayhorn, 2015) reveals alignment with some general conceptions of college readiness in terms of the need for high school curricular intensity (Adelman, 1999; Adelman, 2006). However, along with corroboration, turning to research and literature around African American college readiness also means

opening the conversation to a particular demographic and consequently additional non-academic dimensions of readiness. The literature on college readiness indicates a pattern of Black students being the racial group least ready for college, a trend not so surprising given the national K-12 opportunity gap phenomenon (Schott Foundation, 2015).

Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca offer what is essentially a status report on urban college readiness in their 2009 literature review and analysis. Citing a gap between college degree aspirations and attainment, the authors point to a number of factors that complicate the college going process for low-income and minoritized students, including a topic that emerges for the first time in the college readiness portion of this literature review, *college knowledge*. College knowledge refers to the skills, resources, and information necessary to get to and be successful on the post-secondary campus, and it may partly explain disparities in performance, retention, and graduation along socio-economic lines. College knowledge becomes important when searching for schools, applying to schools, seeking funding, and making the decision on a 2-year or 4-year institution. College knowledge is also something that is largely passed on in familial and social circles, and its transference may be thought of as an inclusion in a cultural conversation or Discourse (Gee, 1989). Members of outsider SES groups may eventually figure out or be made privy to the secrets of the Discourse of higher education, but that process is one of catching up to native members.

A 2008 study by Reid and Moore corroborates research findings that emphasize the importance of curricular rigor while also humanizing the college knowledge conversation. Interviews and questionnaires with first-generation college going African

American and Black immigrant students from an urban high school in the Midwest revealed insights into elements from high school that facilitated their successes in college and the skills they felt they'd lacked as they began their post-secondary education. The students found AP coursework, adult encouragement, participation in extra-curricular activities, and pre-college bridge programs to have been helpful in their first semesters of college. The students who'd taken AP English in high school felt particularly prepared for their collegiate English courses.

Regardless of how well they had performed in college thus far, each of the participants in Reid and Moore's study (2008) felt at least partially unprepared for their current institutions. Insufficient high school rigor, lack of resources such as technology, issues with time management, and lack of study skills were frustrations for these students. These students also expressed opposite feelings about preparation for math and science classes than they did about English, lamenting the struggles they experienced and the magnifying effect of comparing themselves to their classmates who had been educated in suburban high schools. Struggles with science did not exclude students who had taken AP sciences courses in high school. The experiences of these students add credence to the general college readiness literature explored earlier in this review that connects high school curricular intensity to post-secondary educational outcomes (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012). Harper and Associates' Black and Latino male high school achievement study (2014) reveals findings that are similarly college-knowledge focused while also marking a vacuum in the research approach. Whether due to the fact of same-race qualitative researchers or

simply because the question isn't being asked, it remains unclear what role African American students perceive race to have played in their college readiness. This vacuum in literature on the subject of race and college readiness opens the door to future research that utilizes criticality as an analytical lens, offering an opportunity to learn from the question, what does race have to do with this phenomenon (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001)?

University Transition

The experience of university transition can be thought of as the point at which a student's college preparation becomes operationalized. That being said, 78.5% of African American males overcome struggles associated with transitioning from high to college to return to college after the first year as opposed to their White male counterparts' at 84.2% (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019), a figure that provides justification for deeper investigation into the student experience and the university settings they find themselves in. One assumption of this particular exploration and analysis of literature is that successful university transition means student progression to the second year in good academic standing and on a degree completion trajectory. A second assumption under which I conducted this work is that there is a common educational equity goal on the part of researchers, educators, and advocates to weaken demographics as factors determining successful university transition. With those hopeful assumptions in mind, this section will bring together concepts and theory around university transition to increase understanding of the way it is has been conceived and acted upon in educational literature.

Student-University Fit

Along with consideration of student satisfaction (Harper & Newman, 2016; Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011), a conversation about university transition, defined here as the adjustment period after high school graduation and up to the completion of the first-year of college, is essentially a conversation about retention, and the line between it and the study of college readiness and campus climate is overlapping. Situated somewhere between college readiness and university transition is the concept of *fit*. Venezia and Jaeger (2013) assert that helping students find a proper institutional fit is essential for advocates of college-bound students, particularly for low-income and other students whose families lack college experience. They describe in their work, *Transitions From High School to College* (2013), a strategic approach to finding institutions that are fit for students that includes considerations of cost, location, size, student-faculty ratio, counseling and advising services, student body composition, areas of study offered/special area of focus as they pertain to student interests and needs. Regarding student members of the population of interest here, African American males, there is the potential for closer fit at less competitive institutions for those that are also first-generation. Less competitive institutions may feature environments that inspire students to be their best academic selves, as opposed to more competitive institutions that may promote success as it relates to the performance of others (Sommet, Quiamzade, Jury, & Mugney, 2015). The individualism related to outward, competitive goals may be at odds with the interdependent values of first-generation students. As users of educational

literature look to make sense of university transition experiences, they may find utility in considering institutional fit an aspect of individual educational contexts.

University Transition Theory

Ubiquitous in today's scholarly conversation around transition is Tinto's 1975 theoretical model of dropout, and much of the transition literature coming after this contribution either uses, expands on, and/or critiques his model (Guiffrida, 2005; Guiffrida, 2006; Harper, 2014; Harper & Newman, 2016; Simmons, 2013). Tinto drew on Durkheim's sociological study of the phenomenon of suicide (1951) to create his model of college dropout. Tinto found parallels in the motivations of those who drop out of society via suicide to those who drop out of higher education institutions, and used those parallels to create a model that functions simultaneously as a model of dropout and persistence. His is a theoretical model that suggests a longitudinal process of interactions and experiences between students, their academic environments and the people that occupy them (1975). As students have social and academic interactions, their commitments to their institutions and degree attainment change, leaning them further toward committing to degree attainment or dropping out, depending on how they have been affected. Tinto asserts that the greater the integration into the social and academic systems, the greater the commitment to the institution and goal of graduation, thereby increasing the odds of persistence. Students' transitions to universities can thus be seen through the lens of being a series of interactions that either increase or decrease their commitment to remain at the university. Like much of the body of educational literature, Tinto's ubiquitous model was created to explain the experience of a general college

student, perhaps White male and middle to higher income. Such a one-size fits all approach to scholarship privileges the experience and support of the dominant group, and further marginalizes traditionally underserved populations such as African American males. This lack of attention to demographics and culture has led to critique and iterations of Tinto's model, and can be considered a glaring omission when applied to today's diversified higher education landscape.

Central to acknowledging the merit of Tinto's model of dropout, is the acceptance of students' perceptions of their interactions as legitimate. Students react to their perceptions, pulling closer or further away from degree-attainment. The study of student perceptions of their transitions to universities is a prevalent research approach to building on Tinto's theory. Clark (2005) used student strategies for navigation of the first-year experience to understand how they perceived their transition process, finding both healthy and unhealthy approaches to managing the adjustment process. Interviews with students uncovered strategies for managing the transition across four broad themes: overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to a change, or pursuing a goal. Healthy approaches to managing the transition process and interactions with professors and school work included strategies like becoming a peer mentor to overcome shyness, and unhealthy strategies included tactics like purposely earning an F in a course when on track for a C in order to trigger a campus grade replacement policy. Student strategies for managing their transitions demonstrate levels of commitment to their goals and levels of need for support by their campuses in order to succeed.

University Transition and Demographic Considerations

Social and academic interactions as dimensions of Tinto's model of dropout may be thought of as shaping students' experiences, and Smith and Zhang (2008) build on the understanding of the role of student experience as determiner of student persistence by examining student perspectives on what has been helpful as they transitioned from high school to college. Giving their study additional utility is the comparison of perspectives based on race, gender, grade point average, and time in college. Student participants indicated that parents, friends, college professors, and academic advisors were important factors facilitating their transition from high school to college. Students who had an academic ethic in high school had an easier transition to the university and tended to have an academic ethic in college. Student-perceived helpfulness of parents and friends was related to income and race, as White and not lower-income students were more likely to perceive it as being helpful or very helpful. Compared to White students, Black students were more likely to perceive their high school counselors as being helpful or very helpful (45% vs 22%), and their parents and friends as not helpful. These differences may reflect a socio-economic effect that speaks to counselors as instruments of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Students with more familial resources and college knowledge in their social circles would logically find themselves less dependent on the support of school counselors. Poorer students and those with less college knowledge in their spheres, such as first-generation students, would logically lean more heavily on institutional resources like high school counselors.

Literature revealing different transition experiences for students along racial lines (Smith & Zhang, 2008) reveals justification for push back against Tinto's model of

dropout as a comprehensive explainer of retention and dropout patterns (Guiffrida, 2006). Not only are experiences different along racial and SES lines (Goldrick-Rab, 2007; Harper & Newman, 2016; Smith & Zhang, 2008, 2010, 2011), but the needs are different (Goldrick-Rab, 2007; Simmons, 2013; Smith & Zhang, 2011). For Black students these needs include involvement in ethnicity-based organizations (Goldrick-Rab, 2007) and for same-race professors (Simmons, 2013). Examined through an anti-deficit lens rather than one that attributes struggle to students' nature or culture, this difference in needs and experience may be attributed to institutions that do not have equitable foundations that provide equal opportunity for student success and satisfaction regardless of background. Guiffrida (2006) offered an addendum to Tinto's model, recognizing its lack of consideration of the realities of Black and other minoritized students. This addendum problematizes the assertion of Tinto's theory that persistence rests on students breaking away from their traditions and becoming assimilated. It incorporates findings from other educational literature that suggests that minoritized students benefit from doing just the opposite, utilizing familial and social support for the purposes of persisting. For Guiffrida, a cultural advancement of Tinto's theory would include recognition that minoritized students benefit from the maintenance of their connections to their cultures and communities, swapping assimilation language with connection language.

Campus Climate

Overlapping with the university transition experience and representing the last leg of the conceptual journey from high school to the university being examined in this inquiry is campus climate. As one dives into the array of literature on the subject of

campus climate, it becomes easy to forgo a search for a universal definition of the term and to instead embark directly on a journey of understanding the campus dynamics it implies. Notwithstanding an early contribution by Pace and McFee (1960), this intuitive circumvention may be explained by a dearth of literature seeking to understand campus climate studies in the aggregate (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008). Perhaps the individual nature of campus contexts dissuades understanding of the aggregate of campus climate research, or perhaps it is the result of the long list of special interests related to campus climate including, non-exhaustively: racial climates, climates concerning international students, and political climates. Because of the way it captures definitional elements of the studies that came before it, and because it includes race as a dimension of the topic, I will apply Hurtado's campus climate definition (1992) as the working definition here. Hurtado explained campus climate as an interaction of structural properties with individuals that shapes interpersonal interactions and attitudes. Institutional characteristics that affect this dynamic include campus size, control, selectivity, and racial composition.

Having traced the history of literature on the subject through the reference lists of journal articles, Pace and Stern's work (1958) marks the place I have identified as a suitable origin point for campus climate study, with an eventual concentration here on campus racial climate. Borrowing from the realm of psychology, Pace and Stern centered their inquiry into the world of higher education campus environments around the concepts of "press," meaning environmental stimuli, and "need," meaning in this context the set of characteristics that drive individuals such as goals and motives. Their description of a dynamic of presses influencing needs describes what appears to be the

origin of the conceptualization and study of campus climate. The pressures of college environments affect student needs, development, and the ways that they approach college goals such as degree attainment. Pace and Stern purposed themselves with the development of an instrument that could make an objective determination of college environment based on the psychology concept of press and corresponding need. Upon applying their instrument to two campuses, they found two differing sets of dominant campus presses that worked to differentiate the campus environments from one another. One campus was found to have as dominant presses “orderliness and friendly helpfulness, with overtones of spirited social activity” while the other was found to have “reflectiveness, humanism, scientism, understanding, and objectivity” as its dominant presses. These dominant presses codify the elements of college environments, described as a system of pressures; practices; and policies, while the pursuit of such a codification marks the beginning of a trend of studying environments and eventually climates using quantitative methods. This quantitative approach is problematic in that one does not read the resulting list of dominant campus presses and feel that they have gotten a sense of the way the campuses were experienced by students. It seems that a more intuitive initial foray into the subject might have been done through a series of phenomenological studies that would eventually look to quantitative studies for broader application of findings. Also and perhaps owing to the times, the list of presses identified by Pace and Stern reveals no consideration of the experience of marginalized or traditionally underserved students.

Two years later in 1960, Pace and McFee would begin a review of studies that approached the subject of college environments with a declaration that the topic was both still new and not well defined. The mining of the reviewed studies for themes on the subject of the interaction between people and their environments revealed an inching closer to current climate studies in terms of terminology, but findings revealed a conversation still devoid of the demographic considerations that would eventually fragment the topic such as race and gender. Findings from Pace and McFee's literature review revealed the recurring concepts of role, reference group, interaction system, press, and congruence in campus environment literature. They also revealed dimensions of college environments that included cosmopolitan-local, permissive-conservative; theoretical-practical, status, idealistic-practical; humanistic, practical, social press, people-oriented, extrinsic-reward-oriented, and self-expression. It would be these dimensions of college environments that would shape students' experiences on campuses and, in their proportion, differentiate campuses from one another. When considering today's campuses and in respect to the experiences of African American male students, there is the potential for utility in the creation of a similar yet context-specific typology of dimensions of campus environments. Such a classification system could aid with the analysis of data collected from both qualitative and quantitative studies for the purposes of understanding the student experience and to make such findings generalizable. Tucked chronologically between *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas Brown* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994), the demographic-free findings and generic use of concepts by Pace and McFee perhaps reflect the times of the studies, a

period in higher education that predated the integrated, more diverse campuses of today. With Schoen's 1966 comparative study, a factor analysis of campus characteristics data from two of Hofstra University's campuses, the term campus climate emerges in the literature. The study revealed a gap on each campus between student perception of the campus climate and the climate desired by faculty. Principal to the study's success is the belief that student perceptions are real and legitimate, a premise that would also be pivotal to future student development theory (Tinto, 1975). What remained held over from the earliest studies and would operate as a trend for campus climate studies indefinitely was a quantitative approach to climate research and a commitment to the development of an instrument that could objectively capture the climate of campuses.

Campus Racial Climate

Some sixty-four years after *Florida ex rel. Hawkins v. Board of Control* in 1956, the first case to apply the Brown ruling to higher education (Stefkovich & Leas, 1994), college student body compositions have changed to the point where diversity is measured, regionally and nationally ranked, and considered valuable by many. The national trend toward campus diversity has meant a diversified range of student experiences and a multitude of purposes for studying campus climate. This particular work is concerned with the experience of African American males at public-serving institutions, and it will thus build on the patterns of earlier studies by narrowing toward literature concerned with campus' racial climates. Harper and Hurtado (2007) made an important framing contribution to the otherwise unwieldy body of research on campus racial climate with their review and synthesis of existing literature. Their work uncovered

three categories of racial climate studies: those concerning differential perceptions of campus climate by race, those concerning minoritized reports of prejudice and racist campus environments, and those concerning the benefits of facilitating cross-racial engagement on campuses. Specific insights gleaned from their review and synthesis include Black students reporting lower satisfaction with racial climates than their peers, the existence of patterns of students coping with isolation; alienation; and stereotyping, and value added to campuses by culture centers.

An important theme of campus climate literature as it pertains to African American males is that Black students are experiencing perceived tensions based on race (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hurtado, 1992; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; King & Ford, 2003; Radloff & Evans, 2003), and these experiences have the potential to shape students' decisions and approaches to achieving their goals. Not only are Black students coping with institutional climates in which they are experiencing race-based tensions, but they are doing so in ways that are not similarly perceived by their White counterparts. This is an important distinction for those concerned with improving the experience of Black students, and thereby all students, on campuses where they are the numeric minority. This paradox of experiences suggests institutional vacuums in terms of meaningful, empathy-inspiring cross-racial interactions that are intentionally set in motion. In terms of the nature of students' race-based experiences, D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) spoke of a range of adjustments Black students must make in order to attend predominantly White institutions, including personal, family and social. These

adjustments were seen to create a chasm between students' potential and academic performance. Along with adjustments, students were found to be coping with disparaging remarks, mistreatment, and harassment. What makes difficult campus racial climates particularly intractable is the institutional nature of some the forces that contribute to tensions, with important work still to be done in that regard. A study (Hurtado, 1992) that tracked and examined the experiences of a racially mixed cohort of students over four years highlighted the fact that institutional size and selectivity affected campus racial climate, with smaller and more selective schools being positively associated with negative campus climates. These relationships between size, selectivity, and difficult racial climates suggested prioritization of things such as achievement and prestige at the peril of inclusivity, despite existing evidence that deliberate institutional diversity has positive educational effects (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

Binding campus climate literature together, over the years and across the both general and racial focuses, is a trend of applying quantitative methods to better understand the interactions of place, institution, and people (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). It could be argued that it is counterintuitive to do so much learning from quantitative methods on such social phenomena without gaining a clear understanding of it first through the experiences of individuals. The deference to quantitative approaches and the creation of indexing tools in climate research from the 1950s forward gives insight into the ways that research paradigms are created and conformed to (Hatch, 2006). Regarding racial conversations, there is much about them that is highly nuanced, difficult to articulate, and context specific. The study of such a social phenomenon would be well-

served by qualitative means and focus away from fixation on a quick evaluating instrument for positivist purposes and neat results.

Studies As Points of Departure

Tierney's narrative study (2009) of the experiences of three Latino high school seniors in the college application process serves as a useful example of inquiry that explores the intersections of educational aspirations, race, social class, and cultural capital, as well as inquiry that moves beyond essentialization of demographic populations and toward understanding the unique challenges of individual students. The purpose of the study was to uncover the ways that three students with similar cultural identities interpret the college going process differently, negotiating the intersection of their circumstances and the rational choices associated with selecting and gaining admission to the university. The setting for Tierney's study was a high school in Los Angeles, CA where the researcher and the three participants met as part of a summer college transition program for students from low-income families. In this particular study Tierney was both researcher and college preparation mentor to the students, spending approximately 30 hours with the participants in conversations that ranged from brief, between class chats to two-hour sessions, taking place in-person, by phone, and over email. Two of the students were undocumented Americans, with one arriving in the country as a toddler and the other in the ninth grade, while the third participant had lived in the Los Angeles his whole life. The author used his interactions with the students over the course of a year to create narrative portraits of the students' experiences with aspects of college-going such

as crafting application essays, building college writing skills, applying for scholarships, negotiating family obligations, dealing with poverty, and finding colleges that fit the students' needs and wants. The author uncovered students with things in common such as cultural norms, strong academic performance and college-application processes that were extended compared to students from higher-income families whose lives had been, in effect, preparation for the college going experience. The author pointed to cultural capital differences as a means to understand the differences in experiences between his three participant-students and students from higher income families, noting that for students with the appropriate cultural capital to apply for college it is more of a singular act, as opposed to the series of questions that arise for those with less cultural capital. Tierney also uncovered elements of preparing for college that were unique to the individuals. Two of the students struggled with writing, and thus their application essays, while one was comfortable with writing, producing poetry in Spanish that was focused on love and sprinkled with words in English. One student's family moved to Las Vegas from Los Angeles in search of a more financially manageable existence, leaving the student to stay behind and prepare for high school graduation and college going in relative isolation. Another student struggled with his math as pressure to contribute money to his family mounts. Each of the undocumented students faced a struggle to find scholarship money for college, as they were not eligible for federal aid because of their immigration status.

Tierney's study served as one point of departure for this study in that it provided a model of in-depth, informative narrative study of three low-income, urban, student-participants of color. With this participant number, the author was able to capture both

what was unique to each student, and thus expand notions of how to serve students, but also identify potential patterns within the demographic group of study for policy considerations. Despite strong academic records, each of the students found themselves negotiating familial realities and needing help with things outside of traditional ideas of college guidance such as comfort from trauma, understanding potential college environments that were far from their home towns, and preparing for being on campuses that were largely White and thus different than their largely minority serving high school.

This study built on Tierney's through a narrative inquiry into the experiences of African American male students transitioning from urban districts to a PWI, widening the inquiry from a focus on applying to college to one that encompasses the entire process from college preparation to the first-year university experience. Additionally, this study built on Tierney's by examining the experiences of the school counselors that serve the population, an effort to inform the nature, method, and rationale of support provided. Bringing together student and counselor voices in the same study offered an opportunity for in-study corroboration of perspectives and triangulation of findings.

Particular inspiration for this study came from Shaun Harper's two signature studies (Harper, 2012; Harper & Associates, 2014) on Black male and male of color student success. For his two studies, Harper and his research teams conducted interviews with African American male students that had experienced success in colleges across the country and across college types (2012), and with Black and Latino male students that had experienced success in New York City high schools (2014). With 219 participants in his higher education study (2012), and 415 in his high school study (Harper &

Associates, 2014), the large qualitative studies managed to glean insights that were facilitated by both breadth and depth. Opting for studies that centered on achievement instead of struggle, Harper's studies added complexity to conversations around educating males of color that often lean toward deficit and essentialization of males of color as sites of peril. The studies revealed much, including patterns of students crediting familial expectations for college, positive feelings about urban high school environments, reliance on student loans to pay for college, crediting summer bridge programs for college readiness and preparation for largely White campuses, and recollection of having to overcome school counselor under-matching and low expectations around college choice.

This study built on the studies conducted by Harper (Harper, 2012; Harper & Associates, 2014) by supplying a venue for African American male students to be heard via the construction of participant narrative, while doing the same for school counselors that are positioned to supply support. Bringing these two populations together in a talking circle also gave the opportunity for direct communication, learning from one another, and professional development on the part of the counselors. This study also gives insight into the experiences of students transitioning from Hampton City Schools and Prince George's County Public Schools to George Mason University, which were not represented in the studies.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The returns on a college degree are positive in multiple domains including those relating to individual finances, health, and well-being (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Holland, 2017; Hout, 2012; Ruthra & Flashman, 2017). Holders of bachelor's degrees earn 74% more over their lifetimes than high school graduates (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011), and together with holders of advanced degrees they are responsible for 73% of jobs gained in the recovery from the great recession (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). Additionally, holders of bachelor's degrees have better health, more marriage stability, and greater life satisfaction (Ruthra & Flashman, 2017).

Despite being among those with the most to gain from a college degree (Ruthra & Flashman, 2017), African American males have the least opportunity to obtain one across race and gender lines (Harper & Newman, 2016; Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Simmons, 2013). Additionally, at 78.5%, African American males are the least likely demographic to return to college after the first year (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019), indicating an attainment trend that begins early in the collegiate experience. The conceptual location for this study was thus early in the college-going process for African American males. My focus was on the transition experience from urban high schools to

George Mason University, including increasing understanding as it pertains to college preparation, school counseling, and the first-year experience.

The purpose of this study was in part to attend to the degree attainment needs of this population by better understanding the lives and experiences of African American males from urban high schools that have completed their first-year at George Mason University. Narrative data solicited from this population was also used for the professional development of high school counselors from New York City Public Schools and Prince George's County Public Schools. School counselors can be particularly important resources for African American students (Gilfillan, 2018) because of their ability to act as sources and transmitters of the cultural capital that informs decisions and dispositions around the college-going process (Davies & Rizk, 2018). School counselors hold potential to complement the supportive work of African American families who may find themselves increasingly less-equipped with the cultural capital to make informed decisions as the college preparation process deepens (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Coleman, 2019). Another purpose of this study was to understand the lives and work of school counselors from urban districts in order to inform counselor professional development and educational policy as it pertains to improving African American male student outcomes in college retention, degree-attainment, and academic performance. Deepening understanding around the lives and experiences of the participants in this study speaks to a broader, social justice aim of this study, to contribute to the success of African American males as they seek transformational educational

experiences in the face of a history of American oppression (Coleman, 2019; Span, 2005).

In order to meet the purposes of this research project and in congruence with my positionality (Kuntz, 2015) as an advocate for African American youth in pursuit of transformative education, I used critical narrative inquiry as the methodology (Denzin, 2016; Kim, 2016). The type of narrative inquiry that will be used for this study involves the examination of experience through story-telling between researcher and participants (Clandinin, 2006). This inquiry is critical in nature because of my intentional use of narrative as a tool to allow my participants voices to be heard (Kim, 2016), to allow for the articulation of how history and context shaped their decision and sense-making, and by considering these voiced experiences legitimate sources of educational data (Bruce, 2008). This intentional use of my research as a platform for often unheard voices is one that is aligned with strategies associated with critical race theorists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Leonardo & Harris, 2013) who posit that, through the telling and application of personal narratives, audiences can bridge the gap between their perceptions and the realities of Black lives. In this sense, my broader application of criticality, *borrow*s a dimension of critical race theory. This inquiry is also critical in nature because of my intentional diffusion of scholarly sources (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2012; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Wilson, 2008) and methods (Bishop, 2012; De Santis, 2000; Kovach, 2010; Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016) outside of those that are traditionally centered in the Western academy. Through the intentional inclusion of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and marginalized voices, and the inclusion of methods used in Indigenous

research contexts, I put my research in line with my identity as an African American advocating for self-determination and human and civil rights for the historically oppressed, seeking tangible changes to the institutional policies and practices that affect the educational experiences of African American males.

Methods

I begin this chapter with introductions to qualitative research, narrative inquiry, and visual approaches to qualitative research. I then describe the combination of conversation method, collage as a narrative elicitation tool and sharing circle as the methodological approach that I used to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the personal and professional experiences of school counselors from urban public schools deepen our understanding of the ways that they approach their work with college-bound African American male students?
2. How does the college guidance received during high school help us understand the transition experience of African American male students from urban public schools to George Mason University?
3. In what ways do the narratives of school counselors and students from urban districts indicate alignment between preparation for college in their schools of origin and the African American male first-year experience at George Mason University?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has its roots in the 19th century, coming into being as colonial explorers engaged in anthropology as they encountered Indigenous populations (Denzin, 2016). Ravich and Carl (2016) describe qualitative research as having an umbrella function under which a range of approaches fall, such as ethnography, phenomenology,

participatory action, and narrative inquiry. They go on to offer the perspective that the mode of inquiry is one “that centralizes the complexity and subjectivity of lived experience” (p. 14). Research questions in the domain of qualitative research focus on the why and how aspects of human interactions, with refinement of the questions taking place during the research process as researchers face questions and decisions that emerge during inquiry (Agee, 2009). Qualitative research’s focus on subjectivity challenges positivist perspectives on and approaches to inquiry (Allan, 2012; Hatch, 2006; Knoblauch, 2013; Lather, 2006; Vacchelli, 2018) that spring from Comte’s (1845) attempts to bring “certainty and precision” to sociological science (p. 60). The guiding premise of qualitative research is the constructivist perspective that there are multiple ways of experiencing, making meaning of, and acting on reality (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010).

Critical qualitative methodologies push back against positivist inquiry overtly, challenging the notion that facts derived from research are free from values and the influence of theory (Denzin, 2016). Critical inquiry is preoccupied with scholarship that contributes to social good, interrogating inequality in everyday life and in academic research traditions (Denzin, 2016; Kuntz, 2015). Critical inquiry in education has as exemplar (Gitlin, 2012), the work and philosophy of Paulo Freire (1970). Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is an appeal for the acknowledgement of context, interrogation of driving social forces, and subsequent action on behalf of the oppressed seeking uplift through education.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry falls under the umbrella of qualitative research (Ravich & Carl, 2016). Bruner (1987) posits that it is not logical thought that dominates human cognition, but the construction of narratives or stories. In the act of constructing autobiographical narrative, the narrator and protagonist are one in the same, and what is produced is a series of interpretations rather than a record of experiences (Bruner, 1987). Given this perspective on the way that humans make sense of their experiences, narrative inquiry stands as an intuitive and potentially insightful mode of inquiry.

Narrative inquiry's roots can be traced back to the emergence of sociological practices around personal life records at the Chicago School in 1920's and 1930's, and to anthropological work around the life histories of other cultures during the same time frame (Butler-Kisber, 2010). After decades of marginalization in favor of quantitative approaches, interest in personal narratives, perhaps buoyed by liberation movements of the 1960's and 1970's, gained momentum with their power to give voice to the silenced and to challenge dominant discourses (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Narrative inquirers engage in the collection and telling of stories, writing about lives and human experiences with a commitment to their participants' interpretations of events (Bruce, 2008). Narrative research, like other qualitative methodologies, pushes back on the idea of the objectivity of knowledge (Kim, 2008) and allows for deeper understanding of the lived experiences of its objects. Pinnegar and Daynes (2012) begin their work on situating narrative inquiry historically by presenting research modes and researcher descriptives that distinguish the methodology. They offer the position that although opinions may differ on what

constitutes stories, narrative inquirers take stories to be a primary channel of the human experience. Consequently, and through an array of means, such as field notes, photographs, and conversation transcriptions (Clandinin, 2006), narrative inquirers study stories as a means of gaining insight into the experiences of people. Simply put, “Narrative researchers use narrative in some way in their research” (p. 4). and in narrative inquiry, narrative is both the phenomenon of study and the means to a deeper understanding.

Narrative research has been described by Josselson (Kim, 2008) as “up close and personal in that it involves in-depth study of particular individuals in social context and in time, and it requires a highly sensitized and self-reflective inquirer rather than a set of objective, impersonal skills” (p. 253). Given its privileging of participant voice and legitimization of participant stories (Bruce, 2008), narrative inquiry holds potential as a tool to conduct critical research that demarginalizes (Bruce, 2008), protects against the essentialization of demographic groups (Tierney, 2009), and opens new discourses as a result of countering existing dominant narratives (Adame & Knudson, 2007). Narrative holds utility for critical race theorists in its ability to offer access to the lives and experiences of Black and Brown peoples (Leonardo & Harris, 2013), while also challenging harmful myths and mischaracterizations through counter-storytelling. Such was the case in Tierney’s (2009) narrative inquiry into the college application process for three Latino youth with similar backgrounds rising from a public high school in Los Angeles. Though each of the participants performed well in high school, were potential first-generation college students from low-income families, and had a shared ethnicity,

their individual experiences with applying and preparing for college were unique enough to warrant an expansion of the ways that institutional student support are considered. By rejecting essentialized beliefs about his population of interest, Tierney uncovered places where supporters of students may increase their awareness, including topics such as elongated college application time lines for students without familial experience with college-going, attending to students' physical health, and preparing students for attending college out-of-state in environments that have vastly different racial compositions than those of their high schools and neighborhoods. It was my aim to use narrative inquiry in a similar fashion, to push back against essentialized notions of African American males beginning their college experience in favor of expanding awareness around their wants and needs, and to give a complex, human face to the guidance counselors that are positioned to give them support.

Data Collection:

Conversational Method, Collage as a Narrative Elicitation, and Sharing Circle

In order to answer my research questions for this project, I used a combination of data collection methods: conversation method, collage as a narrative elicitation tool, and a sharing circle. Taking Marquez-Zenkov's (2007) cue in terms of making methodological choices that consider the ways that my participants may intuitively articulate their experiences, and privileging participant voice over methodological tradition, I used digital collage for data elicitation in this project. Collage finds its root as a term in the French word for glued, "collé", and Picasso and Braque popularized the art form in the 20th century as a cubism technique (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Butler-Kisber and

Poldma (2010) defined collage as, “the process of using fragments of found images or materials and gluing them to a flat surface to portray phenomena” (p. 102).

Acknowledging their ability to help overcome challenges participants may have articulating their experiences and perspectives verbally, collage methods are suitable for populations across life stages (Margolin, 2014). Collage as an arts-based method has been used to elicit data on nuanced, difficult to articulate, and sensitive research topics such as migrant mental health needs (Vacchelli, 2018), patient summation of a combination yoga/visualization therapy experience (Margolin, 2014), and to understand the care needs of orphaned children affected by HIV and AIDS in rural South Africa (Khanare & de Lange, 2017). I chose collage as a tool for this study as a method of stimulating participants’ autobiographical memories and mitigating issues they may have with telling their stories. I acknowledged the possibility that my student-participants, who were at least one year removed from their experiences with high school counseling and many months removed from their first college experiences, might experience some struggles with recall and determining what to foreground in their personal narratives. I also acknowledged the possibility that my counselor-participants would experience issues with recall and foregrounding as it pertained to their professional arcs and life stories. Van Schalkwyk (2010) spoke to collage’s utility in this regard in her research methods article on the use of collage in narrative inquiry, offering that, “there is a need for assisting and encouraging autobiographical remembering” (p. 676). Van Schalkwyk detailed her experience with combining collage with written and conversational methods of eliciting data in her pilot study on autobiographical memory with psychology students

in Macau, finding that the collage portion of this method produced shows of participants' values, ideological development, multiple self-voices, unresolved conflict, and insights into the participants' interpersonal relationships.

I modified the collage process for this project in that I solicited digital images from participants. I asked participants to capture and collect images that represented their personal, work context, and professional practice stories that they positioned onto virtual poster backgrounds in PowerPoint, as opposed to traditional collage construction that involves gluing printed photographs to a flat surface such as cardboard or poster stock (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). The choice of a digital collage technique was an attempt to benefit from the reality that social media platforms in which users communicate with other users through a combination of digital photography and text, often along a wide-array of relationship types, are now ubiquitous in the United States (Pew, 2018). Additionally, the photo elicitation component of co-created collage stimulated conversation (Allen, 2012), thus facilitating the verbal articulation of experiences that will lead to transcribed sources of study data. Digital collage thus took advantage of a calculated shared literacy between the two participants groups and me.

Goldston and Nichols (2009) used photonarrative in their investigation into the practice of culturally relevant science pedagogy among Black middle school teachers. Rather than using photos as records of the teachers' experiences, photos were solicited from the teachers to make their ideas visible and as a means to initiate storytelling around identity, context, and relationships. Photography was used in their study as methodology, and digital collages served a similar purpose in this study. The digital collages in this

study similarly served as initiators of storytelling around identity, context, and relationships, the means by which my research questions were further answered.

Conversational Method and Sharing Circle

Conversational method, an approach to gaining knowledge through story (Kovach, 2010), aligns with cultural traditions and is situated within an Indigenous research paradigm. Its use as a method to carry out research has an epistemological demarginalization function, privileging unheard voices and legitimating non-dominant approaches to inquiry. Researchers use interviews in qualitative research as a standard practice (Ravich, & Carl, 2016), reflecting “the naturalistic and interpretive values of qualitative research” (p. 187). Weiss (1994) offers that interviews allow researchers to develop rich descriptions of experiences, consider varying perspectives, describe process and experience, describe holistically, understand participant interpretations of events and experiences, and connect researcher and participant (Ravich & Carl, 2016). In terms of convention and values, interviews can thus provide utility in qualitative research, however, conversation method goes beyond interviewing in its alignment with other methodological decisions made for this study in its proximity to the story-telling nature of narrative inquiry (Kovach, 2010), its alignment with my student-participants’ cultural dialect literacy (Marquez-Zenkov, 2007), and its decentering of dominant methodologies (Kovach, 2010). Through conversation method, researchers elicit stories from participants for the purposes of gathering knowledge and helping others, and though associated with the oral traditions of knowledge-sharing among Indigenous populations (Bishop, 2012; Kovach, 2010), it aligns with oral knowledge-sharing traditions of African

Americans as well (Emdin, 2016). Oral knowledge-sharing across and between age groups is a feature of ubiquitous African American institutions such as the church, the barbershop, and the musical genre of hip-hop (Emdin, 2016), and was an intuitive method of data elicitation for my student-participants, who are all undergraduate, African American college students.

Like interviewing, holding focus groups is a common practice in qualitative research (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups are topical group discussions that consist of data collection, a goal, and a prominent facilitator role (Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016). Though beneficial in their ability to capture data from groups in a time efficient manner, the prominence of the facilitator and potential silencing of individual participants (Robinson, 2012; Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016) were conceptually and practically incongruent with the narrative and de-marginalization dimensions of this study.

In order to take advantage of the type of participant to participant interaction that focus groups offer (Robinson, 2012) while guarding against facilitator prominence and participant silencing, I used a sharing circle (Berthelette, Raftis & Henderson, 2001; Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016; De Santis, 2000) as an additional data elicitation method. The sharing circle brought together the perspectives from both participant populations in order to elicit narratives that were not revealed in individual conversations, allowed for a synthesis of narratives that led to new insights (Wilson, 2008), and provided a forum for professional development for the school counselors and educational development for the students. Like conversation method, sharing circles as a research

method have their roots in Indigenous cultural tradition (Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016; De Santis, 2000). Sharing circles are themed discussion groups in which all participants are heard and respected, and silencing is protected against by the use of an object that is passed around, signaling that it is the holder's turn to share (De Santis, 2000). The sharing circle allowed interaction between both participant groups, the students and the counselors, so that they could learn from each other's perspectives, build on the self-awareness that came from the construction of their personal narratives in the individual conversations with me, and develop more strategic approaches to their work as scholars and professionals.

Given potential questions about cultural appropriation as it pertains to my adaptation of Indigenous research methods as an African American, I will take a moment to make my perspective clear. As an African American man without immigrant lineage, my familial genealogy connects me to the enslaved Africans that were forced into labor as a dimension of the colonialism that is the origin story of the United States, other countries in the Americas, and the homelands from which those very Africans originated. Maori researcher and author Smith (2012) put it this way while offering her perspective on imperialism, history, writing and theory:

Millions of indigenous peoples were ripped from their lands over several generations and shipped into slavery. The lands they went to as slaves were lands already taken from another group of indigenous peoples... To put it simply, indigenous peoples as commodities were transported to and fro across the empire (p. 27).

In identifying myself as a descendent of the people Smith describes as commodities shipped from one colonial post to the next, and having access only to the literature I have been exposed to, I have found myself at an epistemological crossroads; align myself with the mainstream methodologies and epistemologies that are ubiquitous in Western academia or align myself with the work of those who share a similar purpose “to improve the lives of the marginalized and colonized, and through that work to make a positive mark on humanity” (Graham, 2020, p. 124). My work is informed by my worldview, and in taking on relational accountability (Wilson, 2004; 2008) as an epistemological commitment and adapting Indigenous research methods in this inquiry, I have strived for continuity that connects my worldview, purpose, methodology, and methods (Kuntz, 2015).

Participants, Setting, and Procedure

Recruitment, Participants, Setting, and Procedure

Through a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling (Ravich & Carl, 2016), I recruited six participants, three school counselors and three students. The process of recruitment was challenging and made it clear to me the power of relationships and flexibility in qualitative research that involves partnering with participants. My initial research design involved a focus on school counselors from District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and alumni from that school system that are current students at George Mason University. The strategy was to inform urban education in general while providing special insight to DCPS, a focus inspired by the school system’s standing as the educational agency serving the nation’s capital and its proximity to George Mason

University. One population was to consist of African American male students from DCPS in their second year at George Mason University. These students were to be able to recall college preparation guidance from school counselors in the high schools they graduated from. The second population was to consist of high school counselors from DCPS, the same school district from which the student-participants graduated. These participants were to have as a part of their professional duties, the role of primary college guidance providers in their schools.

My first wave of recruitment activities involved soliciting leads from three students that I have come to know through their participation in my student support organization. They are current George Mason University students and alumni of DCPS and Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS). Though Black, none of the three fit the criteria for participation in my study; two were recent immigrants and thus not African American as defined here, and one was from a school district other than DCPS. Additionally, I was worried that our prior relationship and power dynamic might negatively affect the study should they be otherwise fit for participation. I asked each of them for counselor and student leads, and despite preliminary agreement by one of their school counselors from high school, this route did not lead to successful recruitment. I also "cold" emailed recruitment messages to counselors from DCPS high schools that had African American male alumni at Mason to avail. My second wave of recruitment approaches involved reaching out to my professional and social circles for connections and leads, including my wife's co-workers that have partnerships with DCPS high schools, administrators and

faculty from the counseling education department at my school/job, and my co-workers and doctoral classmates.

After three months of reaching out and following-up without success, I concluded that pursuing participants from DCPS only was too narrow. With support from my methodologist, I expanded my criteria from students and scholars from DCPS only, to those from urban school districts. This study adjustment would be in keeping with my intent to inform urban education while still leaving open the possibility of recruiting participants that might help inform DCPS. To recruit student participants under the expanded vision, I set up a table with fliers outside of a campus event sponsored by George Mason's Black Student Alliance after receiving permission from the event's organizers. From this event I managed to find my first student participant and engaged in conversation with other interested students who did not match the criteria for participation because they were not alumni of urban school districts. This experience was moving for me in that several young men were interested in participating in the study as a form of giving back to the Black community and simply to help me out, a brotha in need. I was also moved rather negatively by the act of recruiting on the spot using my eyes and ears, the odd and counterintuitive act of looking at students of African descent and trying to determine if they fit my participant criteria. I found myself looking at passing students and asking myself, is he African American? Is he urban? Does he have the ability to commit to a project of such consequence for me? It was both excruciating in the moment and in retrospect. This is not a strategy that I will employ in future projects.

With my recruitment process at the four-month mark, one of the students from my organization reached out to volunteer to participate, somewhat frustrated at himself for not being able to help me find other participants. I accepted his offer and decided that I would make our relationship plain in the writing up of the research to mitigate against any angst I had. Being forthcoming with our prior relationship protects the audience from any confusion about the study, stands in congruence with Kuntz's (2016) call for inquiry and inquirers that are "relationally bound to the phenomenon of interest" and acts on the understanding that narrative inquiry is a methodology in which researcher and participant are engaged a dynamic, collaborative relationship that evolves as narratives are exchanged and co-created (Kim, 2016). This decision would be one of my better ones in the carrying-out of this inquiry, in that I came to find that I had known this student in a rather limited sense and that through our exchange of story and commitment to one another, our relationship indeed evolved upward. My third student participant came as a snowballed recruit of my first participant, his fraternity brother. My counselor participants came from my network and were possible because of my expanded location criterion. My friend, a mentor in my organization and educator, reached out to a counselor for Prince George's County Public Schools and used his friendship capital to connect us. She in turn pulled in a former colleague from the same district upon my request during our first meeting. My final participant, a college counselor from New York City Public Schools, expressed her interest in participating in this study after my dissertation chair reached out to her network on my behalf. Though recruitment was a long and multi-layered experience, it led me to proceed from a place of gratitude,

knowing that my participants and multiple unfruitful efforts are the result of the generosity of spirit of people in my life.

Setting

For my conversations with counselor-participants, I suggested meeting in Howard University's Founders Library, but was open to other destinations of their choosing that were suitable for extended, personal conversations that could be recorded. Howard University is my alma mater, and is a sacred space for African Americans, making it a suitable setting for conducting research that is intended to improve the lives of African American students and those that support them (Drawson, Toombs, Mushquash, 2017; Kovach, 2010). Additionally, my choice of setting was intended to provide sufficient distance between the school counselors and their workplaces for them to speak candidly and with perspective. In the end, I chose the setting for each of my conversations with the participants based on pragmatic considerations (Ravich & Carl, 2016). I met with my first counselor-participant in study rooms in the library of George Mason University's Arlington campus. Given her schedule, the location of her home, her desire to experience the campus, and my familiarity with the campus facilities, this option made the most sense. My conversations with the two remaining counselor participants were held via FaceTime, a video chat application. One participant was based in New York City, so distance from my home in the Washington DC area made video chatting the most reasonable choice. The third participant's schedule made it impossible for us to hold the three conversations in-person, despite our being located in the same region.

For my conversations with the student-participants, I intended to use the Paul Robeson Room at George Mason University. The Paul Robeson Room is a resource room operated by the university's African and African American Studies program, and it is intended to help students learn more about the African diaspora (African and African American Studies, 2018). The space is thus a suitable setting for conducting research that is intended to improve the lives of African American students and those that support them (Drawson, Toombs, Mushquash, 2017; Kovach, 2010). As with the counselor-participants, I was open to other feasible locations that were more convenient or comfortable for them. Again, pragmatism determined our eventual meeting places. I was unable to schedule the nine total conversations upfront given the students' complicated schedules and the dynamic nature of the fall semester, so we met in various study rooms in George Mason University's libraries and computer labs over the course of the Fall 2019 semester as their schedules permitted. The final data collection event, the sharing circle, was held in a classroom in the Global Center of George Mason University for practical purposes. This is the building where my office is located, and my familiarity with the building and work for the academic unit housed there assured that I would be able to reserve the space on the short notice that was available to me.

Participants

All of the participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms in order to respect and protect their privacy. Eve was an African American woman in her mid-forties who served as a public high school counselor in Prince George's County, Maryland. Prince George's County borders the nation's capital and is a part of the same

metropolitan Washington D.C. area as George Mason University. Eve also happened to be a friend of several friends of mine, a surprise revealed in a preliminary phone call I made to her. This relational fact created a dynamic in which we were very patient, respectful, and at ease with one another. Rakim was an African American man in his mid-forties who also served as a public high school counselor in Prince George's County, Maryland. We had much in common in terms of identity and worldview, giving our interactions the feel of those between old friends chatting towards a solution to a vexing human issue. Crystal is a self-identified White American in her mid-thirties who leads the college and career counseling at a public high school in New York City. She had an acknowledged, measured communication style that can momentarily belie her warm passion for social justice, educational equity, and those in need of advocacy. Vertner was an African American male student from Hampton, Virginia and a senior at George Mason University. He was an easy-going, adventuresome brotha with a bright spirit and clear sense of morality. David was an African American male student from Prince George's County, Maryland and a senior at George Mason University. He was a former participant in the scholarship and advocacy program that my non-profit organization provides, and I worked very closely with him over the course of his freshman year. Despite fearing that our prior relationship would somehow weaken the outcomes of this study, it became clear within the first few minutes of our first conversation that I had only known a small part of him. Ejike was also from Prince George's County, Maryland and was a senior at George Mason University. He identified as a Nigerian American while being entirely fluent and

practiced in African American culture. He was a confident, driven brotha that had made leadership his vehicle for meeting his academic and life goals.

Procedure

I had three 60-minute conversations with five of the participants over the course of six weeks and two with Ejike, whose busy schedule made a third conversation impossible. During my first conversations with the counselor-participants, I described the research plan, talked about the choice to use narrative inquiry to collect data, and connected with them on a personal level. I then told my personal, professional, and work context stories, thus opening the door to a research process that functioned as an empathetic dialogue between the counselor-participants and me (Bruce, 2008). I asked participants to capture and collect images that represented their personal, work context, and professional practice stories for sharing in the next meeting. In a piece positing narrative inquiry as a spiritual and liberating methodology, Bruce (2008) made his case in part by highlighting its relational and participatory possibilities. Bruce held as examples of these possibilities the opportunity for collaboration, power-sharing, trust, and mutual respect. These relational possibilities spoke to my data collection process as a whole and the final segment of my first conversations, at which point I asked the school counselors to think about how I could be of service to them.

During the second conversation with counselor-participants, I elicited stories about the school counselors' personal experiences, work context experiences, and professional practice experiences. During this conversation, I focused on their work contexts and approaches to professional practice. I told the participants that we would

co-create digital collages that represented their experiences and the ways that the experiences interact with one another. This mode of co-creation is congruent with the reciprocal and relational nature of conversation method (Dennis, 2014), it allowed me to more deeply understand the participants' experiences, and was in keeping with narrative inquiry as a "co-construction of experiences" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). During the third and final conversation with counselor-participants, none had gathered the pictures necessary to co-create collages, but each of them let me know that they would have them complete for the sharing circle that was to come. Despite that departure from the stated plan, we engaged in conversation that brought together their personal, educational, and professional lives, and used the opportunity to dive more deeply into their experiences with counseling for college in their individual contexts.

My conversations with my student-participants were similar structurally to those with my counselor-participants. I had three conversations with Vertner and David and two with Ejike to understand their experiences as people, first-year students, and recipients of college preparation from school counselors. I used the first meetings to connect with and learn about them personally. In order to foster trust and mutual respect (Bruce, 2008), I opened the first of my three meetings with each participant by describing my research purposes and telling as much of my personal, professional, and academic stories as the situation dictated reasonable. Maxwell (2012) talks about the importance of this type of situational flexibility in a book chapter dedicated to the realities of research design, positing that it is important to both carefully design research and pay attention to shifting research contexts. I entered the conversations aware that the student-participants

could become dispirited by stories that they deemed too long in their telling, but the dynamics developed in such a way that it felt like we could have gone on much longer and still have important and intriguing ideas and narratives to exchange. I described the digital collages as products for us to bring to the sharing circle and asked the students to capture or collect pictures that would tell the stories of their experiences as people, first-year students, and recipients of college preparation from school counselors. I closed the first meetings by asking the student-participants to think about how I could help them as students and people.

During my second conversations with the student-participants, I asked them to tell their multi-dimensional stories, using the image choices they had made as points of departure. Only Vertner was prepared with pictures for our conversation, but all three conversations were quite rich, and there was no sense that anything was missing. During these second conversations, I began to shift the theme toward their student experiences, and I reminded the student-participants that we would construct digital collages using their pictures that represent their stories, and that our next meeting would consist of this collaboration. I closed the second meetings by revisiting my commitment to help them however needed. During the third and final conversation with Vertner, I took a secondary role in the creation of his collage, explaining how to use PowerPoint to create collages and listening to how and why he positioned his images to tell his story. The act of co-creating the collage with Vertner had an inherent member-checking function to it, increasing the validity of the participant narratives that I told during the analysis of data collected by providing an opportunity to receive feedback. David had completed his

collage prior to our meeting, so we simply explored his work and exchanged our narratives. At the close of our third conversations, I told the student-participants to feel free to evolve their collages in anticipation of a sharing circle with the other participants.

Upon completion of the individual conversations with participants, I brought them together for a 2-hour sharing circle that concluded with an analysis and reflection by the participants. After several rounds of trying to get all six participants together, only four of the six, David, Vertner, Rakim, and Crystal were able to participate in the sharing circle. Crystal participated via video from New York. For this sharing circle, I borrowed methods employed by Tachine, Yellow Bird, and Cabrera (2016) in their study of the experience of Native American students transitioning to college, and as described by Mehl-Madrona and Mainguy (2014), who had used them to study primary care in an Aboriginal American context. Once the participants arrived and we settled in, I acknowledged the Piscataway Conoy Peoples, original stewards of the land where George Mason University sits in Fairfax, VA (ODIME, 2019). I reintroduced myself and asked each of the participants to do the same in whatever manner felt comfortable (Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016). After the introductions, I told the participants about sharing circles and gave some background on the method's cultural origins and utility. We sat in a half circle of classroom desks that opened toward a projector screen on which we could view the collages. I went first as each person took approximately 15 minutes to share their narratives and collages. The person who held the object symbolizing that they had the floor, a maraca my non-profit uses for turn-taking in

meetings, took their turn while the others listened without interruption (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014) until all had spoken.

The sharing circle concluded with an analysis of and reflection on what was seen and heard. Participants in Yuen's (2016) arts-based study on the experiences of healing among Aboriginal Canadian women, created body maps to represent their experiences. The participants then went through a process of collective witnessing of one-another's body maps that culminated in the completion of a form that captured their analyses of what they had witnessed. Examples of the simple analysis include, "When I see Roberta's body map and I hear her story, I see a person living with transformation and hope" (p. 340), and "When I see Sophia's body map and I hear her story, I see a person living with sadness and growing to hope" (p. 340). I employed a similar method with my participants, asking them to analyze the collages and stories of fellow participants using the sentence starters, "After witnessing the other participants' stories and seeing their collages, I hear these things:", and "After participating in this research project and the sharing circle, I am inspired to add these approaches to my work:."

Data Analysis and Validity

For this study, I conducted a data analysis that was inspired by the form and logic of Wilson's holistic approach to data analysis (Adams, Wilson, Heavy Head, & Gordon, 2015; Wilson, 2008). By choosing Wilson's method as a model from which to draw, I remained true to my use of Indigenous methods as an epistemological commitment and analyzed in a way that is aligned with the conversational data that I collected. Additionally, Wilson's method involves keeping his participant's narratives intact during

analysis, an approach that speaks to the critical framework that underlies this inquiry. It was my intention to make this research a place where marginalized Black voices and those of their supporters were heard and legitimated in their entirety.

To analyze data collected for his dissertation (2004), and later his book (2008) born out of his dissertation research on Indigenous knowledge, Wilson employed a strategy that was meant to be in congruence with the cultural identities and practices of the researcher, a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation of Canada, and the participants, Indigenous scholars located in Australia and Canada. It is the position of Wilson and his participants, that data analysis should complement data collection and be a synthesizing process by which researchers, “build relationships with the idea in various and multiple ways, until you reach a new understanding or higher state of awareness regarding whatever it is that you are studying” (Wilson, 2008, pp. 116-117). In further building his case for his holistic analysis approach, Wilson cites Taos Pueblo and Warm Springs scholar Terry Tafoya (Wilson, 2008), who takes the position that ideas must be kept in their relational contexts in order to maintain their shape, specifically, “the closer you get to defining, or explaining an idea, the more it loses its context” (p. 99). Patel speaks to the peril of inquiry that privileges pieces and parts over the whole in her book on the subject of decolonizing educational research (2016), connecting the practice of parsing to educational research’s colonial genealogy. Patel offers that the practice of converting complex, whole things into smaller parts allows for dominion over them. She expands by stating that,

Dating back to the 16th century expansion of church power and conquest, expressions of the “truth” of human existence relied upon delineating who was human and who was not; in other words, partitioning diverse and complex life forms into non-permeable categories. (Patel, 2016, p. 19)

Wilson eschewed analysis methods that focus on linearity and the breaking down of data to the point that relationships that inform knowledge around the phenomena are disbanded, in favor of a holistic, dialogic analysis. To analyze data for his doctoral (2004) and book projects (2008), narrative data generated primarily through a sharing circle and conversations with scholar-participants, Wilson converted data-eliciting conversations with his participants into a single, synthesizing dialogue. Wilson describes his analysis this way:

The conversation did not take place as it is written but was actually several different conversations that happened at different times. It is more of a composite conversation in that sense. It does hold true to the content of what each person said, but I have altered some of their words in order to get them to flow together. I use my words, as I would have said them in conversation, to form links between speakers and to help guide the conversation. For the academics who read this, my words may be seen as an analysis of the content (or decoding the text if you will). (Wilson, 2008, p. 98)

To analyze the data I collected, I also created a dialogue, one that conveyed the experiences and perspectives of participants elicited through conversations, a sharing circle, participants’ reflections on the sharing circle, and memos taken throughout the

research process. This approach to analysis allowed me to capture the meaning of my participants' narratives while maintaining evident and newly uncovered relationships between the students' and counselors' experiences through synthesis. This plan assured that my participants were heard, that their perspectives were legitimated, that ownership of participant narratives remained theirs and that ideas collaborated into existence were attributed to all that contributed to the research process (Patel, 2016, Wilson, 2008). As seen in Table 1, synthesis took place in stages; individual dialogues created after conversations with participants informed the larger, final dialogue that incorporated all of the participants' voices.

Table 1

Data Analysis Procedure

Collection and Analysis Actions	Additional Information	Outcomes
1. Individual Conversations	Three with each participant	Shared experiential narratives with the use of collage as elicitation tool Noted researcher reactions and articulates what is not transcribed such as feelings, intuition, body language, and intangibles
2. Memoing	Throughout the research process	
3. Transcribed Conversations	After each conversation	
4. Wrote Dialogues of Individual Conversations	After each turn of conversation, memoing, and transcription	Holistic Analysis of Data

5. Sent Dialogues to Participants	Adjusted dialogues until deemed authentic by participants	Member checked and assured authenticity
6. Conducted Sharing Circle	After conversations have concluded	Elicited experiential data from different angles including reflections and allows participants to learn and build from one another
7. Memoing		Noted researcher reactions and articulates what is not transcribed such as: feelings, intuition, body language, and intangibles
8. Transcribed Sharing Circle		
9. Wrote Dialogue Derived from All Data		Conveyed participants' experiences while uncovering existing relationships between participants' experiences.

Note: The steps of the data analysis are numbered to indicate sequence and include data collection methods for context

Authenticity

My approach to validity here, the pursuit of authenticity, was a coming together of the criticality, Indigenous approach, and methodological congruence that were centered throughout this project. Questions that measure authenticity speak to these converging elements. Do my participants feel that I have heard what they tried to tell me? Have I presented my participants narratives as legitimate sources of knowledge from which to learn? All of these questions expressed a concern for the participants, a sense of

responsibility to them and a concern that my word has been kept throughout the research process. Patel (2016) calls attention to what amounts to a trend of “bait and switch” that pervades educational research, a dynamic in which participants are convinced to participate in research projects under the promise that no harm will be done them. Participants then become subject to research processes that block them from researchers’ analysis of data and thoughts about interactions, forcing participants to wait and view processes, interpretations, and results in completed form. This approach speaks to traditional dominant aims of inquiry as a process that leads to new knowledge over which the researcher has ownership. This using of participants for personal gain was antithetical to my research aims to improve the lives of my participants and thus the worlds they inhabited. It was also antithetical to the relational obligations of the Indigenous research perspectives that I included in this study as a means to protect participants and privilege the voices of those who have not been sufficiently heard in academia and the world at large. I have thus pursued authenticity throughout my research process as a means of staying true to my participants’ experiences (Ravich & Carl, 2016) and in such a way that treated them as co-owners of this project.

Wilson (2008) describes authenticity within an Indigenous paradigm as such, “By that I mean that the research must accurately reflect and build upon the relationships between the ideas and the participants” (p. 101). This perspective was a match for my aims of protecting participants and completing a project that would be owned by all those involved. After completing analysis of conversations with participants, I sent this message to them:

Happy Saturday Brotha, I hope you are doing well and feeling good about this semester. I am grateful for your contribution to my study and this field of research. Attached is the dialogue from our individual conversations. Please check it for authenticity, and let me know if you feel comfortable or need me to make some adjustments. I essentially cleaned up our conversations, made some things private, and added some summary statements (in italics). As you can see, I gave you a pseudonym to maintain your privacy (I hope you find it suitable!). Thank you!

Rob

Chapter Four: Analysis, Findings, & Discussion

This study was conducted to deepen our understanding of the lives and first-year collegiate experiences of African American male students from urban high schools at George Mason University in order to inform the practices of school counseling and education policy making on the secondary and postsecondary levels. This study also sought to deepen our understanding of the life and work experiences of urban high school counselors who provide this population with college preparation guidance in order to help them and related policy makers make appropriate and strategic decisions regarding approaches to work and professional development. The following research questions were crafted to meet the study's purposes:

1. How do the personal and professional experiences of school counselors from urban public schools deepen our understanding of the ways that they approach their work with college-bound African American male students?
2. How does the college guidance received during high school help us understand the transition experience of African American male students from urban public schools to George Mason University?
3. In what ways do the narratives of school counselors and students from urban districts indicate alignment between preparation for college in their schools of

origin and the African American male first-year experience at George Mason University

To answer the above research questions I engaged in individual conversations (Kovach, 2010) with six participants, three high school counselors working in urban school contexts and three current African American, male undergraduate students at George Mason University who graduated from high schools in urban contexts. I transcribed the recordings of my conversations with the participants using Otter AI, an online recording and transcription application, and converted them into six participant dialogues (see Appendices B-G) that captured the meaning of our conversations while eliminating redundancies and moments when conversations became side-tracked through a combination of narrative smoothing for readability (Kim, 2016), focus on participant perspective on narrative topics, summarization, and synthesis targeting research questions. To elicit narrative data for our conversations, trigger memory, and help with connection making, I asked participants to create digital collages that visually articulated their personal narratives and their educational or professional narratives (Margolin, 2014). I also engaged in a sharing circle (Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016; De Santis, 2000) with the participants, collected reflections on the sharing circle process (Yuen, 2016), and wrote memos throughout the research process to capture thoughts, feelings, and observations (Ravich & Carl, 2016).

I used the data collected with the participants through all the methods to construct a cumulative, synthesizing dialogue that placed the participants and their data in conversation with one another to address my three research questions (Wilson, 2008).

This dialogue functions as the presentation of findings for this study as well as the analysis and discussion. This approach to data analysis was used by Wilson in his explorative study (2004, 2008) aimed at informing an Indigenous research paradigm. It was Wilson's position and the position of the other Indigenous scholars who contributed to his study that relational accountability, the Indigenous worldview that privileges relationships between people, ideas, and places in epistemology means that contributed data be left intact in order to complement the collection methods, preserve meaning, and to find new insights in the process of synthesis. The utility of this approach to knowledge-building has as exemplar the documentary film, 13th (Lantigua-Williams, 2016). The film's power is not just in the presentation of ways that the American criminal justice system oppresses Black and Brown folk, but in the making connections between the oppressive forces that are often spoken of isolation. Disconnected from the each other the individual forces lose some of their power and their geneology, but together they comprise an American system with clear, racist and oppressive agendas. The film's creator, Ava DuVernay (Lantigua-Williams, 2016) put it this way:

Also, I think there's something to seeing it all together in one place. You can see the color red by itself, right? But when you put it next to other colors, it creates a different picture. I think we can talk about plea bargains by themselves. We can talk about the black codes and Reconstruction by itself. We can talk about Jim Crow by itself. But when you line them up and put them all side by side, that's what the film does, and you think, "Lord, have mercy. Look at this picture. Look where we are."

I created a dialogue that brings together narrative data from all participants, and my participation in the dialogue functions as conversation facilitator, synthesizer, and analysis of what the participants contributed.

Synthesis Dialogue

1 **Rob Graham**

2 By now you all know me, but I'd like to introduce myself to set the stage for your
3 introductions and to help anybody who reads this understand who I am. My name is Rob
4 Graham, and I am a PhD candidate studying education policy at George Mason
5 University in Fairfax, Virginia. I was born and raised in Pasadena, CA. I'm the son of
6 Robert and Janet, brother of Eva and Nedra, uncle of Roy, and most recently and
7 gratefully the husband of Maryvonne. My research centers on the college-going process
8 for African American male students from urban districts, including understanding the
9 people and places that support their preparation. In addition to being a doctoral candidate,
10 I teach American Cultures and freshmen transition at George Mason, and I also lead an
11 organization that supports DC brothas during their first year of college. I'll ask you all to
12 introduce yourselves on a basic level.

13 **Vertner**

14 Cool. I'm Vertner, and I'm a senior here at George Mason University. I major in
15 criminology and minor in forensic psychology. Currently, I intern at the United States
16 Marshal Service, and I'm graduating in the spring of 2020. So yeah, I was originally born
17 in Denver. My family's like a military family; my dad retired from the army like a year
18 after I was born. I have two older sisters, one is like eight years older than me and one's
19 11 years older than me. I was born in Denver, Colorado, we moved to Augusta, Georgia
20 for a few months, and then we went to Hampton, Virginia where we've been for 20 years.

21 I'm 21 now. I have, two parents at home, luckily. I was raised in the church. I like to be
22 active and social, but I'm also quiet, and I have days where I gotta be by myself. I need
23 those days or hours where I just restore.

24 **David**

25 Hello, David. I'm an economics major at George Mason University, and I'm a junior
26 based on my credits. I plan to graduate still in the Spring. I'm gonna try to work
27 something out. I grew up in Oxon Hill, MD a little bit near DC, like the Southeast part of
28 DC. That's where I grew up until I was about 11 or 12 years old. That's when I moved to
29 Largo, MD. I have my mother, an older brother and a younger brother. My father passed
30 when I was 12. My older brother is attending the University of Maryland. He's on his
31 way to graduate, and my younger brother is in community college right now, but he's
32 planning on transferring after this sophomore year. I was raised in the church too. I'm
33 introverted but also social.

34 **Eve**

35 Eve. I've been a professional high school counselor in Prince George's County, MD for
36 six years. I work at a traditional high school, and I'm a part time counselor at an
37 alternative school, evening high school. I was born and raised in Queens in New York
38 City. My dad was a chef, and my mom was a dietitian. I have two brothers and a sister.
39 I'm the youngest. I had the best childhood, poor but didn't know it, and I was a tomboy
40 100%. I'm sort of a loner, but I think it's more accurate to say I'm very independent. I'm
41 an independent thinker. I don't need a group of people. I'm totally the opposite of most
42 people in that way, so no social media or anything like that. I have three kids, two girls

43 and a boy. My oldest and youngest are girls, my boy is the middle one. They're 27, 22
44 and 19.

45 **Crystal**

46 Hi, all. Crystal. I'm currently a high school social worker at a high school in downtown
47 Manhattan in lower Manhattan. I'm in charge of all of the 11th and 12th grade advisory
48 curriculum, so that's social-emotional but also college and career prep and planning and
49 exploration. So, on my mom's side, my great-grandmother and great-grandfather
50 immigrated, changed their last name because Jews were being persecuted in Russia, not
51 during the Holocaust, but in some other tumultuous time in Russian history. My
52 grandfather bought the name of a non-Jewish person, a neighbor in town who had died.

53 **Rob Graham**

54 Wow! That's interesting.

55 **Crystal**

56 They immigrated to New York through Ellis Island using that name. So, on my mom's
57 side of my family, I'm not religiously Jewish, but I'm definitely connected to Jewish
58 persecution, ethnically and culturally. On my dad's side, I'm not sure if it's two
59 generations or three, but his family came from Sweden and Norway in I think the early
60 1900s. My parents met in New York, so most of my family are New Yorkers, particularly
61 on my mom's side. My mom is an artist, and my dad is a musician and a doctor. He
62 actually just retired, but both extremely open-minded, and always kind. They instilled in
63 me a curiosity about the world. That being said, when I was five, we moved from New
64 York to Boston. I always had the values of open mindedness, but there wasn't a lot of

65 racial and socioeconomic diversity around me, except for the students of color who were
66 bused from the inner city through Boston's long history of busing. I've always been really
67 sensitive just in general to other people, that was something teachers always said about
68 me, whether it was being friends with the bullied kid, or liking animals or whatever it
69 was.

70 **Ejike**

71 I'd say, if anything, I'm a driven, passionate leader. This is my seventh year in university.
72 Ever since the first year, I've been doing some sort of leadership something. I came in
73 being freshman class president, and I'm currently a regional chairperson for a Black
74 engineering organization. As it relates to family, I am the youngest of four. Nigerian
75 immigrants. Immigrated to the States in early January, 1998. Born in 95. Initially it was
76 going to be my mom being here while my dad took us back to Nigeria. My mom made
77 the decision like, no, I'm not going to be here without my kids, so we stayed here, and my
78 dad went back to Nigeria. And that right there was the foundation of my entire
79 upbringing, being raised by my mother in seemingly a single parent household with my
80 parents still being together. My oldest brother was sent back to Nigeria around fifth or
81 sixth grade for behavioral things, sent back to live with my dad. So just three of us here.
82 We grew up in Forestville, Maryland, which would be a lower income part of Prince
83 George's County, MD. I was always like I am today, setting my own path in life. I don't
84 like following after anybody's footsteps. I want to blaze my own trail. Growing up the
85 one thing that I struggled with the most was, I was as my grandmother would call me,

86 small and mighty. I was the troubled child. I was one that was always very mischievous,
87 you know, talking back, going into my bullish personality.

88 **Rakim**

89 I view myself as an individual that is passionate about life, with a focus on youth.
90 Definitely my own two daughters, but I guess we'll probably tap into that a little bit later
91 in the conversation with my introduction to the Nation of Gods and Earths, 5% Nation. I
92 grew up in a suburban community, Hillcrest Heights, Maryland, and I had both parents
93 and a brother. We moved to Fort Washington, MD during my high school years. Dad's
94 city, and my mom's country. St Mary's County, farmers, grew tobacco, stuff like that. I
95 am a high school counselor in Prince George's County, Maryland at a school of about
96 1000 students. I am the 11th grade counselor. This is my seventh year there. I've already
97 been through one rotation of students. Class of 2017 is mine. I'm being tasked with
98 getting the class of 2021 across the stage. I love my job.

99 **How do the personal and professional experiences of school counselors from urban**
100 **public schools deepen our understanding of the ways that they approach their work**
101 **with college-bound African American male students?**

102 **Rob Graham**

103 Thank you all for participating in this work. Now that the introductions have happened,
104 I'd like to explore the first of my research questions: How do the personal and
105 professional experiences of school counselors from urban public schools deepen our
106 understanding of the ways that they approach their work with college-bound African
107 American male students? This one is obviously geared toward the counselors, so we'll

108 focus on you three for a bit. Before we get going, I think it's prudent to answer a question
109 that Eve asked me during one of our one-on-one conversations: Why just counselors in
110 the school? I'll respond here the way I responded to Eve. Counselors are understudied as
111 it pertains to college preparation. Let's think about the concept of cultural capital
112 (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and the college going process. One way to look at it is that
113 certain families have cultural capital which smooths the process of going to college.
114 Maybe they have generations that have been to college, so they know the process, so that
115 in 2020 if they have a student that's going, the family has college knowledge. It's not like
116 a new sort of thing, right? The literature (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, &
117 Holcomb-McCoy, 2011) shows that poor folks and Black folks, and you know those two
118 descriptors frequently overlap, are often first generation, don't have as many people in
119 their social circles with college knowledge. Counselors have the potential to play this role
120 of supplying that cultural capital in a way that other folks might not be able to (Bryan,
121 Farmer-Hinton, Rawls, & Woods, 2017; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, & Holcomb-McCoy,
122 2011; Duncheon, & Relles, 2018; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009;
123 Simmons, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). It's possible that counselors are the only people
124 that students are coming in contact with that have the accessibility and knowledge to
125 assist students with the college going process. Now, the first research question has two
126 parts to it, one personal and one professional. Let's start by approaching the personal.
127 Would you three mind talking a bit about your personal development and life? Then we
128 can perhaps understand some of your approach to your work.

129 **Eve**

130 Sure. I can get us going. I had the best childhood in the world in Queens. I was broke,
131 lived in the hood but didn't know I live in the hood. I heard Chris Rock sum this up, and I
132 was like, oh my gosh, that is me. He said something about leaving Brooklyn one time or
133 wherever he's from. He said, I didn't even know I lived in the hood until I left the hood.
134 And that's how I felt. I went far away to school on purpose. My sister was like, you're not
135 going to go to the neighborhood school like we did, so I took two buses across town to go
136 to school. I met my best friend, and when I saw how she lived, it was like the Huxtables!
137 I was like, what the heck! I had my mom and dad; they just didn't make a lot of money. I
138 didn't know people could live like this! Eventually, my sister kind of did her own thing.
139 She went away to college for a little while, didn't really work out. My oldest brother went
140 away to the military, and my second oldest brother went to Queens College. That's why I
141 said I followed in his footsteps, sorta of like when you mentioned in our conversation
142 about going to Xavier University and Howard University because your sisters did, and
143 that's all you knew.

144 **Rob Graham**

145 Yes! It makes sense, and at the same time it's a bit of a scary prospect. To some extent,
146 you do what your older siblings do. You use the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant,
147 1992) that's available to you, for better or worse.

148 **Eve**

149 I went to Queens College like my brother, and after a year, my parents told me that they
150 couldn't afford to send me to school and that I had to get financial aid. I go to the
151 financial aid office, and I saw these guys there that I knew, and I was embarrassed! So, I

152 never went through with the whole financial aid thing, because my best friend that was
153 there with me, her parents had money and they still have money. So that only lasted for a
154 year because after that I couldn't go back to school. And I didn't complete the financial
155 aid process. I didn't know how. I didn't have that support, because my parents didn't even
156 know how. I went back to New York City, and got pregnant with my first daughter when
157 I was around 19, 20 years old. I moved upstate with my parents, and they helped me raise
158 her. I ended up going to a community college, graduating from there, and transferring to
159 Syracuse University. While I was living in Syracuse, I met my husband at the time.

160 **Rob Graham**

161 So, this move upstate and giving birth to your daughter eliminated all that, hey, I'm
162 embarrassed about needing some financial aid and all that?

163 **Eve**

164 I had a totally different way of looking at life then because I had a daughter. I didn't give
165 a crap what people thought. That opened up my door to a lot of aid, being a single mom,
166 low income. So, Syracuse University, met my husband. We moved to Maryland because
167 he's from this area, and then we had two children together. He helped me raise my oldest
168 daughter like she was his own. And then in 2007, my father passed away. I knew then
169 that I wanted to a divorce. I just brought life in, I've seen life go. I'm not doing this in-
170 between thing where I'm not happy. I had been a stay at home mom and loved every
171 minute of that. After the divorce, I needed to work, so I started working in PG County.
172 From there, I was like, oh, I want to be a counselor. Went back to school to get my
173 master's degree

174 **Rob Graham**

175 What were you doing initially for PG County?

176 **Eve**

177 I was a paraprofessional. I had my degree, but I didn't have a teaching degree.

178 **Rob Graham**

179 So there was your winding road to school counseling, affected in no small part by your
180 family's brand of knowledge about the college going process. Crystal, would you mind
181 talking a bit about your personal development and your life?

182 **Crystal**

183 Sure. I'll just kind of pick up where I left off in my introduction. I don't have a lot of
184 Boston pride, but I did go to elementary and high school there. My dad went for his job,
185 and my parents didn't want to deal with the crazy public school process in New York City
186 for middle school and high school. My dad got a job in Cambridge, Mass, and moved to
187 Brookline, which has the most renowned public school system in the US. Everyone in
188 Brookline is a doctor, a lawyer. Also, very high percentage of Jews. It's 30% Jewish, very
189 wealthy. My house is on the border of Boston and Brookline, but Brookline is technically
190 its own town, so they have their own politics. It's very liberal, but also very un-diverse
191 socioeconomically and racially. There was a large presence of mainly African American
192 students in the schools I attended because of busing, but they were not students who lived
193 in the town.

194 **Rob Graham**

195 What was that dynamic like?

196 **Crystal**

197 The bus dynamic was really crazy. I think the first time I noticed it being an issue or
198 something, was not going to birthday parties of kids that lived in Dorchester and
199 Mattapan because they were in the inner city. So, there was a definitely a difference in
200 being able to socialize or know other kids because you wouldn't go to their houses. I had
201 kids come to my houses, but I never went to theirs. Jumping ahead a bit, I have always
202 been a good student, but also the kind of student that will only perform if I felt inspired. I
203 wasn't doing very well in ninth grade, and there was an alternative program called
204 "school within a school" that was actually started in the 1960s by anti-war folks, civil
205 rights protesters, and activists all across the country. They built basically mini schools
206 inside of schools that were meant to be radical, activist kind of free schools, but not
207 necessarily race-based. You enter through a lottery, and I got in in the 10th grade. Being
208 in school within a school changed my life. So my high school had 2,000 people, and
209 school within a school had about 20 kids in a grade. Very small, just one hallway on the
210 fourth floor. The teachers I had there were activists from the 60s and the 70s, so, there'd
211 be pictures on their wall of them smoking cigarettes and teaching history at the same
212 time. I mean, they were veteran teachers and activists, and so there was there was no
213 tracking. Like, I didn't take AP. Meanwhile, in the downstairs school where my elitist
214 peers were obsessing about college and grades and stuff, I was in a totally different
215 environment. And one of the big things in school within a school was experiential
216 learning. We also got to pick our classes, teachers are called by their first names, you
217 could sign yourself out of school. It was basically a democratic school. It's still there. I

218 actually brought some of my students from New York to see it a few years ago when we
219 were starting a student government.

220 **Rob Graham**

221 So much to unpack in there. I love the fact that you have this clear rear view of the busing
222 dynamic in your hometown and hearing you speak to the fact that your Black classmates
223 got to know your home environment, but you didn't get to know theirs. I hear a societal,
224 educational system analogy in there. I also think it's remarkable that you got what you
225 needed programmatically from the school within in a school; your talent was there, you
226 just needed the right educational environment in order to thrive. Frankly, having had that
227 time with you in conversation, I can see connections between your background, your
228 post-secondary education choices, and your career path. Brotha, can we hear from you?

229 **Rakim**

230 So yeah, grew up and had both my parents. Good people, real good people. Mother was
231 one of 12. My father was the only child of his father, which is kind of huge for me given
232 a story he told me about meeting him one time when he was called into the house. His
233 mother was like hey, this is your father. My father said, oh, okay. Went back outside and
234 played and never saw him again.

235 **Rob Graham**

236 Wow.

237 **Rakim**

238 It's funny, no more than three years ago I let it be known to him that I really appreciate
239 him hanging around and being there for me. Just in case he had any doubt that I did not

240 appreciate him hanging and doing all he could because he's an alcoholic. He still drinks
241 to this day, but he's always respectful, and whenever I needed him, he was there for me. I
242 would say between the two, in terms of level of influence on my brother and me, it was
243 just the two of us, my mother had the greater influence on us. That influence on us was to
244 be hustlers, to get money at a very early age. I was never really into sports. I played
245 sports when I went out playing football and stuff with my friends, but my mom was like,
246 don't forget that you need to get money. So I remember, probably like fourth or fifth
247 grade, having a paper route and turning that route from like a 50 house paper route to like
248 100 house. You know this is a good conversation because it helps me realize that
249 everything that she taught us, what my mom gave me is like Black privilege; the tools,
250 the know-how, all the tricks to the trade. I pass that down to the youngsters that I come in
251 contact with. What are you going to do when you graduate high school? I'm always
252 asking, what's your plan? I think this scholarship will be good for you. That's what drives
253 me.

254 **Rob Graham**

255 I love that little revelation. You can see this clear line from your upbringing to your
256 motivations and your interactions with the youth you support.

257 **Rakim**

258 Some people don't get that at home, so I try to create that in the schoolhouse. Like I said
259 before, just coming up in a community where there was a lot of Black males; a firefighter
260 across the street from me, a metro mechanic, a police officer, my best friend's father was
261 a firefighter and my father was a mailman. They just had that influence on us.

262 **Rob Graham**

263 You mentioned the Nation of Gods and Earths earlier in your introduction. That suggests
264 to me a close tie to who you are and your development. Can you touch on that?

265 **Rakim**

266 Yes. The brotha that brought about that nation, he came to be known as Allah. He was
267 from Danville Virginia, but he moved to New York, and he became a father to a lot of
268 young Black males that didn't have a father. He was in the Nation of Islam, and he came
269 up through the ranks with Malcolm X, but he had a different understanding of who God
270 was. The Black Muslims were more religious with it, and he understood that the Black
271 man was indeed God. That's what he felt those Black youths needed to be taught in order
272 to be self-sufficient, to be survivors in a Caucasian dominated environment that did not
273 support them being positive and feeling good about themselves. Forward to me; that was
274 just music to my ears. It was perfect timing for me because I was about to graduate from
275 Bowie State University, still trying to figure out what I wanted do. I was a criminal
276 justice major, but I got myself into some trouble, and I had always planned to deepen my
277 understanding of the 5% Nation anyway. That being said, a close friend of mine had
278 gotten incarcerated. I took his younger brother under my wing and looked out for him. He
279 had a lot of friends in the community as well, so I let them come with me just like Allah
280 did. So, I'm mirroring his behavior. That's who I am as a person. I was raised around
281 men, I was raised by men, I was raised by coaches. I grew up in Prince George's County,
282 Maryland. We had a unique street, a unique block back in the day. You and your friends
283 would be outside. Parents would be outside to the wee hours of the morning, but there

284 were a lot of men who were a great influence on me. So everything just felt natural for
285 me when I got into The Nation of Gods and Earths. That's how I came into the counseling
286 thing, I started teaching. I'm a competitive individual, but, you know, I love teaching. I
287 love life.

288 **Rob Graham**

289 Mmm! You know, believe it or not, my wife's been telling me a lot about it, and I've been
290 hearing it in hip-hop and didn't know what I was hearing. She kind of helped me connect
291 things, and she's pointed out some lyrics. She's like, yo, what they're talking about is 5%
292 stuff right here. And then, full disclosure, I've been watching the Wu Tang series on
293 Hulu, and they show a little bit of background. I haven't really done my homework, but
294 I've got a little bit of a sense of what it means.

295 **Rakim**

296 I'm not necessarily 5% anymore. As I got older, I broke bread with other people, kind of
297 like, how Malcolm X made his pilgrimage. And then he said, I broke bread with people
298 who were opposite skin color as me with blue eyes, you know, all that sort of stuff. I kind
299 of see myself like that because I travel a lot, and I love people. I wasn't confined to just
300 being in ciphers in Northwest Washington DC. I got to know others, breaking bread with
301 White folks, having good conversations. Like, these people are struggling too! I just
302 started to become what I tell people I am now, eclectic. I will go to a church, I will go to
303 a mosque. I will go anywhere because first of all, knowledge is infinite, and I can extract
304 from all kinds of things and implement that in my life. I pull from a lot of different things
305 with my values. I got some stuff from Sun Tzu with the Art of War. The movie The

306 Godfather, is my favorite movie. A lot of the way I carry things, I got from that movie.
307 You know, a man that doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man. Keep
308 your friends close, enemies closer. A lot of stuff from the Nation of Gods and Earths as
309 well, looking at myself and conducting myself as a god. I still see myself as that
310 individual who's a loving person who nourishes the youth, nourishes anybody. A giving
311 person, a loving person.

312 **Rob Graham**

313 Thank you for that, introducing a piece of culture that has shaped you that a lot of people
314 don't know about. I don't think I've fully appreciated how direct the line is between
315 personal development and people's vocational approach until this conversation, hearing
316 from you and the other counselors. That connection seems to be stronger than that
317 between graduate school and work approach, though I'm jumping the gun a bit in terms
318 of this conversation. This seems like a good time to bring your professional journeys and
319 experiences into the conversation. Maybe talk about your road to your current job and
320 how things have played out there.

321 **Rakim**

322 Like I mentioned before, being introduced to the Nation of Gods and Earths gave me a
323 kind of a path. This is something that I think that I could enjoy, teaching and counseling
324 youth. I started off counseling in group homes, bachelor's degree-level counseling work.
325 I started off at Boys Town of Washington. I would call it a low-level counselor, just
326 someone who made sure that the youth ate, you know, maintained order, stuff like that.
327 We would give them points if they displayed certain behaviors throughout the day, take

328 them on trips to cultural events and stuff like that. But that wasn't making quite enough
329 money. I went to Bowie State's homecoming, met with a friend of mine, and she said that
330 she was teaching. I said, you know what, I've been thinking about that. I think I could
331 enjoy that. She said, we have a first-grade position open in my school; come on in and
332 meet my principal. I came down, met the principal, and we had a conversation. I just felt
333 like from that point forward everything just flowed. She actually brought me on like three
334 months later to teach a first-grade class. As soon as I walked in, it just felt natural, like
335 this is me. This is my career, my destiny. Taught DC Public Schools for a number of
336 years and then wanted something different. So that's when I went to pursue my master's
337 in counseling. I got a job in Prince George's County Public Schools doing elementary
338 again. I did that for about three four years, moved on to high school, and that's where I've
339 been ever since.

340 **Rob Graham**

341 What does the work look like? One of the things that really interests me about this
342 research is the opportunity to hear about the actual work in each of your contexts. I'm
343 convinced that outsiders, even the well-read kind, don't know what school counselors do
344 or deal with. Ask twenty people what school counselors do, and I bet you'll get twenty
345 broadly different answers.

346 **Rakim**

347 Right, so we just recently transitioned from one principal to another. I work at a high
348 school in Temple Hills, MD. Temple Hills is a community that I would say is of middle,
349 maybe low-middle class families. We have a lot of students in our school who come from

350 single parent households. A lot of our youth are being raised by Mom, which was
351 surprising to me. We broke it down at the beginning of the year, but a lot of single parent
352 households, a lot of families with students who would be first-time college students if
353 they made that choice. We have a decent Hispanic population. Maybe about 20% of our
354 population is Hispanic Salvadoran. Some Colombia and Peru maybe, but mostly El
355 Salvador. That's the makeup of that population, mostly Black. The new principal is
356 young, and he comes from middle school, so he knows a lot of the students because we
357 get a share from the school that he was previously at. He's young and energetic, and he's
358 still learning. I like his leadership style; he's more laid back, doesn't sweat you a lot. He's
359 like, do your job man, and everything will be okay. I don't really know how he deals with
360 the teachers, but I get the impression that he knows curriculum and instruction. As far as
361 counselors are concerned, we pretty much run the ship back there. I mean we're okay. If
362 anything needs to be done through us, he will come to us. He's comfortable asking us
363 what needs to be done. I am the chair of the department this year, didn't want it. It got
364 bestowed upon me because Eve left.

365 **Rob Graham**

366 You sound like you were a little bit reluctant about that leadership role. Why the
367 reluctance?

368 **Rakim**

369 It's a good question. It was kind of selfish to a certain extent. I kind of just want to be
370 focused on my class. I have a good administrator that I work with. We kind of love our
371 class, and that's what I focus on. When you become a chair, it's like they pull you into

372 these meetings about curriculum and instruction, nothing related to counseling. It's like I
373 gotta sit up in meetings when something needs to be signed off on or something needs to
374 be taken care of immediately. So I think for most people, it's like they don't want the
375 added responsibility, they don't feel like the money is worth it, they just don't want the
376 aggravation. Our caseloads are enough.

377 **Rob Graham**

378 Okay. What are your responsibilities at work?

379 **Rakim**

380 To prepare the students to be college and career ready. Of course, making sure that they
381 have the appropriate credits to graduate. I'm making sure that they have the core classes
382 that are needed, the community service hours, all the testing, making sure they have
383 everything to graduate. That's what this thing is if you ask me. I feel like my task is to tap
384 into the student, and figure out what their destiny is, so you're sort of personalizing your
385 job description. For me it's not about just graduating students. You can tell the difference
386 between somebody that just does their job and says, hey, I want to make sure you got the
387 credits to graduate, that's all I'm supposed to. And then you have somebody that says, I'm
388 supposed to do that but at the same time, I want to help this person get to where they're
389 trying to go. I think that's the more meaningful part of the work.

390 **Rob Graham**

391 You're saying that really you need to be thinking about those students' individual
392 destinies and goals. That's the most important part, but that is not necessarily part of the
393 job description.

394 **Rakim**

395 The higher ups constantly pound us about making sure that the students get the correct
396 credits, making sure that they graduate with everything. If not, then we're on the five
397 o'clock news.

398 **Rob Graham**

399 Right. I mean, it happens every year. And what you're saying speaks to what I found
400 during my review of school counseling literature, these tensions between contextual
401 realities of high school counseling (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Malone, 2013;
402 Simmons, 2011; Woods, & Domina, 2014), like needing to avoid being on the five
403 o'clock news because someone graduated without meeting all the requirements and
404 dealing with competing priorities (Astramovich, Hoskins, Gutierrez, & Bartlett, 2013)
405 like needing to graduate a class of students while paying attention to individual needs and
406 paths. What's your day to day look like?

407 **Rakim**

408 So, come in during the day. Do my emails, respond back to parents, telephone calls. I
409 usually get students independent of what I got going on. I usually try to funnel my
410 students to my office for open hours during their lunch time. I take our kids down in the
411 morning time to do senior contracts. Before you come into the building you have the
412 front office, and if you keep walking to the back, you have the counseling suite. We
413 actually just changed things around back there. Students used to be able to walk back
414 there and just walk up on a counselor, but after I got there they provided a secretary for
415 us in the second year, so she's kind of a buffer between us and the students. We have that

416 door shut off now, so they have to have a pass that they come before lunch. I usually take
417 my lunch at one o'clock, till about 1:30. At 3 I'm kind of tightening up my desk, getting
418 cleaned up, just kind of wrapping up for the day.

419 **Rob Graham**

420 Where are you guys in relationship to the industry suggested student to counselor ratio?

421 The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of 250

422 students to every counselor (2019).

423 **Rakim**

424 We were right there. Last time I looked we were at around 220 or something. We got low

425 enrollment, so we are right there. The ninth-grade counselor may have more; she may

426 have 300.

427 **Rob Graham**

428 To me the number's a little bit arbitrary. Do you feel like that's a good workable number,

429 allowing you to sort of meet your goals?

430 **Rakim**

431 I think so. I've had 250 before, and I think that was quite manageable. I got 200 now. I

432 mean, yeah, compared to some of the numbers I've heard other people tell me. We go

433 north of the county, you get a lot of big numbers, some 400 to 1.

434 **Rob Graham**

435 So, if you got 400 students, you're just doing computer work. You don't have time to talk.

436 **Rakim**

437 Right. I would imagine yeah because in a public high school you know you're chasing
438 kids, trying to figure out where they're at. There is a lot of paperwork if they're not
439 coming. Where are they? What have you done to reach out to them? And so forth. and
440 then by the time you finish that, you got to do some more paperwork. Report cards just
441 came out. It's always the gathering of data, and it's always putting interventions in place.
442 Then you got to monitor those interventions and so forth. So a lot of that stuff is very
443 time consuming. I learned that when I did my internship through Trinity University. That
444 professor wanted us to do a lot of counseling, and all of us that were in high schools,
445 were like, Sir, that's not the reality. I mean they had us doing credit checks, credit
446 evaluations, meeting with students and doing schedules. You know schedules take up
447 about a whole month. Once you get in September, you're not done with schedules until
448 October 15th.

449 **Rob Graham**

450 Eve, you're also in Prince George's County, and you used to work with Rakim. Can we
451 hear about your professional journey and experience on the job?

452 **Eve**

453 In my mind, I always thought I wanted to be a psychologist, and as life progressed, things
454 just didn't play out for me where I could spend that much time focusing on becoming a
455 psychologist. I started a family early, and I focused on that, being a stay at home mom. I
456 was on my way to becoming a licensed therapist, but this fluke thing happened where I
457 found out the school that I was going to didn't have accreditation for their LPC license,
458 practical whatever counselor, I forget what it stands for. On the last day to drop classes I

459 found out, so I had to go run and drop a class because they were not accredited. So it
460 forced me into the school counseling piece because that program was still accredited. So I
461 was thinking, okay, well, it's kind of like parallel, so why not? And that's how I got into
462 the school counseling realm.

463 **Rob Graham**

464 Mmm! It's kind of a natural shift, right? Not too much of a departure, right?

465 **Eve**

466 In school, we don't do a lot of counseling. We do a lot more academic counseling and a
467 lot more Band-Aids on a bleeding heart. We don't have a lot of time to dedicate to that
468 piece, the personal-social growth piece. We're more focused on graduating you,
469 graduating you on time, getting you to your post-secondary goal. That's more of the focus
470 versus your overall well-being.

471 **Rob Graham**

472 Do you have a school psychologist?

473 **Eve**

474 We do, but the school psychologist is divided between schools, so he's only there maybe
475 two days a week. He is phenomenal. When I talk to him about a student, he will go out of
476 his way to meet with the student. But we do more of a triage. We can refer out, but we
477 only have this one resource that's now in the schools, and they're not always going to be
478 in the schools. It's like a grant, so, we have it for right now, and at the beginning of the
479 year, we didn't have it.

480 **Rob Graham**

481 Mmm. Interesting. I think that's a nice transition. Before we get into the specifics of your
482 work, maybe you could give me a little sense of the context, and I'll just lump these
483 questions together, and you can just hit them however you want. And just you know, I'm
484 not beholden to my questions. I just want to stimulate conversation. Tell me about your
485 school. What kind of students do you have? Tell me about the neighborhood, maybe
486 where the students are coming from. Tell me about your colleagues and the leadership in
487 your school.

488 **Eve**

489 I'll start with leadership. I feel like Prince George's County has underdeveloped
490 leadership. There are basic things that come with Leadership 101 that I've felt in my 12
491 years. The team that I started with was strong. Both of the elementary schools I worked in
492 in PG County had strong leadership. Then I shifted into high school when I came out of
493 the classroom into counseling and leadership. That particular principal was new at the
494 same time she hired me, and she lived in a fantasy world with unicorns and rainbows. It
495 was crazy. And for six years, I was under that leadership, and she had a lot of personal
496 issues going on.

497 **Rob Graham**

498 So this is high school now?

499 **Eve**

500 This is high school. She had a lot of personal issues that she brought to work with her
501 when she came to work, so she wasn't consistently at work. She left us astray to the point
502 where people from the area office had to step in for her in her absence. For the last two

503 years of my six years being there, everything was awry. I mean, everything. The students
504 walked the hallway like it was the mall. They had no respect for education. They were
505 completely and totally disconnected from education. That particular population didn't
506 really go to college. They didn't really understand post-secondary goals. But where I am
507 now, same thing, weak leadership because they can't deal with confrontation within the
508 workplace.

509 **Rob Graham**

510 How about the overall context of the school you're in now?

511 **Eve**

512 It's important to know the population because it's roughly 1100, 1200 students. Six
513 hundred of them belong to the science and tech program, and you have to qualify to get
514 into the program. What I've noticed is those parents tend to be together still, mom and
515 dad households. This is shocking to me because the high school I came from, it was rare
516 that it was mom and dad at the table together.

517 **Rob Graham**

518 That's the school where Rakim is now, right?

519 **Eve**

520 Yes. So this is totally different. I have about 400 students, and about 300 of them are
521 science and tech students, so I'm having totally different conversations with the students
522 and parents. My current students cry because they can't get into AP classes, whereas the
523 school I came from, they cried because they had to go to class. They make me sharpen
524 my skills. We get requests from colleges all the time. I didn't get those requests when I

525 was at my previous school. We barely could get colleges to come out. But now they're
526 banging on our door. I'm talking about like, Princeton, Harvard, and Georgetown. So like
527 I said, the conversations are way different but in a great way. The parents, awesome. We
528 can agree to disagree when they come in, want something for the kids because they want
529 it.

530 **Rob Graham**

531 When you say awesome parents

532 **Eve**

533 Science and tech. I've actually appreciated all the parents that come to the table because
534 even our non-science and tech parents who are single parents, like working two jobs, we
535 may have a different view on how life should be lived, if you will, but they're there to
536 support their students no matter what. Anytime a parent comes to the table, I'm just happy
537 to have them.

538 **Rob Graham**

539 Well, I entered this research under the idea that everybody has ideas about what school
540 counselors are doing, but nobody really knows except people who are actually in the
541 profession or in the schools. Tell me about your team, how your team is organized and all
542 that. Is there team leadership? How about the space? What does it look like? If you had a
543 GoPro on your head, what would it look like?

544 **Eve**

545 The high school's relatively new. I think it was built in or opened in 2012, 2013? And it's
546 called a one to one school, so it's supposed to be this high tech school. Every student gets

547 a Chromebook. Most schools don't get it in the county that I'm in. It's a beautiful looking
548 space. The counseling suite is bright and nice, but our offices are small. As far as the
549 team, we are a broken team, and I knew that going into it, but I had no idea it was that
550 broken. So we have one counselor that's our lead counselor. I think maybe she has eight
551 years of counseling experience. She knows a lot. She can read policy and understand it
552 and just memorize it. I kind of looked forward to working with her because I knew that
553 she had that, but I just didn't know she was this intense.

554 **Rob Graham**

555 So, nice, updated space like Rakim's, but very different contexts and populations despite
556 being in the same school district/county. And the team is broken? Because of the
557 intensity of the lead counselor?

558 **Eve**

559 Let me just say, we have four counselors. She's the lead. She has the most experience,
560 then I come in at six years. And then the other two come in at maybe three years of
561 experience in counseling, and one of them is super. I'm the oldest, the least experienced
562 two are maybe 30 and 20 something, and the lead is late 30's. I'm 40 whatever, so it's an
563 interesting dynamic, that I'm the oldest person. I came in with a team spirit 100%, and as
564 I transitioned into this school, I had a hard time. I really I hated it. I was feverishly
565 looking to get out of the county at that point. But then when people would come into the
566 building, they'd say things like, Eve, you're here because you are known in the county as
567 a change agent. We were a united front at my last school, but here our team lead is so
568 enveloped in herself! It is insane! To the point where she has one of the team members

569 shook, where she cries almost daily because you can't approach her. She has the least
570 amount of experience, and our team lead thinks it's her way or no way. I learned under a
571 different model, if you will, and there's more than one way to skin a cat. So I'm like
572 having to retrain that particular counselor. I think this is really important to know because
573 that particular counselor was put on administrative leave her first year because she was
574 about to graduate a student that didn't meet the requirements. So our county went under a
575 lot of fire because of graduation. We had an audit recently, and a lot of things were
576 found, including the reality that we don't operate in the 21st century. We literally go like
577 this, Eve- English 9, English 10, English 11, English 12 (acts out process of writing a
578 student record by hand).

579 **Rob Graham**

580 Yeah, that's how you have human error, right? Are you guys organized by grade level?

581 **Eve**

582 Last year was the first year for this school, but I've only operated under grade level. They
583 went under grade level under protest. We're very dysfunctional, and I had to come to a
584 place in my mind where I'm going to serve out this year, do my bid if you will, and then
585 look at other places because I'm not sure that Prince George's County is for me. I want to
586 sum this up. I believe that Prince George's County specifically uses their counselors as
587 glorified secretaries. That's what I feel like I am.

588 **Rob Graham**

589 Well that's sad. What about your work duties and maybe a typical workday?

590 **Eve**

591 So I can go in with the plan. I'll wake up in the middle of the night and write my lists on
592 my phone of things I want to do that comes to my mind because we stress over it all the
593 time. It's like an, I gotcha, if I do this wrong. It's like you work every day as if you're
594 going to be threatened somehow. That's how I feel. That's how my other co-workers feel,
595 even the seasoned counselor. We do our parent-teacher conferences in the morning.
596 We're on duty at nine, parent meetings start at nine because teachers need to be in their
597 classrooms by 9:20. Teachers don't come to the meeting or they come ill-prepared. Most
598 of the parent-teacher conferences I've been in have been a waste of my time in my
599 opinion. I have yet to be in a parent-teacher conference that was actually comprehensive
600 where we're actually getting into something. We talk about grades instead of areas that
601 need improvement, strategies for future success, or getting the appropriate supports.
602 That's how my days start, but for the most part, it's paperwork.

603 **Rob Graham**

604 I've heard this piece recently from a new counselor in Arlington, VA. So lots of workload
605 inefficiencies that are keeping you from

606 **Eve**

607 meeting with the students. I have an open period during lunchtime that is between 11:15
608 and 1:15, so they can come in without a pass. The issue with that is I'm meeting
609 sometimes during that time. I don't always know, but they can come anytime without a
610 pass. And the reason that is, is because we don't want you to miss instruction.

611 **Rob Graham**

612 Do student, do students take advantage of that?

613 **Eve**

614 They do. They're excellent. I've never worked with a student body like this before. It's the
615 polar opposite of what I worked with at the other school. Our conversations are deeper.
616 They don't just come and cry about not liking their teacher. They come in like, I know it's
617 junior year, but I'm already ready to plan for senior year. (chuckles)

618 **Rob Graham**

619 Right, that's nice.

620 **Eve**

621 It is refreshing to have the conversations. I had to sharpen my tools because I didn't really
622 have to talk about planning and goal setting with the other population; they needed a
623 mom. They needed someone to talk to. Planning? A goal? I'm just trying to get through
624 this day! So our conversations were a lot different. Here the conversations are richer, and
625 I appreciate that. I felt like the other population was a little oppressed and depressed. And
626 the schools are three miles from one another. And you wanted me to talk about that. The
627 place where the school sits is slightly hoodish, but the students are not. They're the
628 opposite because they're bussed in because they're science and tech students.

629 **Rob Graham**

630 Crystal, you're the Director of College & Career Counseling for your high school in
631 Manhattan. What have your road and experience been like?

632 **Crystal**

633 I was an English major in undergrad, and then I wanted to go into teaching 'cause I'd
634 always done youth work and stuff before. I was briefly blinded by Teach for America.

635 Luckily, I didn't get in because I probably would have started a riot if I had been in the
636 program. They want someone that they can shape, completely turn into a CEO of a
637 charter network or something. I started working with a different organization through a
638 fellowship, and then through a long chain of things became super, anti-nonprofit. Not all
639 nonprofits, but privatization of services and rights that people should have in public
640 spaces. So that's what really got me into wanting to be in a public setting again, and how
641 I ended up in a public high school now. I was on the founding team of the school, and
642 now it's in its sixth year.

643 **Rob Graham**

644 How about the school? Would you paint a picture of the context?

645 **Crystal**

646 Every school in our network has some kind of real world theme that connects students to
647 the world like law and social justice, so students are connected with internships, job
648 shadows, career readiness, and college all related to the theme. Our students are taught
649 through the design thinking process, so it's modeled after the D school at Stanford and
650 other schools like that.

651 **Rob Graham**

652 I know all about that. I went on this design thinking bender, and I was teaching it in my
653 classes, having my students do design thinking projects to help them become acclimated
654 on campus and solve problems.

655 **Crystal**

656 So that's what we're about. We do have classes like programming, computer science, and
657 media, but the design thinking is used in all classrooms, all subject areas. Teachers have
658 to develop curriculum around design thinking. I was originally the partnership
659 coordinator, and I switched into the college counseling when the first graduating class
660 was juniors. So, three or four years ago. Then a year into that, I actually started pursuing
661 my social work degree at night, and I finished in two years so that was this past summer.

662 **Rob Graham**

663 So the social work degree, do you feel it aligns well with the college preparation and
664 school counseling role? When I think about preparation for the field, that's just not the
665 first thing that comes to mind?

666 **Crystal**

667 I think two things. One, the guidance counselor role is becoming less and less powerful
668 because it's connected to scheduling, transcripts, very straightforward kind of technical
669 things. So there's just a general shift toward people doing counseling toward social work
670 as opposed to counseling or mental health because it's more in a box. The other thing is
671 that I think part of career readiness is organizing, because it's informing people and
672 families. It's not just the student, it's the student's family. I do a lot of, not just one on
673 one, but in student groups, with whole families. I have events every other week where I'm
674 doing kind of mass education, and I view that especially around financial aid, and also
675 not under-matching students, as a form of organizing. Community organizing was my
676 emphasis in my social work master's program.

677 **Rob Graham**

678 That piece you said about guidance counseling becoming a reduced technical role dealing
679 with scheduling and transcripts speaks to what Rakim and Eve have said about their
680 administrative loads, and it's a bit disappointing given positive African American student
681 perceptions about the helpfulness of high school counselors (Blair, Burkhardt, & Hull,
682 2018; Gilfillan, 2018; Smith & Zhang, 2008). It strikes me as a wasted opportunity at a
683 meaningful relationship. Who are your students? How do the students wind up in your
684 school?

685 **Crystal**

686 50% are random, and 50% do this lottery process that's semi-informed. The racial
687 breakdown of the school is about 47% Latino, that's our highest population, 30% Black
688 African American/Caribbean American. Then, I think it's 8% Asian 10% White and 2%
689 Native American mixed or something that. It's extremely diverse, racially and socio-
690 economically, and ethnically. I mean it's a freakin melting pot, and it's really noticeable
691 when I bring college reps to the school. They always pick up on it.

692 **Rob Graham**

693 What about the makeup of the faculty and staff?

694 **Crystal**

695 I don't know the exact stats. So our assistant principal is a White male, and our assistant
696 principal's a White female. Both of them have been at the school since it was founded, so
697 both are very closely embedded in the work of the school, more than figureheads. The
698 dean or director of school culture is a Black man. He's kind of seen as an assistant
699 principal, although he doesn't have that license yet. I would say that everyone in our

700 office, the secretary, parent coordinator, staff are Latino women. And then the teachers
701 are kind of a mix. Honestly, I would say that the majority are White but not
702 overwhelmingly. We have Black teachers, White teachers, Southeast Asian teachers,
703 Latino teachers, Russian; I mean all ethnically and racially different. And then myself
704 and our guidance counselor are White. Myself, the guidance counselor, and the dean, we
705 are the kind of managers of student support. So, we are a kind of triad under the principal
706 and the AP.

707 **Rob Graham**

708 What does the space look like physically, and what is your day to day?

709 **Crystal**

710 There's different power imbalances and different access to resources within the campus
711 itself, which is problematic. So, there's four schools in our building. The original school
712 housed in the building used to be prestigious and has become a dropout factory
713 essentially. There's another school from our network in the basement, and then there's a
714 new high school on the third floor. We are exploding, and our school has become very
715 popular in terms of the amount of kids ranking the school. We have 110 spots for
716 incoming freshmen, and this year we had over 500 kids who ranked us within their top
717 four. Another thing is now being inundated with White families who have kind of caught
718 on with this design thinking tip and now see that the school is actually effective. We have
719 open houses sometimes and I'm like, what the fuck, all White families. But the majority
720 of times where we see groups of students of color at open houses is when a counselor

721 from the middle school is taking them. When kids are coming with parents, it's really
722 heavy White.

723 **Rob Graham**

724 There's so much at play in your statement. There's luck involved in who gets what
725 educational experience. There's the indignity of being a student in that failure factory
726 while rubbing shoulders with students in better situations. There's the cultural capital of
727 the White families that know to how to position themselves for advantages. Of course
728 you can't take your kid to an open house if you have to work. There's the important role
729 of the counselor bringing the students of color to the open house, filling the role of the
730 person with the insider educational knowledge in the family. Also, the scenario sounds a
731 lot like your experience in your own school within a school in high school! I'm not sure
732 if or how your own educational experience plays out today, but the parallels are food for
733 thought.

734 **Crystal**

735 The school itself is in downtown Manhattan. Nobody lives by the school. We have kids
736 from every borough- Staten Island, Queens, Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, but I'd say the
737 majority of kids come from Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx. I get to school any time
738 between seven and eight. The bell rings at 8:45 to start school and again at 3:30. I spend
739 the majority of my day right now, because of college application season, doing
740 application prep. Everybody's applying to the City University of New York system on
741 Tuesday, every senior. Then I have a FAFSA night coming up. We just did this three-day
742 college trip. I have 15 kids doing early decision, so I work with them for three additional

743 hours after school. It's kind of a cohort model. And then I have my financial evening for
744 parents coming up. And then after school, I'm the cheerleading coach on Monday,
745 Tuesday, and Thursday. On Wednesday I'm doing Ed prep, and then on Saturdays I'm
746 doing Ed or EA marathons.

747 **Rob Graham**

748 You do not get burned out. I don't know how that's possible.

749 **Crystal**

750 My work is my wife. I mean I woke up this morning at six to make sure my student was
751 on his plane. Particularly in October through December, it's around the clock. I really feel
752 that Sunday is my day of rest, but I'll still spend at least two hours on Sunday, prepping
753 for my week ahead.

754 **Rob Graham**

755 I think it's wonderful. I think you're wonderful for the work you do and your approach to
756 your work. But that strikes me as not being a model of work that everybody can do.
757 You're unique in being able to pull that off, it seems.

758 **How does the college guidance received during high school help us understand the**
759 **transition experience of African American male students from urban public schools**
760 **to George Mason University?**

761 **Rob Graham**

762 I'd like to shift a bit and get your perspectives on the next research question for this
763 study: How does the college guidance received during high school help us understand the
764 transition experience of African American male students from urban public schools to

765 George Mason University? This is a conversation for all six of your perspectives.

766 Personally, I received no assistance from my high school in preparing for college. I just
767 kind of learned from my sisters and my cousins and watched a comedy set at an HBCU.

768 Vertner, can we hear about your experience with college guidance at Hampton High
769 School?

770 **Vertner**

771 So, I went to Hampton High School in Hampton, VA. My high school was predominantly
772 Black. Basically Hampton High, like where we live at now, is in the hood of Hampton,
773 the city.

774 **Rob Graham**

775 So when did you start thinking about college, and where you were going, and being
776 strategic about that kind of stuff? How did that go down?

777 **Vertner**

778 I would say college pretty much started sophomore year, like the glimpse of it. It
779 definitely started, which is kind of the culture at Hampton, as, where am I going to play?

780 So it wasn't necessarily, where do I want to go to college academically? I mean at home it
781 was, but you know, with the coaches and friends and myself, it was always like, where
782 I'm going to play.

783 **Rob Graham**

784 Play soccer?

785 **Vertner**

786 Yes. It wasn't until junior year when I switched that mindset to academic, because the
787 injury really impacted me and my thought process. So, I started looking at schools
788 academically, you know. I will say the school actually helped with that too because they
789 have a good grasp on getting people from high school to college. And that was a big thing
790 that junior year too because I was taking my SAT's or ACT's, and that just put it in my
791 mind more. And knowing that my senior year's coming up, and the pressure from at home
792 to start getting on college and stuff.

793 **Rob Graham**

794 So you you touched on something. You said your school had a pretty good grasp on
795 getting people from high school to college. Can you talk about what they had going on?

796 **Vertner**

797 Yes, our counselors. So we met with our counselors once every semester, and we usually
798 had someone, a principal I guess, her role was to mainly expose colleges to us. Colleges
799 came to visit all the time, during cafeteria hours and stuff like that. They'd pass out
800 flyers, tell us what they expect and all that good stuff. We always had college banners in
801 the hallway. I remember, specifically, we had a Virginia college chart, and it had like the
802 GPA requirements, ACT, SAT score requirements. It was all the Virginia colleges. And I
803 always remember looking at George Mason because that was one of my top schools that I
804 wanted to go to. I'm a bad test taker, so I knew I couldn't get in solely on my SAT and
805 ACT scores, but I had the GPA to kind of help cover those up. So I was always looking at
806 that chart ratio, my GPA match with the college. My guidance counselor really helped
807 kind of fill me up, you know.

808 **Rob Graham**

809 It's interesting, people don't think about that stuff being on the wall working, but it
810 worked for you a little bit. I mean it gave you something to look at and target and made
811 stuff kind of clear. And this guidance counselor you're talking about?

812 **Vertner**

813 I'm trying to remember, because it was two different ones. One of them was mainly like
814 school sources, and one was mainly for like ACT and SAT prep. I always went to her to
815 get waivers; the whole school got three free waivers for the SAT and ACT.

816 **Rob Graham**

817 So you wouldn't have to pay out of pocket? For prep or for the test?

818 **Vertner**

819 The test.

820 **Rob Graham**

821 Okay, so that's good, especially if that opened up access for students from lower income
822 families.

823 **Vertner**

824 Yeah. She basically picked my brain about where I wanted to go. Have I visited any
825 colleges yet? Such things like that.

826 **Rob Graham**

827 What would you say the focus was on, helping you find a college and sort of getting you
828 there?

829 **Vertner**

830 Yes

831 **Rob Graham**

832 Did you have any experiences or conversations that sort of prepared you for the actual
833 college experience after admission and once you got here?

834 **Vertner**

835 I would say mainly two people helped me with that aspect, and they were from my social
836 world. In terms of preparedness, one of them went to my church, and he played baseball
837 out in like Indiana. He was like a year above me, so when I was a senior high school, he
838 was a freshman in college. During that summer, we talked a lot. I picked his brain, asked
839 him, you know, what was it about? How was it? Stuff like that. I also had a dude who
840 went to my high school; he played in the band with me. He graduated from Mason, and
841 he turned out to be one of my line brothers. I've known him since middle school. I asked
842 him a lot of times, hey, how's Mason? What'd you do to get involved? I saw that we have
843 a Black student alliance here and asked him about that. So, he was like a good gateway.
844 But at other times, I just kind of navigated through. I wouldn't say by myself, but I used
845 what I knew from those two and other people like my sisters, but there's a difference
846 because they stayed at home.

847 **Rob Graham**

848 Huh! Good thing you had these two guys in your life. Some folks don't have those
849 resources.

850 **Vertner**

851 I used everything that I could gather up, and I tried to navigate my freshman year here. In
852 terms of academics, I would say definitely the IB program helped me in terms time
853 management and stuff like that, you know. Especially with time management because
854 from IB to being in the band, concert band, football, to soccer, to any other little clubs
855 and activities I did, it helped me really dissect my time management. And I will also say
856 my church. We have something called YP, young people's division. They're always
857 advocates for us going to college and stuff like that, and my church always made sure we
858 were going to college. We had a high school speech that we got towards graduation in
859 front of the whole church. Basically, they're always supportive. So, yeah.

860 **Rob Graham**

861 You said IB prepared you with your time management. Was it something they did, or was
862 it just the fact that it was so rigorous and time involved and that it forced you to kind of
863 get your time right?

864 **Vertner**

865 Yeah, it kind of forced me to get my time right.

866 **Rob Graham**

867 How'd you do in high school?

868 **Vertner**

869 I did good. I think I ended up with like a 3.8, 3.7. I think my freshman year GPA at
870 Mason was really good because I always knew from my guidance counselor from high
871 school to have a good freshman year GPA.

872 **Rob Graham**

873 Jesus, that's the gospel right there!

874 **Vertner**

875 That's the best advice that somebody ever gave me. I do tours for Mason now, and that's
876 what I tell the people that are trying to come here. No matter what you do, have a high
877 freshman year GPA. At least try.

878 **Rob Graham**

879 How were things for you two PG County brothas?

880 **David**

881 I went to a school named Charles River Flowers. My school was like 90% Black, and it
882 was a pretty good experience, but it was also a mixture of students that attended the
883 school. There were some students from Washington DC because there wasn't really a
884 district rule at first for the schools, so basically anybody from like any district or area
885 could attend our school.

886 There were fights all the time, peer pressure, a lot of bullying. Growing up around all that
887 stuff and in that particular environment, trying to stay focused on school was and is really
888 hard. It takes a toll on a lot of students. A lot of students decided to drop out because the
889 majority of students don't have fathers in their lives, so they had to defend themselves. At
890 young ages, they had to provide for their family, I'm talking about 12 years old, 13,14;
891 they had to provide for their families at young ages. They never really had time to think
892 about school; they didn't have time to plan for school. I know a lot of my friends that
893 would like to go to college, but they didn't necessarily have the resources. They're the
894 father figure, you know.

895 **Rob Graham**

896 Man, that's heavy. It's also important for folks to know students' realities so they can
897 teach and support them appropriately. You know, I talked to some of my friends, and
898 Flowers had kind of a good reputation. Why did Flowers have a reputation for being
899 kinda of a good school in PG?

900 **David**

901 I think it's because of the science program, the STEM program, it was really good. We
902 also had a great business program, a finance program. I was in the finance program, and
903 that had a really good reputation. Yeah, also the basketball team.

904 **Rob Graham**

905 It sounds to me like there were multiple student programs in the school, like a business
906 program, a science program, and then what? Were the rest of the students just like
907 general?

908 **David**

909 Yes, the rest of students were just general. They just took basic, regular classes.

910 **Rob Graham**

911 Okay, so they were not as high achieving?

912 **David**

913 Well, I think they could choose to be in a program, but I think you did need a certain
914 GPA? And certain credentials, such as the National Honor Society. I was also in that, so
915 that also helped me.

916 Mentors really played an important role in my journey, especially mentors at the church,
917 you know, because it's really convenient. One of my mentors from church, I remember
918 talking to him about how it's hard to stay focused on school, and he would tell me, every
919 day you gotta do the small things, be cool with the teachers, stay out the way. Just mind
920 your business. I was to myself a little bit in school, but everyone knew me already
921 because my brother went there. So it was kind of hard to stay out of the mix. He was like,
922 you can still have friends, you don't have to have be fake and not say anything to them,
923 but you have to do it from a distance. That's the only way you can focus and get to
924 college, and I knew I wanted to go to college since about the ninth, 10th grade. That's
925 when I really knew that, so I was like, all right, I need to start working now to get to the
926 towards that goal. Yeah.

927 **Rob Graham**

928 How'd you do there?

929 **David**

930 I did really well. My GPA was a 3.8. I think the lowest GPA that I had at the school was
931 a 3.5. Every teacher liked me. I made sure every teacher knew me and stuff like that. I
932 always put in the effort.

933 **Rob Graham**

934 What about your buddies? Did they do as well as you did?

935 **David**

936 My friends from the program that I was in, yes, they did well. I also had friends that
937 weren't in the programs; they didn't do as well as me.

938 **Rob Graham**

939 So, the program was kind of a key?

940 **David**

941 Yes

942 **Rob Graham**

943 In what ways did your high school prepare you for college?

944 **David**

945 We had a few clubs that were designed to help us prepare for college, and I got involved

946 in those. One of the clubs was college preparation. It's a specific club for students at my

947 high school, and we had specialists. They asked us many questions to make sure we

948 wanted to actually attend the college like, why do you want to attend the college? They

949 made sure we knew all the background of college. We had to do research papers on the

950 college, and actually look into the college before we made a decision. They also educated

951 us on the importance of keeping your GPA up, so we could get admitted. They helped us

952 with our resumes as well. So, yeah, we had a few useful resources. The teachers as well. I

953 believe they helped prepare me for college. Definitely my English teacher, with the

954 essays. I think that's a big part of me getting into the school, being able to write.

955 **Rob Graham**

956 So, you had teachers or an adviser, club adviser?

957 **David**

958 Yeah, we had a club adviser, but mainly the teachers decided to volunteer in clubs.

959 **Rob Graham**

960 The focus in the club, mostly about getting into college or preparing you for the college
961 experience?

962 **David**

963 It was both, but more getting into college, and also preparing our minds for what is to
964 come in college. But they didn't actually prepare us for like what we'll have to go through
965 in college, like specifically.

966 **Rob Graham**

967 When you say preparing your mind, what do you mean?

968 **David**

969 They basically informed us about the mindset that we had to have. They used to give us
970 certain discussions and talk about college. Like, don't stay up too late. Don't get
971 distracted. They'll talk about how you need to be close with your teachers and stuff like
972 that. Don't follow the wrong crowd. They'll basically try to discipline our minds before
973 we get into college.

974 **Rob Graham**

975 Knowing that your mom went to college, and your brother, how much help did you get
976 from family in preparing you for college? What kind of help did you get if you got any?
977 How effective was that help?

978 **David**

979 My mom, I think her generation was kind of different from mine as far as preparing for
980 college. I believe that resumes are more important now than they were back then. She

981 kind of shifted more towards trying to build up my resume. She got me involved in a lot
982 of activities outside of school
983 as far as like helping the homeless, doing extracurricular activities, and community
984 service.

985 **Rob Graham**

986 Mom knew that you needed to be more than just a student; you needed to be active in
987 order to make yourself a better candidate. What about brother? Did he help prepare you?

988 **David**

989 Well my brother, I wouldn't say he prepared me for the big college experience because he
990 attended PG Community College, so he didn't really know how it would be, you know.

991 **Rob Graham**

992 What about your counseling experience in high school, what about your school
993 counselors?

994 **David**

995 Well, I didn't really have that many school counselors in high school. Mainly I used the
996 teachers as counselors, but I believe there were resources there that I didn't use. I wasn't
997 really involved in school counseling at all.

998 **Rob Graham**

999 Why do you think you didn't have a relationship with school counselors?

1000 **David**

1001 I think you could have gotten involved if you really reached out, but it's not a big thing.
1002 They don't really enforce it. It's something you had to find, and it takes time and a lot of

1003 talking to different people. It's not readily available to us. You had to really dig deep to
1004 get involved, and it's kind of hard to get involved with that stuff when you're already
1005 dealing with school. And many of the counselors were volunteers, and some of the
1006 volunteers might choose to do different things, so they won't be volunteering anymore.
1007 So it's just a mixture of different stuff.

1008 **Rob Graham**

1009 Damn, so if it weren't for that club, would you have had preparation for college?

1010 **David**

1011 I would have zero preparation. The clubs helped me prepare for getting admitted, so I
1012 didn't really have that much preparation for the actual experience; what I would be going
1013 through on a day to day, meal plans, struggles with the classes, money, financial stuff.
1014 Yeah, I wasn't really prepared for much of that.

1015 **Rob Graham**

1016 Ejike, you graduated from the same high school as David and then came to Mason. How
1017 was your experience with that journey?

1018 **Ejike**

1019 At Flowers High School there's a good number of people in science and tech that are
1020 second generation Africans. So the parents who came over to the States grinded, they
1021 went school, got the degrees; they're doctors, some lawyers, some engineers, some are
1022 accountants, and they're well off. Their children are reaping the benefits of what they've
1023 sown. So, ideally it would be my children when I make it to where I want to make it,

1024 reaping the benefits of what I've sown, my parents have sown. That's the group, the circle
1025 that I ran around with.

1026 **Rob Graham**

1027 You have a real genuine two culture thing happening. Is that a fair assessment?

1028 **Ejike**

1029 Un hun

1030 **Rob Graham**

1031 I mean you have a full mastery of and full experience of two cultures. Making sure I tell
1032 your story right. Okay. So, how would you judge your experience in high school? Was it
1033 a positive one? Was it a negative one? What were you up to?

1034 **Ejike**

1035 I've been active, with regards to involvement in organizations and different things since
1036 elementary and middle school honestly. In high school I played sports, but they weren't
1037 really my things, still aren't, but it was nice to do. I also did drama club, Future Leaders
1038 of America's Government, mock trials, and I was also co-president of the African
1039 Student Association. Then of course, we still had the whole science and tech thing that
1040 was going on. I was also National Honor Society my senior year.

1041 **Rob Graham**

1042 You've just been a busy brotha from the gate! How'd you do in high school?

1043 **Ejike**

1044 I did fairly well. I believe I was about 36th in my class out of like 600 and something.

1045 **Rob Graham**

1046 What kind of GPA did that get you?

1047 **Ejike**

1048 I finished off around a 3.66 or something. I didn't do too bad. I credit it to my own work

1049 because I was always the type of person where a lot of things came naturally to me. And I

1050 did the amounts of work that I needed to do to not fail.

1051 **Rob Graham**

1052 You mentioned physics, and there's some literature out there that says if you take classes

1053 that are advanced to a certain degree, it helps you prepare you for your collegiate

1054 experience (Long, Conger, & Iatarola, 2012). Did you take any AP classes?

1055 **Ejike**

1056 I did. I took AP Lit.

1057 **Rob Graham**

1058 How you were prepared for college by your high school? Maybe it was some counseling.

1059 Maybe it's a particular college program or an individual. Talk about the ways in which

1060 people at your school intentionally prepared you for college if you don't mind.

1061 **Ejike**

1062 Flowers prepared me primarily via the science and technology program with the teachers.

1063 They always pushed us to that extra level, and their main thing was like, oh, we're

1064 teaching the way that we're teaching you because when you get to university, teachers are

1065 not going to care about whatever. They will care you just have to make them care, which

1066 is an entirely different conversation. Furthermore, the Flowers science and technology

1067 program provided me with a good deal of exposure to different courses and ways of

1068 thinking, if you will. We're able to do our research practicum at the end of our high
1069 school career which is similar to a bunch of the poster presentations that people in their
1070 master's or PhD programs do. That exposure to that way of thinking and operation was
1071 really, really dope.

1072 **Rob Graham**

1073 What about the counselors? What role did they play in your college preparation?

1074 **Ejike**

1075 I don't recall them playing that much of a vital role in my college preparation. I will say
1076 that the science and technology program coordinator was more of our counselor than any
1077 other actual counselor. She was very vital in a lot of the things that were going on. She of
1078 course is a Black woman. She was a Delta which brought another level of complexities in
1079 the understanding of the collegiate experience. She was a Hampton alum. Her son was
1080 also in my grade, so she had a visceral connection to the students in my class. She was
1081 very honest, always very willing to help. The way she talked to us wasn't really the way a
1082 coordinator of a program would talk to students; she talked to us like a Black mom.

1083 **Rob Graham**

1084 Excellent

1085 **Ejike**

1086 And one thing that Flowers did do around the university, around the school on the
1087 teachers' doors, they had these posters that had the degrees that the people had, and
1088 whatever university they went to, just to start reinforcing the whole collegiate thing. That
1089 was pretty nice.

1090 **Rob Graham**

1091 I've always underestimated the power of college materials posted on school walls, but
1092 after hearing from you and Vertner, there seems to be something there. I guess it makes
1093 sense; I've had the image of my uncle's master's degree etched into my brain since
1094 childhood, and I can see now that connecting him with that accomplishment pushed me
1095 to want at least that level of education. Did you get any intentional, sort of direct talk
1096 about college? You got to college; somebody worked with you to help you get here. Was
1097 there anybody at school where you could say, okay this person helped me pick a school,
1098 this person introduced me to this field, so I understood this better. Was there anybody
1099 like that, doing straight up, pure college conversation?

1100 **Ejike**

1101 I did. Can't remember what it was called, but it was a half a year-long course just on
1102 collegiate preparation. Granted, looking back on it now, it could have been better, there
1103 was room for improvement. But we'd look up different universities, find out their tuition,
1104 room and board, different majors. It didn't make sense then; it didn't click, for whatever
1105 reason. It wasn't until after I accepted my offer during the summer that I did some real
1106 intense research. I started realizing like, although a university may have a computer
1107 science degree, the way they go about doing that computer science degree is completely
1108 different. But that that college class was definitely helpful, and there were other teachers
1109 who were younger who talked to us about university from their experience.

1110 **Rob Graham**

1111 Okay, okay. So, your siblings being older, did they assist you in understanding your
1112 journey to and through college?

1113 **Ejike**

1114 My siblings had different experiences than mine, so I didn't see nor use them as a
1115 resource for anything. So, it was really just kind of like finding out a lot on my own. Of
1116 course, more or less being first generation, my mom couldn't help me. I relied on other
1117 people I knew from Flowers that did well. I remember the class before us, there were
1118 some high performing students, so I would lean on them more than anything else like, ask
1119 them some questions. Like, how do I do this, how do I do that? Those are the people who,
1120 if I had questions I would go through because I knew their experience was somewhat
1121 similar to mine to a degree.

1122 **Rob Graham**

1123 I'd like to bring the counselors back into the loop to hear some of what they and their
1124 schools do to help prepare students for their post-secondary educational experiences.
1125 Crystal, I remember you saying during one of our individual conversations that you'd just
1126 returned from an overnight college trip with some of your students.

1127 **Crystal**

1128 Yeah, the seniors and juniors and sophomores. We went to seven schools in
1129 Pennsylvania, and that morning before I talked to you, I helped a student with his travel
1130 arrangements for a diversity overnight trip to Colorado College, so that was a hectic
1131 stretch.

1132 **Rob Graham**

1133 You work these long hours, especially during the October-December application season
1134 helping students with FAFSA, applications, doing college trips, and educating families.
1135 You do college prep work, and I can hear the piece about admissions and getting students
1136 there. Do you do anything to prepare students for what happens once they get on their
1137 college campuses?

1138 **Crystal**

1139 I try. I feel strongly that it's entirely another role of work. I think college access is one
1140 profession, and I think college retention or matriculation is another. I would say about
1141 40% of our students enter a College to Opportunity Program for New York State. Similar
1142 to a Posse. They get a summer bridge program, full financial aid, of meal plan, books, no
1143 financial barrier. And they get an academic advisor, so the kids that are going in through
1144 Opportunity Programs, I'm usually pretty confident that they're going to be okay. That
1145 being said, I have encountered some opportunity and programs that are fucking bullshit.

1146 **Rob Graham**

1147 I'm sure

1148 **Crystal**

1149 Our school has a bridge to college program where we have former alumni as resources,
1150 so I basically got to nominate a former student of mine who goes to University of
1151 Rochester. He's a sophomore and comes back in the summer to help me with summer
1152 melt. Basically, he will help me with seniors after they graduate in the summer before
1153 they go to school, make sure everybody has sent their immunizations, sent all of their
1154 registration stuff, parents' stuff, pick their housing. That program helps with a lot. In the

1155 high school where I am, I'm responsible for the students in my building, whereas a non-
1156 profit might be responsible for students through the longevity of their educational career,
1157 so they might have that bandwidth to have two roles. Whereas for high school counselors,
1158 we just have to trust that the institution we're sending students off to are going to meet
1159 their needs. Not to mention the fact that my kids get quality college counseling in a
1160 public school while disadvantaged kids in the school downstairs have no college
1161 counselor.

1162 **Rob Graham**

1163 So crazy.

1164 **Crystal**

1165 Yeah. It's crushing. I mean that's why I collect all documents in junior here, so by the
1166 time the kids get to be seniors, I have everything, no matter how the cards fall, I have
1167 everything I need. The timing of documents is never a barrier to progressing in an
1168 admissions process. Again that's just an advantage that they have because they have me,
1169 and that's not fair. It's fucking sad.

1170 **Rob Graham**

1171 I can kind of gather how you feel, but how do you feel walking those halls knowing that
1172 those students who are in that same building don't have a you?

1173 **Crystal**

1174 Last year, I was the debate team coach for the whole campus, all four schools, so I knew
1175 some of their seniors from mock trial. And they kind of just started coming to me. And
1176 then it spread to their friends, and then we started a whole peer mentoring thing with my

1177 students and them. I think my principal is sympathetic to other schools, particularly the
1178 school that's been there the longest, which is kind of just a dropout factory. Those kids
1179 walk into our campus every day probably wishing they went to our school. It's just some
1180 fate; our school is non-selective, so it's really just a random algorithm that assigns kids to
1181 schools.

1182 **Rob Graham**

1183 Rakim, what's happening at your school in terms of college preparation?

1184 **Rakim**

1185 You know, I'm still trying to figure it out with our population. I think I touched on it
1186 earlier, but maybe the students just don't feel like they're ready. Academically, you know
1187 a lot of students may be scared of the real world. You know, we do college fairs, and
1188 they're just not responded to well. They're not taking the SAT, they're not doing a lot of
1189 these things. I'm just trying to really still figure that out. So, speaking with you has been
1190 kind of helpful. I will say this, I want to go back now and kind of go at this like a
1191 scientist.

1192 **Rob Graham**

1193 Man, you read my mind. This sounds like research, a self-study of sorts, like a view into
1194 your own context; this is exactly what I was thinking. It's a beautiful research project, it's
1195 a beautiful problem. You're in the right position, right mindset to do what sounds like
1196 beautiful research.

1197 **Rakim**

1198 Yeah, I gotta figure it out. I have to figure this out because I want to be able to serve that
1199 population. We've got all these high schools right next door to each other, but the
1200 mindsets are so different. Now I know we got dynamite kids, right. I'm just trying to
1201 crack this thing, so I can better serve the students because this is frustrating. You know,
1202 especially after I just put all this work together for this college tour, and I couldn't get as
1203 many as I wanted to go over. In fact, we decided in our counseling department that we're
1204 not having a college and career fair this year. Last year when the college reps came, they
1205 were like, your kids were not prepared, they didn't know what they wanted to do. Your
1206 food was great, but your kids don't know what they want to do. This is pretty much a
1207 waste of time. Hopefully the answer is getting some teachers in there that can better equip
1208 the students, so they feel more confident, go on with their lives doing what they want to
1209 do.

1210 **Rob Graham**

1211 Man, you're gonna have me thinking about that problem, dreaming about that problem. It
1212 comes from such a good place, and it's so organic, and it needs to be solved. If you find
1213 yourself starting the project, let me know. Maybe I can help you. What do your students
1214 need to know about college going? Something maybe they don't see the importance of
1215 yet or that you keep trying to tell them that's not clicking or registering?

1216 **Rakim**

1217 I think the first thing is that everybody can go. I just went Friday to Montgomery College
1218 and heard about a lot of scholarships and things of that nature, the Promise Scholarship,
1219 all these grants and stuff. I just think it's incumbent upon the counselor to know these

1220 things because, like I said before, we are the ones that should know all this information
1221 about scholarships and grants and so forth, and we should be bringing it to our students. I
1222 just think the kids need to know, hey, there's opportunity out there for you. Forget what
1223 you may have heard, especially our Hispanic/Latino population. I'm taking them on a
1224 college tour on Wednesday, 30 or 35 students. Before we get there, I'm going to speak to
1225 them all personally, hey, there's opportunity out there for you as well. I think a lot of our
1226 students probably view it as a rich man's or rich family's kind of thing. Just off the top of
1227 my head right now, I think a lot of that might be a financial thing, where a lot of them are
1228 saying, hey, you know, I can't afford that. They need to know about some of the
1229 programs and availability of money, especially for unaccompanied youth, for foster care
1230 youth. There are opportunities, they just gotta believe and tap into their counselor. One of
1231 the things that I always communicate to them is I wasn't a dynamite student. And I say,
1232 especially for you young men, it clicked for me when I got to college, and I graduated.
1233 You know, I was retained in eighth grade. So, I make sure I just give that to them. And
1234 for a lot of them, let's start off a little slowly. Especially with males in high school, we're
1235 just going through the motions a lot. But when we get closer to the prize, we start to see a
1236 little more clearly.

1237 **Rob Graham**

1238 So Eve, College preparation. What do you do? I'm getting a sense of what your workload
1239 is like, and what you're asked to do generally. What do you do in terms of, or does your
1240 school do in terms of preparing students for college? I really want to know about you and
1241 your team.

1242 **Eve**

1243 Well, I can only speak about myself. Prince George's County invested in this program
1244 called Naviance. Naviance has been in existence for a very long time. My kids had it
1245 when they were growing up, but I think it's kind of obsolete now. But they finally
1246 invested in it, so this is pretty much our second year. The first year, three years ago was a
1247 pilot program, and the school I'm working at was one of the pilots. We have to promote it
1248 as counselors. We have to teach the students how to use it. You see the issue with that?

1249 **Rob Graham**

1250 Mmm? I mean, it's another thing that keeps you away from doing...

1251 **Eve**

1252 Well, I don't have classes every day.

1253 **Rob Graham**

1254 So, student contact also. You're not reaching all the students.

1255 **Eve**

1256 Well, and we're monitored. Like, hey, we looked at your class, and this is how many kids
1257 did such and such. Anyway, there's a scope and sequence for every grade level, and I was
1258 able to get my juniors to do it. We do guidance lessons. Quarterly we go into the
1259 classrooms. I have it set up on Mondays. We'll be in their second and third periods, I
1260 believe, in two classes, where I'm going to introduce this platform. It's a web-based
1261 platform where students can do interest inventories, and from the results, it will produce
1262 categories of career planning choices that you may want to go into. You can investigate

1263 the careers and the colleges that offer majors for this, then compare throughout the
1264 United States the salary range.

1265 **Rob Graham**

1266 I actually do something like that with my students at Mason, the freshmen. They're still
1267 exploring, by the way, when they're freshmen, they're still looking around and still
1268 figuring things out.

1269 **Eve**

1270 Of course

1271 **Rob Graham**

1272 Okay, so you do the Naviance thing, and you do the guidance visits.

1273 **Eve**

1274 We do the Naviance thing, and that is going to be how I push them to explore colleges
1275 from now on because we're being monitored. I need to make sure they do all of these
1276 things, and I give them deadlines. I show them how to do it. Then I go, and I read reports.
1277 I team up with the English teachers because everyone has English. Every quarter, we
1278 build on an activity related to your post-secondary goal. This is from ninth grade on up.
1279 So, we follow our students until they graduate, and then we start it all over again. It's a
1280 progression thing, and we walk through it. We do meetings with the families. We're
1281 going to have this thing in April where we bring the parents in to talk called Junior
1282 Options Night. We're going to have people from FAFSA there, show you how to request
1283 your transcript, and show you how to request a letter of recommendation through
1284 Naviance.

1285 **Rob Graham**

1286 Un hun, un hun

1287 **Eve**

1288 It's all building, and then like I said, the quarterly guidance lessons, the parent programs
1289 that we host, and then we team up with the county. We have a college and career office in
1290 the county that does stuff pretty much quarterly. They do a college application night, and
1291 it includes a how to write a personal statement and how to write essays to apply to
1292 colleges. They do the FAFSA piece all the time. If you go through the cycle, you'll begin
1293 to understand. People want it now though. I get a lot of parent requests to meet
1294 individually, but I just don't have that time. I tell them to log into Naviance, and explore
1295 that option because you could search scholarships, colleges, careers. You have to go and
1296 sign up yourself to take the SAT on your own.

1297 **Rob Graham**

1298 Success in college. Do you guys do any work to maybe prepare them for what's going to
1299 happen once they get there?

1300 **Eve**

1301 Un hun.

1302 **Rob Graham**

1303 Can you tell me a little bit about that? And also, I can't leave this conversation without
1304 hearing if you do anything specific for my population of interest, Black males. Do you
1305 tailor anything to them?

1306 **Eve**

1307 Absolutely not. I have a high expectation for my students, and I expect them to meet it,
1308 but I don't just say, reach this, see if you can get there. I show you how to get there, step
1309 by step. So, I don't do anything specific with Black males.

1310 **Rob Graham**

1311 So most of your work is getting the access, like getting them in there. Is there anything
1312 you would want to know if you had an opportunity to hear from some of the students that
1313 you worked with that are now in college? Like, is there anything about their experiences
1314 you'd want to know?

1315 **Eve**

1316 I mean we talk about that. And you know, I always ask them, what can we do better? And
1317 of course, it's like make things more fun, and they really wanted to be more engaged in
1318 the classroom.

1319 **Rob Graham**

1320 Mmm!

1321

1322 **In what ways do the narratives of school counselors and students from urban**
1323 **districts indicate alignment between preparation for college in their schools of origin**
1324 **and the African American male first-year experience at George Mason University?**

1325 **Rob Graham**

1326 Let's address this final research question if we can. This seems to be the question that can
1327 reveal clear policy implications for both secondary and post-secondary institutions as
1328 well as practice implications for school counselors and support personnel at George

1329 Mason University. Perhaps we start by hearing how the students' experienced their
1330 college preparation at the university. So Vertner, let's get back to you for a moment with
1331 a bit of a recap. In terms of preparing for college, you began that process by thinking
1332 about where you'd play college soccer, which was part of the culture of your high school.
1333 Your mindset shifted toward a broader consideration of college after you got injured and
1334 the programming around college kind of picked up. Your school did a good job of getting
1335 you geared up for college by engaging you in conversation through staff and faculty,
1336 hanging banners in the hallways, providing waivers for the SAT and ACT. Outside of
1337 high school, preparation for college was through community. It was your church. It was
1338 your brothas who went to school ahead of you. Most of the focus was on choosing a
1339 school that was a proper match and getting admitted. Did you kind of imagine how
1340 college was going to be? What happened when you got there/here?

1341 **Vertner**

1342 I would say I really had no picture of what college was going to be like. I mean I had like
1343 some idea in terms of the academic aspect, but in terms of the social life and stuff like
1344 that, I had no idea. Mainly because I had never heard of Mason until like a year or two, a
1345 before.

1346 Also, my sisters commuted back and forth to school, so I didn't really get to see their
1347 college social life. I kept an open mind, because I didn't want to be disappointed, and I
1348 didn't want to be unappreciative of it. I just stayed in my room or whatever. Orientation
1349 was weird for me too. I definitely didn't want to go back. I don't know why I felt like that,
1350 but maybe it's because it I was my first kind of time being away from home. Mason was

1351 also initially challenging because the majority of the people around me were White, and I
1352 was used being around all Black people. It was like culture shock in a sense, but like I
1353 said, when I got back home from orientation, you know, I reminded myself to keep an
1354 open mind.

1355 **Rob Graham**

1356 Un hun. Tell me what happened freshman year when you started doing the work. Tell me
1357 if the advice that you received matched the experience that you had here. What'd you
1358 think about the work? What'd you think about the social, social situation here? How was
1359 your experience transitioning here?

1360 **Vertner**

1361 I would say that from the first moment, it was kind of weird. I was just there, you know,
1362 by myself unpacking my stuff. At first, I felt some type of way because my roommate's
1363 parents were there, but I think our campus has a real good way of making people feel at
1364 home. The RA, as soon as everyone got moved in, had a meeting, and then we went out
1365 for programming to help get you comfortable. It wasn't just, okay, freshmen move in.
1366 Figure your way out. They helped out for a week long, and that rapport was built.

1367 **Rob Graham**

1368 Nice. We can give Mason some props for setting the stage for a comfortable initial
1369 transition. Even the very first steps can be anxious moments.

1370 **Vertner**

1371 In terms of academics, I would say freshman year, both semesters actually, was very,
1372 very good for me. I got like a 3.5, 3.6. I think my freshman year GPA was really good

1373 because I always knew from my guidance counselor from high school to have a good
1374 freshman year GPA. In terms of classes, they were pretty straightforward.

1375 **Rob Graham**

1376 Have you been the same major the whole time?

1377 **Vertner**

1378 Yeah. I had the same major the whole way. The more challenging part, which is again a
1379 fact of freshman orientation, is trying to figure out how to schedule classes. I don't know
1380 why that was so hard to me looking back, but it was just a new ordeal to me, and I feel
1381 like the counselors for Mason, weren't really helpful in that moment. But, you know,
1382 there was like a lot of us in that room to try to help, but they weren't really helpful. I
1383 figured it out on my own back at home.

1384 My second semester made me see the importance of the professor. I heard people talking
1385 about, oh this professor's hard, and this professor's hard. So not necessarily the class, but
1386 it's all about the professor. So at that point, moving forward, I always researched each
1387 professor.

1388 **Rob Graham**

1389 Do you feel like you had the information that you needed from your high school in order
1390 to be successful? Do you feel like they set you up enough in terms of like college
1391 preparation?

1392 **Vertner**

1393 Let's say yeah. They kind of put me in a right mind frame. They gave me the gas in my
1394 car. However, I will say I wish I'd known more about the financial part. More about

1395 resources, the ins and out of FASFA, scholarships. Also, maybe more actual program
1396 details. To expand upon that, you have your science majors and your math majors.
1397 Maybe going through the details, this is what you'll probably learn, these are the
1398 curricula, these are the degree requirements from different schools.

1399 **Rob Graham**

1400 That sounds like common sense to me. Why do you think they don't do that? Or didn't do
1401 that?

1402 **Vertner**

1403 I would think resources and time because like my school, there's a lot of like people that
1404 will drop out. So in terms of like priorities, they might try to get you to finish high school
1405 and then, show you college rather than show you the actual ins and outs of the academic
1406 ways of college. It's kind of like prioritizing things.

1407 **Rob Graham**

1408 When did you pledge your fraternity here?

1409 **Vertner**

1410 I pledged my sophomore year.

1411 **Rob Graham**

1412 And did that help your academics at all, getting that inside information from your
1413 brothas?

1414 **Vertner**

1415 Not necessarily with my academics because that was always top tier priority for me, but it
1416 helped me with career tracking.

1417 **Rob Graham**

1418 If somebody asked me to characterize your experience, I might say, this is a brotha who's
1419 an example of how to be successful. I don't think there's anything about your background,
1420 you just you just hopped on and just rode!

1421 **Vertner**

1422 Yeah!

1423 **Rob Graham**

1424 You just rode out! I think there's some success there, and I don't want to get talking about
1425 the research too much, but a lot of choices, your decisions, and your road matches what
1426 I've heard about brothas who have been able to be successful in college, which is the
1427 staying active, calling home when you need some support, having a connection to your
1428 home (Guiffrida, 2006), um, supportive family and all that. The super activity (Tinto,
1429 1975), the IB program (Smith & Zhang, 2008), the fraternity (Goldrick-Rab, 2007). Is
1430 there anything you think high school counselors should know about the first year of
1431 college for African American dudes? A lot of the focus is on getting them accepted, but
1432 now there's a little bit of research where people are like, wait a minute; we need to know
1433 what's happening when they get there (Mathewson, 2017; Kowalski, 2017, July 19).

1434 **Vertner**

1435 Yeah. I would say definitely look at the dropout rates, first-year dropout rates. I think
1436 that's when it's the highest?

1437 **Rob Graham**

1438 It is, and we're the least likely group to return after freshmen year (Espinosa, Turk,
1439 Taylor, & Chessman, 2019).

1440 **Vertner**

1441 When you look at it from high school, you get a lot of pressure. I even see it with my
1442 friends. They'll go to college first year, and then you see them back at home the next
1443 year. I think it's important that we look at that and what's going on. The thing is, the
1444 pressure kind of lets up once you're in the first year. You get that sense of independence
1445 and take your foot off of the gas pedal. Some people also think college is a scam because
1446 they don't see the benefit.

1447 **Rob Graham**

1448 So you think that freshman year maybe brothas need more structure? Like an additional
1449 year of structure until they understand what kind of system they're in?

1450 **Vertner**

1451 Yeah

1452 **Rob Graham**

1453 That makes sense. Wait, did you play soccer here your freshman year?

1454 **Vertner**

1455 Yeah.

1456 **Rob Graham**

1457 Okay so you walked in with a little structure, had somebody to be accountable to.

1458 Teammates, coaches, school really.

1459 **Vertner**

1460 Yeah, I knew I didn't want to go back home, so I was like, I gotta stay here.

1461 **Rob Graham**

1462 Anything you think Mason should know about the first year of college for African

1463 American dudes?

1464 **Vertner**

1465 I would say

1466 **Rob Graham**

1467 And let me tell you, whatever you're about to say, they're not hearing it from people like

1468 you very often, so I think this is an opportunity.

1469 **Vertner**

1470 Yeah, I would say, what Mason kind of preaches is not necessarily how they quote-

1471 unquote act. They preach inclusion and diversity and stuff, but when you kinda get in the

1472 meet and greet of everything, past like orientation and stuff like that, and you're in the

1473 class, you don't always see that. Whether it is the professors that you see, advisors,

1474 especially advisors, like different resources. They'll give you one thing, like the minority

1475 support office, and they'll say, use that as a resource. Now one thing they did do good is

1476 we have an LLC on campus, living learning community for Black men.

1477 **Rob Graham**

1478 Really?! That's what I was waiting on.

1479 **Vertner**

1480 Yeah, so that's just started this year. I think that was a real good step to see. I guess that's

1481 the first step of making sure there's inclusion.

1482 **Rob Graham**

1483 So, it sounds like you're saying, okay Mason's supposed to be this diverse, inclusion kind
1484 of place, but where is it in the classroom? Where is it in the advising? It needs to be more
1485 than just one resource and orientation.

1486 **Vertner**

1487 It looks diverse, but where's the inclusion? Because diversity and inclusion are two
1488 different things.

1489 **Rob Graham**

1490 Ejike, Flowers High School prepared you in a couple of ways.

1491 Officially/programmatically the college preparation course that you took was helpful,
1492 differently helpful in retrospect. The information on faculty doors kept the spirit of
1493 college and college familiarity stirring. The school counselors didn't help with college
1494 preparation but the science and tech coordinator was quite helpful. She approached the
1495 work as a Black mom to the students, and the fact that she was a Delta added some
1496 complexity to the thinking about the college experience. The science and tech teachers
1497 provided a rigorous course experience that was intended to serve as a preview of what
1498 was to come after high school. Given the fact that you are a first generation college
1499 student and your siblings journeys' were so different, you relied on older peers to close
1500 information gaps you had in preparing for Mason. How did you think college would be,
1501 and did it wind up being how you envisioned it?

1502 **Ejike**

1503 My transition to here was definitely interesting because there was a part of me that felt
1504 lonely, primarily because I would look around the university and see a lot of people that
1505 came from Virginia Beach or Hampton or Richmond. They have their individual cliques
1506 from their similar upbringing and surroundings, and that makes sense because Mason is
1507 in Virginia. So, I joined organizations and what not. I was freshman class president, but
1508 at the end of that year, they disbanded that entity. So I was like, I haven't really found my
1509 place; I don't think I'll find my place here. I was considering transferring to University of
1510 Maryland because a lot of my friends from high school went there. I decided I'd give it
1511 one more semester here at Mason; then I would make a decision. My sophomore year I
1512 was the vice president of an African organization, and I was also a senator in student
1513 government. That whole aspect of being a vice president was really the turning point of
1514 my finding my niche at Mason, staying here, and of my leadership. I was at the starting
1515 point of my rise in the ranks in the Black community here.

1516 **Rob Graham**

1517 It sounds to me, I'm reaching into your brain a little bit, if somebody would have asked
1518 you about the secrets of your success here at Mason, you would attribute a lot of that to
1519 being so active in your extracurricular stuff,

1520 **Ejike**

1521 Precisely, because I thoroughly believe that you want to not simply attend a university,
1522 but be involved and have a holistic experience. I'm sure that some do, but it just does not
1523 make sense to me because I couldn't imagine just coming here going to class and going
1524 back to my room and doing nothing. That's just not my cup of tea. The best part about

1525 university is not the classes, not the education. You can learn all that stuff on YouTube.
1526 The best part about this is the experience, the conversation, the people, the arguments.
1527 The differences of opinion, the exposure, the workshops, the talks. The professors, the
1528 advisors, just like everything in between, the demonstrators. All of that makes up so
1529 much of a holistic collegiate experience.

1530 **Rob Graham**

1531 I agree, and educational literature supports your perspective; being active in student
1532 organizations and extra-curricular activities has aided brothas with their first-experiences
1533 (Harper & Newman, 2016). What kind of support did you have when you got here from
1534 professionals, in terms of advising or anything like that? Would you say that you had
1535 some strong advising to help you with your transition once you got here?

1536 **Ejike**

1537 Oh, most definitely. I would not be the man that I am today without the strength, support,
1538 love, care, and advice of the people who have gotten me to where I am today. Going back
1539 to being freshman class president, the advisor was a Liberian woman who was doing her
1540 master's at the time. I'm 24, and she's probably like three, five years older than me, more
1541 like a big sister than anything else. There were other people in the organization, but the
1542 way she talked to me and interacted with me was coming from that mutual background of
1543 we're African, we think differently, we operate differently, we should show up and
1544 represent ourselves differently. She really held it down for me over the years. I've met
1545 with many advisors, many people, mentors official and unofficial that have really shaped

1546 who I am in my thought process and all of those different things. One of the most
1547 influential doesn't work here anymore, Gavin Graves (Pseudonym).

1548 **Rob Graham**

1549 I remember him. Used to teach the first generation transition courses.

1550 **Ejike**

1551 He was phenomenal in helping me find myself and my voice.

1552 **Rob Graham**

1553 It sounds a little bit, I don't want to use random like a negative word, but it sounds like
1554 the support you got was a little bit random in that it's sort of unexpected. Random that
1555 you would click with the Liberian sista. Random that you would click with Gavin. Would
1556 you say that there's enough support for freshmen coming in? Freshmen brothas coming
1557 in?

1558 **Ejike**

1559 They have to fight. They have to be willing to find it and fight for it. The support is there;
1560 people just have to know how to find it. And you know, knowing how to find it is going
1561 out of your comfort zone or asking questions of older Black people you see on campus:
1562 Black faculty, Black students, Black student leaders, the different group organizations on
1563 campus. If a Black freshman came to me and said, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't
1564 know how to do the college thing. I'm struggling. Can you give me some advice? I would
1565 find time in my schedule and have a conversation.

1566 **Rob Graham**

1567 I got two questions that I just feel like I need to ask you, and I don't even know if they fit
1568 what I'm trying to do here. If you had a couple of freshmen brothas come to you and say,
1569 what's a good organization to join early in my college career to help me kind of navigate
1570 and get my bearings and all that kind of stuff? Because you know, they can be floating in
1571 the wind a little bit. What would be the organization or the group?

1572 **Ejike**

1573 That's hard for me to see at this point. It's hard for me to say, because the offices,
1574 organizations, and people that I knew are no longer here. So I can't wholeheartedly
1575 recommend something or someone to somebody because I don't know what their impact
1576 is with students. I honestly would even only be able to say the general ones. Of course,
1577 Diversity Services (Pseudonym) are there. In its heyday, my freshman and sophomore
1578 and junior year it was a place where Black students just went to chill, talk, kick it. It used
1579 to be big after dark, but now Diversity Services has become like a transactional space.
1580 People just go there to get their needs met, and they keep it pushing. There's no longer
1581 that safe space. From what I've seen, it has transitioned from a space for Black folk to a
1582 space more for like Brown, which kinda leaves Black folk out. And for me, you know,
1583 this being my seventh year in university, I have literally seen the Black community
1584 transition from it being somewhat close-knit, to it being what it is today, almost night and
1585 day.

1586 **Rob Graham**

1587 I made this assertion, and you kind of went with it a little bit, the fact that you've got
1588 these two cultures. Do you think that the fact that you've got these two cultures has been
1589 a plus for you and your educational journey?

1590 **Ejike**

1591 Definitely. Because I don't consider myself African American, I don't consider myself
1592 Black American, I consider myself probably Nigerian American. Born in Nigeria, raised
1593 in The States, but I was raised in a very Nigerian household. So Nigerian, within closed
1594 doors, and then, African American, outside or in the other community. So it's very much
1595 a dichotomy of how I see things, so I can understand how Black Americans process and
1596 how they think and understand. And then of course you have the Nigerian Americans and
1597 the Nigerians and how they think and process different things, and the, the two different
1598 cultures have shaped my way of thinking. So definitely very much a benefit, very much.

1599 **Rob Graham**

1600 Let me lay this out, Ejike. Once here, you relied on advice you'd received imploring you
1601 to remain true to your identity and values; that was your protection against the forces that
1602 made transitioning to the university an up and down experience. Part of your "secret
1603 sauce" on all academic levels has been your extracurricular activity, the piece of the
1604 university experience that you think is the most important in crafting an enriching,
1605 holistic experience. You believe the resources are there to support the transition to
1606 university for Black freshmen males, but they must look and fight for them.
1607 Unfortunately, the Black campus community no longer has a safe space for Black
1608 students that Diversity Services once was, as it has transitioned away from Black and

1609 toward an emphasis on Brown. You believe your inner identity as a Nigerian coupled
1610 with your outer identity as an African American has given you a broader lens and thus a
1611 general advantage as you have navigated Mason and the world. You've been here for
1612 seven years, you've seen the history. You've got a lot to say, and I think people can learn
1613 a lot from you, and people should really hear your voice. That's just real you know, and
1614 helping Mason decide about policy issues and where to spend their resources, who to
1615 spend their resources on. My Brotha, I appreciate you. So David, where are you with all
1616 this?

1617 **David**

1618 So George Mason, I like this school. At Mason you really have to pace yourself and pick
1619 and choose what groups you want to be in or associate yourself with. I think everybody in
1620 the Black community knows each other because it's not that big. There's still problems
1621 that occur on the campus between different groups and stuff like that, but for the most
1622 part it's avoidable. Time management, that's a big thing here. You have to take the time
1623 and do your work. George Mason also has a lot of clubs you can get involved in; like I
1624 was involved with the BSA, Black Student Association, for a little bit. I'm not African,
1625 but I was involved with the African Student Association. But one thing is, for my major
1626 econ, I believe that a lot of the teachers expect you to have a certain amount of
1627 knowledge before you come to the school.

1628 **Rob Graham**

1629 What do you mean?

1630 **David**

1631 So that was a hard thing, trying to figure out what major was good for me. I was initially
1632 a biology major, and I switched over to be an econ major because my first class, I didn't
1633 know what I was doing at all. And even the econ major, I'm enjoying it now that I had a
1634 teacher that was able to sit down with me and teach me some of the economic principles

1635 **Rob Graham**

1636 Mmm!

1637 **David**

1638 and stuff like that, but before that, I didn't know anything about economics. My high
1639 school didn't provide me with any economic classes, so I was lost. Everybody else knew
1640 what they were doing. A few students would tell me they were involved in clubs growing
1641 up, like since middle school, economic clubs to help them prepare for college. So they're
1642 doing these things since middle school, and I'm coming to college not knowing what
1643 economics is!

1644 **Rob Graham**

1645 Just fresh! Meanwhile, for your classmates it was just more of what they'd already been
1646 doing in high school and middle school.

1647 **David**

1648 Yeah, exactly! It just sounds good! So I'm like, let me get into economics. That was the
1649 biggest thing about this school, they really expect you to have some type of background
1650 in the field.

1651 **Rob Graham**

1652 Okay, I'm sure you imagined college would be a particular way. You know we all have
1653 imaginations. Was Mason what you had imagined before you got here?

1654 **David**

1655 Um, no. I thought every college was the same, so I thought it'd be like big parties
1656 everywhere, like everywhere you go, you just see parties and stuff and like

1657 **Rob Graham**

1658 Like in the movies

1659 **David**

1660 Yeah, in the movies, exactly. That's basically exactly what I thought it would be. But,
1661 coming to this college is actually good for me because I don't have that peer pressure to
1662 actually be involved in parties. Everybody works for the most part.

1663 **Rob Graham**

1664 So not the party situation you thought. Any other thoughts about your imagination vs
1665 reality?

1666 **David**

1667 Right. Well in my imagination I also thought there would be, I don't want to say mentors
1668 necessarily, but people that will be available to help, more advisors around, but you kind
1669 of have to find that yourself. I thought they would be more on top of us, but it's like, no,
1670 we're adults now, so I wasn't ready for that transition.

1671 **Rob Graham**

1672 Did you seek out support from like advisor type people?

1673 **David**

1674 Yes, I definitely sought out support for academic advisors, so I was able to talk to them. I
1675 also think your advising was a different level advising that I needed because they advised
1676 on picking your classes, but they can't advise us on the college life. So when I sought out
1677 and met you, that was really the big difference in me actually learning how to develop
1678 and how to come into college being strong and successful. That's the biggest support that
1679 I needed coming in.

1680 That support isn't really available. The academic advisors that's here, they tell us what
1681 classes to pick, how to graduate, how many classes and credits we need to graduate, but
1682 they don't really advise us on how to survive in college.

1683 **Rob Graham**

1684 Why do you think that is?

1685 **David**

1686 I think that's not their primary job, so they don't really focus on that, but I think if we did
1687 reach out and had those conversations with them, they would actually advise us on how
1688 to survive in college.

1689 **Rob Graham**

1690 So you had some conversation with Ebony (Pseudonym).

1691 **David**

1692 Ebony, yes. See that was a different advisor, that's different. I could actually talk to her,
1693 and she'll like check up on me. She is a different academic advisor, but for the most part,
1694 I think that she understood my situation. That's what it takes, for someone to understand
1695 where you come from.

1696 **Rob Graham**

1697 I had done some work with Ebony, so I talked to her. I was like, look, I got this kid. I'm
1698 out of my depth. I'm looking for somebody to support him, but he's a special kid. This is a
1699 special program. I need somebody who's going to advise him differently. I need you to
1700 advise this kid like you're advising your son or your nephew. I need you to add some love
1701 to the mix. You know what I mean?

1702 **David**

1703 Yeah.

1704 **Rob Graham**

1705 She was open, she was excited about the prospect. We kind of shared the same values and
1706 stuff, so that's why I asked her. Maybe that's a little bit of the difference maker, her
1707 mindset. You know rather than just you just being another student in her portfolio, I was
1708 like, I need you to treat him like special cargo.

1709 **David**

1710 Right, and I definitely felt that, yeah.

1711 **Rob Graham**

1712 Would you say that brothas need a bit more than the help with the schedules when they
1713 come to Mason?

1714 **David**

1715 Yes, definitely. That's a big thing that brothas really need on this campus. They need
1716 more support than the average student, because the average student already experienced
1717 college from high school. That's basically college for them as far as the classes, the

1718 difficulty level of the classes. But we come to college introverted. Who are these different
1719 races? There's a lot of factors that throw us off in college and possibly make us go in the
1720 wrong direction. I mean it's not really peer pressure, but it's like a whole different world.

1721 **Rob Graham**

1722 Do you think you were prepared for college? I know this is kind of a broad question.

1723 **David**

1724 I don't think I was completely prepared for college at all, no.

1725 **Rob Graham**

1726 So what would you need? What could your high school counseling have done to make
1727 your experience smoother?

1728 **David**

1729 Smoother? I think they could have educated me more on the financial part of college as
1730 well because I came to college expecting books to be cheap. That's one part, and books
1731 are like \$1,000 a semester! As far as like the dorms and stuff like that, just being able to
1732 get along with different people. I think they should have educated us on how to get along
1733 with different people in different races and stuff like that. My first roommate I had, he's a
1734 different race, and he didn't have the same values as me.

1735 **Rob Graham**

1736 Did you ever hear about summer bridge programs like TRIO or anything like that?

1737 Or Upward Bound? Why didn't you do that?

1738 **David**

1739 I wasn't aware until one of my friends told me about it. They were like, oh, I was in the
1740 summer program that we had. They were able to like live with different people, so they
1741 already had their roommates.

1742 **Rob Graham**

1743 Right. It's unfortunate that you didn't hear about the pre-college programs. That's
1744 something that is suggested of school counselors, that they encourage students to
1745 participate in those programs (NACAC, 2018). And they get a little bit of a jump I think
1746 in terms of understanding what they're about to get into.

1747 **David**

1748 Yes, they had a whole summer to understand what they're about to get into. So I'd have
1749 definitely got into that if I knew about it before college.

1750 **Rob Graham**

1751 Why did you pick biology initially?

1752 **David**

1753 Initially I was interested in being a doctor. I was interested in that because I had family
1754 that were doctors, and I used to watch what they were doing, and I thought it was cool.
1755 But I learned, just because you think something is cool (Rob chuckles), that doesn't mean
1756 it's meant for you, you know?

1757 **Rob Graham**

1758 Right. I think I learned some really interesting stuff about you. Your high school needed
1759 to do some things, but I think it's also important to understand that the high schools are
1760 not doing those things. So what needs to happen on the college side? You know I don't

1761 want to let the college off the hook. The college needs to be realistic about what's
1762 happening on that other side, and they need to respond. My sister says this thing, don't
1763 admit people to the school if you're not going to support them.

1764 **David**

1765 Right. I kind of noticed that when I'm talking to minorities at this school, a lot of them
1766 choose the easy majors, the easy route out. They'll do like history, but they'd be like, I'm
1767 interested in economics, but you know, I don't know how that will go. But if they just had
1768 that one person to talk to, they would know what to expect in these classes, and they'll
1769 know how to prepare. You helped me with that, but if I didn't have a MATE scholarship,
1770 and the MATE foundation to support me in that way, I wouldn't know what to expect
1771 from a lot of these majors. I probably would have picked something like history to get the
1772 easy way through.

1773 **Rob Graham**

1774 Hmm! If you could have done high school a different way that you think would have
1775 made you more successful in college, what would that be?

1776 **David**

1777 That's a great question. I spoke last meeting about how a lot of people in the inner city
1778 keep to ourselves. You know we don't really speak on the bigger picture, have those deep
1779 conversations. I believe having those deep conversations creates stronger bonds that last
1780 longer, you know. I believe I shoulda had those deeper conversations because I believe
1781 that that would have allowed me to grow socially in college, you know.

1782 **Rob Graham**

1783 Mmm! Hmm, interesting. That's real interesting right there. Anything you think high
1784 school counselors should know about the first year of college for African American
1785 brothas? What do you want those high school counselors to know about our experience,
1786 your experience?

1787 **David**

1788 I want high school counselors to be aware that when we first attend college, we're
1789 completely lost. That's just the reality of it, especially coming from a predominately
1790 Black area, and attending predominantly Caucasian institute. It's a different culture here,
1791 so you're feeling out of place a little bit. I kind of felt out of place. I also had a weird
1792 feeling that people were smarter than me because everybody just looked so intelligent. I
1793 felt like it'll be hard to make those social connections, like they like might feel like they're
1794 better than me. They have to understand that we have to start building the mindset early,
1795 like in high school.

1796 **Rob Graham**

1797 When did you start feeling like, I'm smart? I'm just as smart as anybody else here on
1798 campus. When did that transition happen for you?

1799 **David**

1800 I needed the male figure to talk to. So just me going out and doing different things, being
1801 in the environment. Like, I remember you sent me to go talk to Dr. Geoff. Just going out
1802 and doing these different things and having these different experiences, you're like oh
1803 okay, I could do this. And when you're actually looking at the work and communicating
1804 with these people you're like, oh okay, we're all on the same platform here, nobody's

1805 better than me. Me building study groups and just talking, putting myself out there. I had
1806 to really put myself out there and get involved in clubs and stuff like that.

1807 **Rob Graham**

1808 How long did it take?

1809 **David**

1810 I'm not gonna lie. I'd say after my freshman year, like two semesters. That's how deep it
1811 really is.

1812 Coming into sophomore year I felt more comfortable, but freshman year I felt like I was
1813 completely lost and like I didn't belong in the culture at all.

1814 **Rob Graham**

1815 When you were having those thoughts like, hey everybody's smarter than me, did you
1816 ever think about leaving?

1817 **David**

1818 Yes, I'm not gonna lie. I honestly thought about leaving my first year. I thought I didn't
1819 belong here at all. I wasn't familiar with most of the majors, a lot of the classes, like the
1820 prerequisites for these classes. A lot of these students I spoke with, especially during my
1821 first year, I'm like, how do y'all know this stuff? Our high school taught the subjects. For
1822 instance, a lot of these chemistry classes and physics and stuff like that, I never had in
1823 high school at all. So I was just thinking about saying, you know what, forget it. I just
1824 want to leave. That's what the university needs to understand. This is a different world.

1825 **Rob Graham**

1826 It's a different world.

1827 **David**

1828 It's a different level of education. I had to start from ground zero with a lot of the work I
1829 did, especially with math, because I didn't take any calculus class in high school. I don't
1830 even think they had a calculus class, to be honest. So I had to start from ground zero and
1831 do a lot of the prerequisites when I got here. I had to get tutors and go to the math
1832 tutoring center. I was the one in there all the time, just to learn.

1833 **Rob Graham**

1834 I can't believe you did it. One of the things I just think is so special about you is, you hear
1835 advice, and you do it!

1836 **David**

1837 Appreciate it. I remember you gave me that advice, to go to the math tutoring center. I
1838 talk to a lot of people, and I give them the same advice. I'm like, you need to do this; this
1839 is the only way. The extra-curricular stuff you have to do outside of school, to succeed,
1840 you just have to do it. We have to do extra. It looks easy for them because we kind of get
1841 disadvantaged; we feel like we're disadvantaged, and we start losing faith in school.
1842 We're looking at these people like, okay y'all, just do the work quickly. They're done in
1843 five minutes, and they could just go and have a social life, but we're sitting here working.

1844 **Rob Graham**

1845 What you forget is, what you're doing is more remarkable because you're coming from a
1846 completely different place! The fact that you're here and fighting is more remarkable than
1847 somebody who's doing something that's already super familiar.

1848 **David**

1849 Right, exactly. It's more remarkable right. And towards the end, it's always a bigger
1850 reward, right?

1851 **Rob Graham**

1852 Right

1853 **Open Chat- Synthesis and Building**

1854 **Rob Graham**

1855 Any questions or comments for the group?

1856 **Rakim**

1857 This is for the young brothas. I talked earlier about my struggles in high school, getting to
1858 some of the youth that are just apathetic, and my answer right now is just to keep on
1859 pushing. What do suggest or what should be a route?

1860 **David**

1861 My advice is, especially with kids that are always in trouble for instance, I think as a
1862 counselor you could probably try to see what the deeper picture is, see what they're really
1863 going through like personally because everything starts with the personal standpoint, you
1864 know. I was getting to the fact that a lot of people don't consider college because they
1865 have to take care of family, and pay bills, and worry about grown man stuff at such a
1866 young age, so college is not even a consideration. So, I believe that first assisting them
1867 with the small things and then you can start you know, working on the bigger stuff.

1868 **Rob Graham**

1869 Locating the trauma a little bit here.

1870 **Vertner**

1871 I know like in my high school, we always have either the guys who like running in the
1872 street coming to class here and there, and also brothas on the football team who do both,
1873 on the team and in the streets too. People on my football team that had a chance of
1874 playing in college, they would still do college stuff to get recruited. That would give them
1875 motivation to go to college, and I've seen that kind of translate throughout the rest of our
1876 team as a sense of, you know, he's going to college, so why can't I? I might not be getting
1877 a scholarship, but I could still go to college. So it's kind of like investigating their friend
1878 group. We try to build them up, and peers follow their peers.

1879 **David**

1880 That's a great point definitely that's like my situation. Everybody knew my brother and
1881 stuff, so they assumed immediately I'm just like him. My brother was in trouble a lot. I
1882 remember one of my friends that hung out with my brother saw my report card one time,
1883 and he saw like all A's and B's. He was like, what are you doing? If you build up the
1884 group leader, the rest will follow.

1885 **Rob Graham**

1886 I have question for you, Crystal. You have this deep interest in race work, there's a
1887 foundation of race work in your background. Do you think it's possible for somebody to
1888 do your job as well as you do it without having attended to race as a factor in education
1889 or in this country?

1890 **Crystal**

1891 No, definitely not. That's not to like credit myself, but I think when you're a White person
1892 that's working with predominantly students of color, it's your responsibility to investigate,

1893 not just what their experiences are but your experiences in that setting and why you're
1894 there, and the White people that I see, educators or social workers or whatever, at my
1895 school who are unsuccessful particularly at building relationships with students have not,
1896 do not think that that's important. That's my that's what I see.

1897 **Rob Graham**

1898 As we wrap up our conversation and I prepare to act on your contributions to the study,
1899 I'd like to know your reactions to this conversation, what your thoughts are and how you
1900 might act on them.

1901 **Rakim**

1902 Collaborating, research and study among people across different backgrounds is GREAT.
1903 Among the group, it appears that everyone had some individual, some role model that
1904 was inspirational in their life and maybe even made a shift in that person in acquiring
1905 their destiny in life. Knowing a person's story is a great way of reaching them and
1906 helping them to find their destiny. Role models bear role models. Student Athletes must
1907 have a back-up plan. I am inspired to add these approaches to my work: Just a continued
1908 consistent energy and drive for African American Males, but also all minority groups as
1909 well. We as a society I believe have gotten away from ethnicities being celebrated and
1910 folk understanding the knowledge of themselves. Thus, I as a counselor want to ensure
1911 that students know and understand that the highlights or life events of the past may lie in
1912 unlocking the doors of their future. Know Thy Self

1913 **Crystal**

1914 Challenges to adjusting to college's academic rigor and social life, albeit financial aid
1915 cross city/state lines. They are recurring themes. Nation wide. I am inspired to add these
1916 approaches to my work: Open up the way I present my role to students to encompass
1917 careers, work, etc. This is something I definitely need to work on. Not just "Alternatives"
1918 to college, but just other ways of thinking about postsecondary life.

1919 **David**

1920 There is a need for guidance counseling for African American first-year students, but
1921 counselors weren't really active in high school. It seems counselors don't know how to
1922 address helping students individually, deep diving. I'm inspired to build personal
1923 relationships with people to understand their issues. I believe that some people's issues
1924 are deep, and they need assistance with mental help before they even consider college.
1925 Mentors are needed in both high school and college. Most inner-city students are
1926 completely lost and don't know what to expect in college. This needs to be addressed.

1927 **Vertner**

1928 There is a lapse in college guidance while in high school. Preparation for college goes
1929 beyond academics; it includes financial, emotional, and other types of support. True
1930 guidance comes with passion and a need for understanding. I aspire to add the ideas and
1931 knowledge of what I learned to better grow myself and those around me.

1932 **Rob Graham**

1933 I appreciate you guys tremendously. I've learned a lot. Hopefully you guys have learned
1934 from each other, and hopefully once I put together the paper of this work, you'll be able
1935 to continue learning from one another. You should feel like you have ownership of this

1936 work. This is all of our work, not just mine. There's no way I could say I did this thing;

1937 this is a community effort.

Chapter Five: Conclusions & Policy Implications

The purpose of this study was multifaceted, with a broad aim of contributing to American social justice by helping to meet the educational needs of African American males, a segment of society that has had its educational aspirations repressed since the colonial era (Span, 2005). A history of educational exclusion on both K-12 and postsecondary levels (Butchart & Rolleri, 2004; Span, 2005; Stefkovich & Leas, 1994), separate but unequal education (Klarman, 1994), and White backlash at racial progress (Henig, 1997; Klarman, 1994) means that today's African American male students are being educated in systems and institutions that were not designed for them or their success (Picott, 1958; Stefkovich & Leas, 1994). Despite notions of societal progress on issues of race and education, and despite having so much to gain across quality of life domains (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Holland, 2017; Hout, 2012; Ruthra & Flashman, 2017), African American males are the demographic with the least opportunity to obtain a four-year college degree (Harper and Newman, 2016; Haywood & Sewell, 2016; Simmons, 2013), and the least likely demographic to return to college after the first year (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019). It is at the nexus of race, gender, post-secondary education, and the transition to college that this study's specific purpose resided, to improve educational outcomes on the post-secondary level for African

American males from urban school districts by better understanding their experiences and those of the high school counselors who provide them with college preparation guidance. Insights into personal, professional and educational experiences were intended to inform the professional practices of school counselors, educational policy making, and approaches to college success for the students. To meet the purposes of the study the following research questions were crafted:

1. How do the personal and professional experiences of school counselors from urban public schools deepen our understanding of the ways that they approach their work with college-bound African American male students?
2. How does the college guidance received during high school help us understand the transition experience of African American male students from urban public schools to George Mason University?
3. In what ways do the narratives of school counselors and students from urban districts indicate alignment between preparation for college in their schools of origin and the

As I conceived of this inquiry and considered issues with degree attainment and college preparation of African American males, the profession of high school counseling for college, and the nature of the educational institutions that students navigate, I did so through a critical theoretical lens. In making use of critical theory, the school of thought with origins in the 1930's in the Frankfurt School (Simon-Ingram & Ingram, 1992), I understood it and operationalized it as Kim (2016) explained it in her book meant to

demystify narrative inquiry and the thought that may inform the methodology. Kim understood critical theory as such: “For critical theorists, the ability to look at the contradictions inherent in a society is a starting point to develop forms of social inquiry that interrogate “what is in reality” and “what should be” (p. 57). In recognizing that there exists a need for American social justice as it pertains to African American educational aspirations, an opportunity gap in degree attainment, I aligned myself and this work with Kim’s notion of critical theory.

I chose narrative inquiry as my methodology in order to be consistent with my worldview, purpose, methodology, and methods. I am an African American man that conducted this study not for study’s sake or intellectual curiosity but as an arm of my advocacy for African Americans and other marginalized populations who are underheard in the academy and society at large. Narrative inquiry can provide amplification for those voices whose lived experiences have been pushed to the margins (Clandinin, 2006), again in the academy and society at large, hence the name of this research, *Mic’d Up*. As she expanded on her interpretation of critical theory, Kim continued on to offer that, “Scholars view critical theory as a method of understanding forms of power and domination. However, the premise of critical theory is its moral imperative and its emphasis on the need for both individual empowerment and social transformation” (Kim, 2016, p. 57). By using narrative inquiry and taking advantage of the opportunity it provides to amplify unheard voices in long form, I have been able to allow for the self-empowerment of my participants and to address institutional power brokers that the

participants may otherwise not have access to through the eventual dissemination of this work.

My methods for data collection were multitiered: conversational method in which I collected 17 hours of personal, professional, and educational narrative data from the six participants; digital collages as narrative elicitation and complement to conversations with five of the participants; a two-hour sharing circle with four participants; a participant reflection on the sharing circle; and memoing throughout the research process. The data from all methods were used as source materials to construct a cumulative, synthesizing dialogue that placed the participants and their largely intact data in conversation with one another to address my three research questions (Wilson, 2008). The synthesizing dialogue functions as the presentation of findings for this study as well as the analysis and discussion.

Conclusions

Forced to give a theme to the work and my research process, I would say that gratitude was the running thread of the project. I searched for participants for this study for months and received responses ranging from being ignored to deep interest and then disappearance. In this process my personal and professional communities stepped in to help me recruit on the strength of our relationship and identification with the subject matter. I found myself overwhelmed with gratitude at every step and every gesture along the way. My participants, whose busyness was evidenced in the data collected, dedicated many hours to me, participated honestly and candidly and made themselves vulnerable in the sharing of their often deeply personal narratives. Their reasons for participating in the

study deepened my gratitude. Vertner, who I recruited by simply approaching him as a stranger, agreed to participate because he would be helping a brotha out with my research and because he felt my approach was respectful. Ejike agreed because Vertner, his fraternity brother, presented the opportunity and because he felt like he had something to contribute. Crystal agreed to participate because the project spoke to her thematically and was aligned with research conducted during graduate school. Eve participated out of respect for a mutual friend who I had asked for recruitment help. Rakim agreed to participate out of respect for Eve and to help a brotha out. David agreed to participate on the strength of our prior mentor-mentee relationship despite not being asked. There is a relational thread running through their agreement to participate, and I feel permanently connected and indebted to each of them. In these and other ways, this project has been transformative for me. Additionally, each of the participants expressed in their own way that the act of articulating their narratives and engaging in self-examination was something that they were benefiting from, giving me the sense that the project was transformative for them on some level.

Policy Recommendations

My overall, actionable conclusion is that a history of minoritization and educational exclusion has led to a vexing dynamic, at least between the institutions studied here. African American students are making their way through urban school districts with some college access support but little guidance on the actual college experience. They are then arriving on George Mason's campus and receiving little to no college success guidance. This dynamic is particularly unfortunate for African American

males who are often first-generation, from families with limited financial resources, and members of social circles without the kind of cultural capital that can provide sufficient college knowledge. They are thus being encouraged to attend college, being recruited to attend universities like George Mason, and finding themselves unprepared for the experience before them.

Having heard the voices of the six participants and synthesized their perspectives, I have come up with non-exhaustive lists of policy recommendations on both the secondary and post-secondary levels that hold promise to improve retention outcomes at George Mason University. The lists of recommendations, seen in Table 2 below, are non-exhaustive because they speak to students being fitted into institutions that were not designed for their attendance. After the lists, I discuss a few of the policy recommendations in detail in the next section.

Table 2

Policy and Practice Recommendations

For George Mason University

1. Black Male Initiative
 2. Black space for community
 3. Disaggregate Black population data
 4. Increase Black faculty especially in first-year courses
 5. Add well-being components to academic advising
 6. Train faculty on university transition experiences of African Americans
 7. Extend time of initial good academic standing to three semesters
 8. Supply each entering African American freshmen with gift certificate for books and dining
-

-
9. Hold optional Black family orientation
 10. In-State Tuition for DMV

For Urban High Schools

1. Lessen administrative burden of counselors
2. Modernize processes and technology
3. Audit counselor processes
4. Pay counselors for after-hours work
5. Actively promote TRIO type programs
6. Increase family social services
7. Increase size of counseling teams
8. Continue and elevate college preparation clubs/courses
9. Recruit faculty and staff from outside community to allow for fresh perspectives
10. Counselor exchange programs within region as professional development

General

1. Realign counselor graduate education with reality of the profession
2. Create channel between high school counselors and dedicated academic advisors

*Lists are in no particular order and are non-exhaustive.

George Mason University

Disaggregate Black Population Data

It is my belief that a first step in taking an informed approach to supporting African American male students at George Mason is to identify the population, get a sense of its size, know where the population is coming from, and then examine academic data. As it pertains to the year 2018-2019 cohort of 2,881 degree-seeking undergraduate students classified as Black or African American at George Mason (GMU, 2020b), current institutional statistics do not disaggregate by ethnicity or family background, so it is difficult to assess and address the needs of African American male students on an institutional level. The potential utility of disaggregated Black student data showed up in my conversations with the student participants. Despite all being members of the African

diaspora, there were differences in the ways Vertner and David, the two African Americans, processed their educational experiences when compared with Ejike, the Nigerian American participant that is proficient in African American culture, particularly as it pertains to self-efficacy. For Vertner, transitioning to the university was a mysterious process in which he figured things out along the way. For David the adjustment process was trickier and marked by confusion, self-doubt, and a sense that everyone around him was smarter and better equipped, despite his academic excellence in high school. David also felt the full weight of his high school's issues with student violence and poverty, an experience that seemed to shape his outlook at the university. Ejike attended the same high school as David, but expressed a disconnect between himself and the negative forces there such as the violence in school and the neighborhood. He instead held membership in the insulated community of children of immigrant African parents. He attributed his success at the university in part to his own hard work and ability, and he spoke of finding his niche at the university as the primary factor in thoughts of transferring to another school. Ejike also directly spoke to ethnic differences in mindset when recalling a Liberian sista who advised Mason's student government,

There were other people in the organization, but the way she talked to me and interacted with me was coming from that mutual background of we're African, we think differently, we operate differently, we should show up and represent ourselves differently.

These differing perspectives suggest differing needs when it comes to support for African American freshmen and other Black George Mason students. I have heard anecdotally in

my six years at George Mason that different researchers have taken up the task of disaggregating Black educational data, but that project has not been seen through to completion.

Black Family Orientation

Each of the student participants expressed in some way that they didn't really know what their experience would be like at the university and what would be expected of them. They also spoke about limited contributions from their families because of lack of contextual experience; Vertner and Ejike are first-generation which limited their familial college knowledge, and Michael expressed that times had changed since his mother's college experience at the University of Maryland, rendering his sole source of familial college knowledge limited in his eyes. Vertner was prepared for the college experience by picking the brains of a friend from his church and a friend from his high school, a wonderful expression of community that was subject to Vertner knowing what to ask and how to receive the answers. He put it this way after mentioning the two friends that shared insight with him, "But at other times, I just kind of navigated through. I wouldn't say by myself, but I used what I knew from those two and other people like my sisters, but there's a difference because they stayed at home." Michael offered a combination of disorienting factors as he described his preparation for the college experience beyond the college club at his high school,

The clubs helped me prepare for getting admitted, so I didn't really have that much preparation for the actual experience; what I would be going through on a

day to day, meal plans, struggles with the classes, money, financial stuff. Yeah, I wasn't really prepared for much of that.

Ejike has siblings that went to college, but their experiences were different in that one went to college in Nigeria, one went to college on a football scholarship, and one went to college in North Carolina on a full scholarship and had an experience that he did not feel he could draw from. Ejike described his college preparation this way,

Of course, more or less being first generation, my mom couldn't help me. I relied on other people I knew from Flowers that did well. I remember the class before us, there were some high performing students, so I would lean on them more than anything else like, ask them some questions. Like, how do I do this, how do I do that?

To smooth the transition to George Mason University I recommend a Black family freshmen orientation to be held weeks before the fall and spring semesters begin that would touch on the subjects of financing college, academics, institutional timelines, campus resources, and designated student support personnel that families can contact directly. As it stands, the Black Student Alliance (Mason 360, 2020), a student organization, holds a three-hour Black Freshman Orientation each fall. While it is a wonderful expression of community, the Black Freshman Orientation also points to a gap in institutional support that students have identified and attempted to fill themselves. Relying on the student organization to provide a Black orientation leaves the program open to fluctuations in student leadership and at the mercy of the organization's limited financial resources. George Mason University should make the Black Freshman

Orientation a program sponsored by its orientation services office, thereby providing it with stability, expanding resources to draw from, signaling that this population is important to the university, and acknowledging that need for specialized support.

Additionally, the Black Freshman Orientation should include programming for families so that they have an opportunity to make informed decisions as a unit. The University of San Francisco (USF) is an example of a university that has a Black freshman orientation that was designed by students, faculty, and staff with stated university support (Heller, 2017). This 2017 statement by professor and vice-president of operations, Dan Heller, speaks to USF's clarity on the subject and commitment to positive student outcomes:

Our Black Student Orientation isn't unique. It mirrors those held at many other colleges and universities which, like USF, have recognized that different populations of students come to our universities with distinct experiences and needs, and their success can best be ensured through tailored and special-focus support programs. This recognition is based not only on our understanding of our own students, but also on a long and rich history of scholarly research that has shown that students from different groups have varying experiences in both the K-12 and postsecondary educational systems in our country.

Having an institutionalized Black orientation would allow for something similar to the comparatively expansive program that USF offers, which includes two days of morning to evening orientation featuring move-in support, tours, socializing, and workshops that include family.

A Black Male Initiative

Narratives expressed by each of the student participants in this study suggest a need for structural support for African American males during the first-year transition to George Mason. David was a scholar in the Black male college transition program that I lead (MATE, 2020), Mid-Atlantic Advocacy Through Education (MATE), during his freshman year. He credits the programmatic features of academic advising, mentoring, and a textbook scholarship with closing his information gaps and easing the unexpected burden of purchasing expensive textbooks. Vertner was a soccer player during his freshman year, so he was in community and had people to be accountable to, thereby increasing his chances of staying the course. Ejike joined student government and credited that with helping him finding a niche at the university and ending his isolation. Structured, institutional involvement and having immediate community upon arrival holds promise to improve retention rates and perhaps student satisfaction with the college experience. Unlike neighboring state universities like the University of Virginia (UVA, 2020) and the University of Maryland College Park (UMD, 2020), George Mason University lacks a central, functioning Black male initiative program to assist this population with issues of forming community, academics, finance, and identity. While Vertner mentioned that George Mason now has a Black male LLC (living learning community), its existence is not evident when searching the university's website, and it is thus at least too difficult for a new student to find. If George Mason is to continue the practice of recruiting and admitting African American male students, it must support them structurally and programmatically. The University of Maryland's (UMD)

Nyumburu Center (UMD, 2020) is the home of its Black Male Initiative, and its mission reads as such:

The mission of the Nyumburu Cultural Center is to promote an understanding of and appreciation for African-American Culture in all of its richness and complexity. In carrying out its mission, the Nyumburu Cultural Center strives to improve the life for African-American students and students of the African Diaspora, both undergraduate and graduate; to foster greater involvement of these students in campus programs and initiatives; to instill in these students an informed consciousness of their African-American, Caribbean, and African heritages; and to improve retention and graduation rates of these students. In the various events and activities, it sponsors, the Center also acknowledges, recognizes and solicits contributions of other heritages. Such efforts to cross boundaries and to intersect with other campus circles make the Nyumburu Cultural Center an excellent place for cultural exchange, intersectionality, and collaborations which enables the University of Maryland to make greater strides in achieving genuine cultural pluralism.

Like USF's statement about their Black orientation, UMD's mission statement here shows a clear understanding of this population's needs and an institutional commitment to it. Their Black Male Initiative features supportive courses the likes of which George Mason would benefit from, such as, *Diversity, Issues, And Academic Strategies For Success*, and programming like a welcoming event, movie night, and general meetings. The impact is captured in student testimonials like this one,

Nyumburu has truly been a home away from home for me in my four years on this campus. Whether it's doing work in the computer lab, booking a room for an event, playing pool with friends, or having impromptu intellectual discussions, Nyumburu has provided me with most resources that I need to succeed as a student and a leader.

High School Level Policy Recommendations

Counselor Work Audit

Each of the three participating counselors stated that their current workloads would not allow for going beyond their college access work, indicating a need for their school districts and schools to reassess the scope of work for school counselors. In order to accomplish such a shift in work duties for Eve and Rakim and their high schools, a step in the right direction would entail an audit of their work processes to eliminate the administrative inefficiencies they detailed in their professional narratives such as outdated and non-existent computer systems, manual record-keeping, and participation in inconsequential staff meetings. For Crystal and her New York school, a step in the right direction would be the hiring of an additional staff member to perform the college preparation duties she described as an entirely differently role for which she doesn't have the bandwidth.

Compensation

An additional step forward in terms of college preparation for Eve and Rakim would be what recently happened for Crystal. They and other counselors in their school district should be paid for work duties carried out after hours. As it stands, neither of

them have the time to lead college programs during their normal work hours. They must now set up after-hours programming and sacrifice their personal time, unpaid. Crystal is now paid \$48 an hour “per session,” a designation meaning work done after the closing bell of the standard work day at 3:30pm each afternoon. Such an adjustment to counselor compensation in Prince George’s County where Eve and Rakim work would indicate that their work is valued, and there is the potential for more creative and meaningful programming if the work is not performed under professional duress.

Implications for Research and Scholarship

This study contributes to existing scholarship on the subjects of college retention, transition to the university, college preparation, school counseling, and African American male education by synthesizing and conceiving of these subjects as a single conversation geared toward student success. This act of synthesis built on work such as Tierney’s narrative study (2009) of the experiences of three Latino high school seniors in the college application process, Harper’s (Harper, 2012; Harper & Associates, 2014) studies on Black male and male of color student success secondary and post-secondary, research on the contextual realities of school counseling (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Malone, 2013; Simmons, 2011; Woods, & Domina, 2014), and Clark’s (2005) examination of university transition and retention for African Americans. Findings and recommendations from those studies shaped my research questions which required at least two conceptual lenses to be addressed. Thus, a move was made away from the practice of searching for insight in research gaps and towards understanding topical relationships.

The method of analysis I used for this study, a single holistic synthesis dialogue, revealed findings by putting the narratives of the school counselors and students in conversation with one another after their direct experience exchange of a sharing circle. It became evident to me that students and counselors need to have more opportunity to engage one another directly and deeply as they make progress in addressing the needs and aspirations of college-bound students. Despite being at different stages in life and education, the counselors and students were riveted by each other as they listened to each other's narratives during the sharing circle, asking meaningful questions and committing to acting on what they had heard with no indications of power imbalance or being stuck on previous notions about the others' decision-making or experiences.

Specifically, this narrative inquiry made plain a dynamic that was mentioned earlier in this chapter that should be used as a target of future inquiry: It is the experience of African American male students that they are being guided and recruited to college but not receiving the appropriate college preparation guidance in their high schools or success guidance in college. Contextual constraints limiting awareness and the ability to act on the range of college-bound student needs means that school counselors on the secondary level are focused on access and putting their faith in universities to appropriately support their admitted students. Meanwhile, universities are placing their luck on high schools sending them students that can be successful with the tools they arrive with. This dynamic, uncovered through the synthesis of disconnected literature and often disconnected voices, offers a new target for educational research that seeks to

improve educational outcomes and retention of collegiate African American male students.

Future Research

In the course of engaging the school counselors, three potential research projects emerged naturally. In discussing ways that he prepares for students for post-secondary life, Rakim recounted how his efforts to garner student interest in activities like college tours and college night could be stimulated and how participation could be made more earnest. Rakim discussed potential research this way:

You know, I'm still trying to figure it out with our population. I think I touched on it earlier, but maybe the students just don't feel like they're ready. Academically, you know a lot of students may be scared of the real world. You know, we do college fairs, and they're just not responded to well, they're not taking the SAT, they're not doing a lot of these things. I'm just trying to really still figure that out. So, speaking with you has been kind of helpful. I will say this, I want to go back now and kind of go at this like a scientist.

Rakim addressed his very real-world problem, and I see value in a researcher lending him their expertise and time to address an issue that is standing in the way of students meeting their full potential post-graduation. Getting clarity on this issue could bring benefits to everyone with a stake in the success of his student population. Crystal articulated a similar potential research project in an open exchange during our sharing circle, an issue

with getting students who aren't or aren't yet on a four-year college path to be excited and proactive about their alternative paths. She put it this way:

So one thing that I'm really struggling with... I get students who have the at minimum, like the community college applications, and I'm struggling for the students who aren't doing anything beyond that to like, give them like excitement or meaning about like what their path is... They're just kind of doing it because like, that's what everyone does. I'm really like for years now have struggled with, like, the retention at community college, and like going with the misconception that it's like better to go to like a trade school, like a proprietary, like pay for this trade when that's something they could do for free at community college. So, but they don't necessarily know that or want to go to that, so I don't know if you know people who have, like, struggled with that or as a counselor how you help students see value in that?

Though it is a departure from the university focus of this project, there is value in a project that can help Crystal better understand her students' outlooks as it pertains to paths that don't lead directly from high school to universities and how they are making sense of their options.

Eve brought forth an issue with work flow inefficiencies in her district that if explored, could make for meaningful insights into the counseling profession at large and locally, including ways to improve counselor retention. She put the potential area of research this way:

Well, I can talk to that because I've my own kids were in Charles County and Fairfax County... Talking to Fairfax County counselors and even Prince William County as a parent and a counselor, we do a lot more paperwork... And I just feel like I'm not sure if it's education as a whole or just the particular county that I work in, but I am not planning to return next school year to the county. No way. I have to know if this exists in other places, and I do not hear that. People leave, and they love it. In fact, I'm at the school that I'm at now because that particular person couldn't deal with the leader of the team in the counseling department. She went to another county in Maryland, and she absolutely loves it. Doesn't have to attend half the meetings that we do. Doesn't have to do all the paper work that we do. Yeah, there's a component of paperwork, but not overwhelming. I mean, it's overwhelming the amount of paperwork that we do.

Eve is a smart, passionate counselor that's planning to leave her post in order to find out if her struggles are industry-wide. There is much to explore in a survey across jurisdictions of counseling department workflows, processes, and leadership that can lead to policy shifts and the potential retention of quality professionals. By listening to and responding with action to professionals like Eve and the other counselors who contributed to this study, there is opportunity to make good-faith contributions to American social justice.

Appendix A



Office of Research Development, Integrity, and Assurance

Research Hall, 4400 University Drive, MS 6D5, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-5445; Fax: 703-993-9590

DATE: June 11, 2019

TO: Meagan Call-Cummings, PhD
FROM: George Mason University IRB

Project Title: [1440707-1] Mic'd Up: A Critical Narrative Inquiry Into African American Males, Guidance Counselors, & The First-Year Experience At A PWI

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: June 11, 2019
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited review category #7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The George Mason University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations. Please remember that all research must be conducted as described in the submitted materials.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form unless the IRB has waived the requirement for a signature on the consent form or has waived the requirement for a consent process. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document. Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure. All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to the IRB office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed (if applicable). All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB. This study does not have an expiration date but you will receive an annual reminder regarding future requirements.

- 1 - Generated on IRBNet

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of five years, or as described in your submission, after the completion of the project. Please note that department or other approvals may be required to conduct your research in addition to IRB approval. If you have any questions, please contact Kim Paul at (703) 993-4208 or kpaul4@gmu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee. GMU IRB Standard Operating Procedures can be found here: <https://rdia.gmu.edu/topics-of-interest/human-or-animal-subjects/human-subjects/human-subjects-sops/>

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within George Mason University IRB's records.

Appendix B

Conversations with Crystal

Personal Background Narrative- Who Are You?

1 **Rob Graham**

2 All right! So, I'll start with my opening question, and then we can get into the
3 conversation starters that I have here. This is intended to be more of a conversation than
4 an interview, so we'll just go with the flow a little bit. Okay?

5

6 **Crystal**

7 Okay.

8

9 **Rob Graham**

10 Why did you agree to help me?

11

12 **Crystal**

13 Oh, that's a good one. Um, some of my interest in your work connects to some of the
14 stuff that I experience daily professionally and what I was writing about in graduate
15 school. So I just graduated, actually just got my license, looking at it right here. Just came
16 in the mail.

17

18 **Rob Graham**

19 Wow. Congrats. What type of degree?

20

21 **Crystal**

22 Social work through a community organizing lens. Hunter's one of the only schools with
23 a community organizing track within social work in the country.

24

25 **Rob Graham**

26 Which school is it?

27 **Crystal**
28 Hunter, Silberman School of Social Work.

29
30 **Rob Graham**
31 Okay.

32
33 **Crystal**
34 Part of my interest in working on a project like this is because it, from your explanation,
35 culminates in a collaborative exploration of people's interests, and...how did you put it?
36 Elevates the experience of six people?

37
38 **Rob Graham**
39 That's exactly right.

40
41 **Crystal**
42 Which I think of as organizing. I also think organizing and collaborating itself is
43 transformative outside of what the outcome is. Not that the outcome doesn't matter, but
44 part of why I'm interested in community organizing is because the process of getting to
45 know people, whether similar or different, is in itself, to me, an outcome that's
46 meaningful and that changes society. In terms of college access, specifically for Black
47 boys or young men of color, I've worked for a long time in after school programs, youth
48 worker settings, schools, and now a high school. One of the things that has come up, at
49 least in my more recent work, is the disparity and trend in young Black men who are
50 enrolling in college but not matriculating, or even not showing up on the first day.

51
52 **Rob Graham**
53 Hmmm! (with surprise and interest)

54
55 **Crystal**
56 In my experience that's coupled with Black men who are also students with disabilities.

57
58 **Rob Graham**
59 Yeah, you're talking about something that is just a whole lane that needs to be explored.
60 You just you triggered something in me with that.

61
62 **Crystal**
63 Right now, in my school, the class I'm working with of seniors is the third graduating
64 class. So it's a new-ish school, but I've been the college counselor at that school since its

65 founding. It wasn't until last year that we got back the National Clearinghouse data on our
66 students about who was still in school. And it was hands down Black students, followed
67 by Black male students, but overwhelmingly Black students with disabilities who were
68 the least likely to be in college post-high school.

69

70 **Rob Graham**

71 Right. So we need some experiential data to go along with those numbers.

72

73 **Crystal**

74 Actually, in one of my research projects I interviewed students with disabilities who had
75 graduated from my high school, some who are in school, some who are not in school. By
76 "school" I mean college. My questions were more about the label of disability and
77 whether that was helpful or harmful in their post-secondary experience. It was a little
78 more disability focused than I think your work is, but I do have multiple interviews with
79 students about their experiences. So I started to collect those experiential narratives from
80 them. Gender and race weren't as consistent as what you're doing.

81

82 **Rob Graham**

83 Mmm. So, where do you have that stuff captured? Is it in some kind of product?

84

85 **Crystal**

86 It's a paper and a presentation, and I'm happy to share it with you.

87

88 **Rob Graham**

89 Would you mind? Would you mind?

90

91 **Rob Graham**

92 That would be great. Okay, um, crazy question, do what you can with it. Who are you as
93 a person? I think maybe you captured a little bit of this in your answer to my first
94 question, but what led you to the point where we're sitting in this space, having this
95 conversation? Capture it however you want.

96

97 **Crystal**

98 Sure. I think firstly, I think of my family. So, on my mom's side, my grandmother and
99 grandfather immigrated, changed their last name because Jews were being persecuted in
100 Russia, not during the Holocaust, but in some other tumultuous time in Russian history.
101 My grandfather bought the name of a non-Jewish person, a neighbor in town who had
102 died.

103 **Rob Graham**
104 Wow! That's interesting.
105
106 **Crystal**
107 Great grandfather, sorry, and immigrated to New York through Ellis Island using that
108 name. So, on my mom's side of my family, I'm not religiously Jewish, but I'm definitely
109 connected to Jewish persecution, ethnically and culturally.
110
111 **Rob Graham**
112 Right.
113
114 **Crystal**
115 For a long time, I struggled with that because I'm so abreast of American racism. I
116 struggled with not my mom, but some of her family's conflation of the race of Jews and
117 what I saw as racism in the US. Oppression of Black and Brown people was not
118 analogous with Jews.
119
120 **Rob Graham**
121 Mmm
122
123 **Crystal**
124 So, that caused me a little bit to, reject my Jewish heritage, but I've come full circle with
125 that.
126
127 **Rob Graham**
128 Mmm. Yeah, there are ebbs and flows to that stuff, right?
129
130 **Crystal**
131 Yeah. On my dad's side, I'm not sure if it's two generations or three, but his family came
132 from Sweden and Norway in I think the early 1900s. Moved first to Massachusetts, but
133 then to the Midwest. My parents met in New York, so most of my family are New
134 Yorkers, particularly on my mom's side. My mom is an artist, and my dad is a musician
135 and a doctor. He actually just retired, but both extremely open-minded, and always kind.
136 They instilled in me a curiosity about the world. That being said, when I was five, we
137 moved from New York to Boston. Are you familiar at all with Massachusetts?
138
139 **Rob Graham**
140 A little. I'm gaining some Massachusetts familiarity.

141 **Crystal**

142 I don't have a lot of Boston pride, but I did go to elementary and high school there. My
143 dad went for his job, and my parents didn't want to deal with the crazy public school
144 process in New York City for middle school and high school. My dad got a job in
145 Cambridge, Mass, and moved to Brookline, which has the most renowned public school
146 system in the US. Everyone in Brookline is a doctor, a lawyer. Also, very high
147 percentage of Jews. It's 30% Jewish, very wealthy. My house is on the border of Boston
148 and Brookline, but Brookline is technically its own town, so they have their own politics.
149 They just legalized weed. It's very liberal, but also very un-diverse socioeconomically
150 and racially. So it's kind of a weird thing because, in high school and stuff, I always had
151 the values of open mindedness, but there wasn't a lot of racial and socioeconomic
152 diversity around me, except for the students of color who were bused from the inner city
153 through Boston's long history of busing.

154

155 **Rob Graham**

156 Yes.

157

158 **Crystal**

159 So, there was a large presence of mainly African American students in the schools I
160 attended, but they were not students who lived in the town.

161

162 **Rob Graham**

163 What was that dynamic like?

164

165 **Crystal**

166 I'll get to that but one additional caveat. I have always been a good student, but also the
167 kind of student that will only perform if I felt inspired. I still kind of felt like that even in
168 grad school, honestly. But I wasn't doing very well in ninth grade, and there was an
169 alternative program called "school within a school" that was actually started in the 1960s
170 by anti-war folks, civil rights protesters, and activists all across the country. They built
171 basically mini schools inside of schools that were meant to be radical, activist kind of free
172 schools, but not necessarily race-based. You enter through a lottery, and I got it in in the
173 10th grade. Being in school within a school changed my life. So my high school had
174 2,000 people, and school within a school had about 20 kids in a grade.

175

176 **Rob Graham**

177 Oh wow.

178

179 **Crystal**

180 Very small, just one hallway on the fourth floor. The teachers I had there were activists
181 from the 60s and the 70s, so, there'd be pictures on their wall of them smoking cigarettes
182 and teaching history at the same time. I mean, they were veteran teachers and activists,
183 and so there was there was no tracking. Like, I didn't take AP. Meanwhile, in the
184 downstairs school where my elitist peers were obsessing about college and grades and
185 stuff, I was in a totally different environment.

186

187 **Rob Graham**

188 Hmmm

189

190 **Crystal**

191 And one of the big things in school within a school was experiential learning. We also
192 got to pick our classes, teachers are called by their first names, you could sign yourself
193 out of school. It was basically a democratic school. It's still there. I actually brought some
194 of my students from New York to see it a few years ago when we were starting a student
195 government.

196 **Rob Graham**

197 Wow

198

199 **Crystal**

200 But there's town hall meetings, everything is a democratic decision. Students hired their
201 teachers, fired teachers. Everything was democratic, student and teacher run jointly, no
202 hierarchy. So that really changed my life. But going back to your other question about
203 what it was like to go to school with students of color in school who didn't live in town

204

205 **Rob Graham**

206 Yeah, the bused-in dynamic.

207

208 **Crystal**

209 So, the bus dynamic was really crazy. I've always been really sensitive just in general to
210 other people, that was something teachers always said about me, whether it was being
211 friends with the bullied kid, or liking animals or whatever it was. I think the first time I
212 noticed it being an issue or something, was not going to birthday parties of kids that lived
213 in Dorchester and Mattapan because they were in the inner city. So, there was a definitely
214 a difference in being able to socialize or know other kids because you wouldn't go to their
215 houses. I had kids come to my houses, but I never went to theirs.

216

217 **Rob Graham**

218 Un hun, un hun.

219

220 **Crystal**

221 I remember I took an African American History class with the dean, who was a Black
222 man. There were two White kids in that class, one of whom was me. That was the only
223 class where I was ever situationally in the minority.

224

225 **Rob Graham**

226 *Okay, interesting. You agreed to join this study because you saw some parallels between*
227 *the subject matter and your work and things you wrote about in graduate school. You*
228 *have a very fresh degree in social work in your hands that had a community organizing*
229 *emphasis, which is what you're about. You've worked in many contexts that relate to*
230 *college access for Black male youth and youth of color, including after school programs,*
231 *youth worker settings, schools, and now a high school. Of particular interest for you is*
232 *the plight of Black male students with disabilities and their postsecondary educational*
233 *experiences. In terms of who you are as a person, you are the daughter of a mother who*
234 *is an artist with Russian Jewish heritage and a father who is a musician and doctor with*
235 *Swedish and Norwegian roots. Your folks were kind and opened minded, traits you*
236 *seemed to inherit. You were born in New York but schooled in MA where you learned*
237 *some lessons about differing life experiences through your friendship dynamics with*
238 *students bused in from the inner city. You were an excellent student that was a better*
239 *match for the non-traditional high school that you went to, with its democratized*
240 *curriculum and power-sharing model. After some twists and turns, you've made sense of*
241 *your Jewish identity in the context of American racism/oppression and there is some rich*
242 *family history to your story including your great grandfather's purchasing of a non-*
243 *Jewish name to avoid persecution and his immigration via Ellis Island. I'll take a*
244 *moment and tell you about me. I grew up in Pasadena, California. I don't know if you're*
245 *familiar with Pasadena.*

246

247 **Crystal**

248 Never been but, I've heard of it.

249 **Rob Graham**

250 LA County, home of the Rose Bowl, about five minutes from Dodger Stadium. Sort of
251 typical upbringing: two parents, two older sisters. Growing up, dad was a police officer.

252

253 **Crystal**

254 Hmm

255 **Rob Graham**

256 He was a Vietnam vet, so pretty straight laced kind of guy. From Little Rock, Arkansas.
257 Somehow he made his way from Little Rock, military, and wound up in Bakersfield,
258 California. And as I tell the story, I realize that I don't know how he made it from
259 Bakersfield to Pasadena, California. Mom from Chicago, a little bit more liberal, a little
260 bit more free spirited. She owned and ran a preschool growing up. My early childhood
261 memories are of me being in this space with all these kids, and in this business, and
262 having a good time. We were, I guess, straight up middle class. My parents got divorced
263 when I was about 11. Even though my parents were divorced, it was sort of a non-
264 traditional kind of divorce, more of a we're not going to be together, but we're still going
265 to be a team, to the point where my dad actually lived with my mom's mom after they
266 divorced. Dad passed away when I was a senior in high school. My sisters went to Black
267 colleges, Xavier University and Howard University. I wound up attending both of those,
268 squeaked out of college with a 2.0. Bartended for a couple of years, went back, got my
269 master's in California a couple years ago in English, and just kind of fell in love with
270 school as an adult, and really started having some new questions about life and the world.
271 After I got my master's degree, I needed more school. Wound up coming to George
272 Mason University thinking I was going to get a PhD and study English grammar or
273 something for ESL, but I took an education policy course about school reform in the
274 United States. I took that class and learned about education history and some of the
275 societal imbalances. I started seeing that a lot of this stuff was intentional. And it just
276 really

277

278 **Crystal**

279 I wrote my final paper about this, also.

280

281 **Rob Graham**

282 It blew my mind, uncovering how this situation is particularly bad for African American
283 males. I just decided that somehow I would be supporting African American males and
284 their education. I've been an academic advisor and faculty teaching freshmen transition,
285 so I decided to focus on this particular area of education where I had some professional
286 expertise. And then of course, with Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, and all that kind of
287 stuff, I just got really pumped up and sad. Rather than walking around with hate, I
288 decided that I would somehow try to turn this into a love thing. That's been my approach
289 to my research, and I started an organization that supports African American males as
290 they transition from DC and Prince George's County Public Schools.

291

292 **Crystal**

293 Yeah, I went to school in Maryland, so...yeah. I went to Goucher College in Maryland.

294

295 **Rob Graham**

296 Oh, I don't know where that is.

297

298 **Crystal**

299 It's in Baltimore.

300

301 **Rob Graham**

302 Okay.

303

304 **Crystal**

305 Um, are you familiar with Stanley Andrisse?

306

307 **Rob Graham**

308 Say that again.

309

310 **Crystal**

311 Stanley Andrisse. Prison cells to PhDs?

312

313 **Rob Graham**

314 No, it sounds like I should be. (chuckling)

315

316 **Crystal**

317 He's in the DMV area. I was connecting with him a little bit about being a mentor to one

318 of the students that he's working with, but he used to be incarcerated, got his PhD in bio-

319 med or something. He's affiliated with Hopkins and Howard. Goucher has a prison to

320 education pipeline project, so they're now affiliated with him. So just a small world.

321

322 **Rob Graham**

323 Hmm! Yeah, it is.

324 **Crystal**

325 But I was an English major in undergrad at Goucher, you just reminded me of basic

326 things I didn't mention (both chuckling). I was an English major in undergrad, and then I

327 wanted to go into teaching 'cause I'd always done youth work and stuff before college and

328 even in the summers and stuff, and then I was briefly blinded by Teach for America.

329 Luckily, I didn't get in because I probably would have fucking, I don't know, started a riot

330 if I had been in the program.

331 **Rob Graham**

332 Ha! (Laughs)

333

334 **Crystal**

335 But they didn't want someone like me, which makes sense 'cause I was at that time a
336 pretty seasoned educator. I'd been working in youth programs since I was a teenager.

337

338 **Rob Graham**

339 Yeah, they want a blank slate.

340

341 **Crystal**

342 They want someone that they can shape, completely turn into a CEO of a charter network
343 or something. So luckily I didn't get into that. And I started working with a different
344 organization through a fellowship. And then through a long chain of things became super,
345 anti-nonprofit. Not all nonprofits, but privatization of services and rights that people
346 should have in public spaces. So that's what really got me into wanting to be in a public
347 setting again, and how I ended up in a public high school now. I was on the founding
348 team of the school, and now it's in its sixth year.

349

350 **Rob Graham**

351 Okay, that's great. That's great. Tell me about some important relationships in your life.
352 And they can be human relationships and also relationships to spaces or institutions.

353

354 **Crystal**

355 Gosh. Definitely my sister, we're very close. She's studying to be a nurse. She lives with
356 my mom in New York. That's my number one. Number one.

357

358 **Rob Graham**

359 I see. Is she your little sister or big sister?

360

361 **Crystal**

362 Little sister. I also have an older sister, but we didn't grow up together. My little sister
363 who I grew up with, we're four years apart and very close. I would say I have some
364 friends from high school that I'm still really close with, even from elementary school. I
365 had a solid girl crew in college, many of whom are in this area. My boyfriend too. We've
366 been together for two years but have known each other for five or six years now, very
367 close. I think those are my main people outside of my parents. Outside of that, I think my
368 school. I sleep at my school, I'm there so much. I love my high school so much. It's really

369 a labor of love. I'm pretty attached to it. I spend more time at work than I do at home. The
370 weekend is precious to be at home, but for the most part, I'm at work from 7:30 till seven
371 every day. And today on the weekend, so

372

373 **Rob Graham**

374 Wow, that's saying a lot. Um, I hate to ask you this. Um, how old are you?

375

376 **Crystal**

377 I will be 31 in December.

378

379 **Rob Graham**

380 Gotcha. And then you got that that new degree that you were showing me. From where?

381

382 **Crystal**

383 Hunter

384

385 **Rob Graham**

386 Oh, that's right. Anything that I should know about you or that you want people to know
387 about you as a human?

388

389 **Crystal**

390 Um, how do I say this? I'm pretty cautious about who I associate with, but I think
391 sometimes people perceive me as cold or intimidating or something. I think I'm pretty
392 nice, but I do observe people first, feel out how people are. I'm also pretty clear that I
393 don't need new friends. So I can seem pretty cut and dry with people I don't know.

394

395 **Rob Graham**

396 I can sense that you got some intensity and some seriousness about you, *but that's okay.*
397 *It's been a pleasure learning about some of the important people in your life like your*
398 *folks of course but also your relationship with your sister, your friends, and your*
399 *boyfriend. It is also special to hear how meaningful your school is to you and how that is*
400 *expressed through long, committed hours that extend beyond the school bell. Given that*
401 *you are a Sagittarius like me, I can also easily wrap my brain around your cautious*
402 *approach to people that can come off as something other than warmth initially. Thank*
403 *you!*

404

405 **Professional Experience Narrative**

406

407 **Rob Graham**

408 How are you?

409

410 **Crystal**

411 I took my students on a college trip overnight, so I'm a little tired but hanging in there.

412

413 **Rob Graham**

414 Oh wow. So, you took your students to visit some schools?

415 **Crystal**

416 Yeah, the seniors and juniors and sophomores. We went to seven schools in

417 Pennsylvania, and I'm sitting here working, so

418

419 **Rob Graham**

420 Oh wow. And you're alive still.

421

422 **Crystal**

423 Do you know about diversity overnights? Selective private colleges do these recruitment

424 programs overnight. They're more competitive than the admissions process sometimes,

425 but I have a kid going out to Colorado College, who I set up an Uber for this morning

426 because we got back late last night, and his flight was this morning. So this morning was

427 a little hectic.

428

429 **Rob Graham**

430 Okay. Are you ready for some conversation?

431

432 **Crystal**

433 Yes.

434

435 **Rob Graham**

436 All right, so forgive me if we covered any of this, and this might feel a little bit

437 redundant. And you sent me some wonderful stuff I can probably draw some of these

438 answers from. We're going to sort of drift toward the professional today. Again this is

439 conversational, so just using my prompts here to stimulate conversation. So, tell me about

440 how and why you got into counseling, including your preparation for the work, and

441 specifically as a school counselor, preparing students for college.

442

443 **Crystal**

444 Okay. I mentioned last time, when I was a teenager I started working in an after school
445 program. And that was my segue into social work, not as a professional yet but that kind
446 of work. Um, and then didn't get into Teach for America which was a blessing because I
447 would have probably been fired. I spent some time abroad, and then I worked in a few
448 different nonprofits, doing different types of work with homeless people, formerly
449 incarcerated people, single mothers seeking employment resources to get off public
450 assistance. I mean, ran the gamut of things. I worked in a nonprofit that was kind of a
451 single stop center, so whatever people's issue, they were having me come in and work
452 with what they called an advocate. I don't know if this is one of the things you read, but I
453 wasn't a volunteer because I was an associate, but I found the volunteer model really
454 problematic and kind of offensive for the level of systemic oppression that people were
455 coming in with.

456

457 **Rob Graham**

458 What do you mean when you say that you found that the volunteer model was sort of
459 offensive?

460

461 **Crystal**

462 Because it was 20 year olds, college students taking two hours a week to help someone.
463 This was often well intentioned, but the levels of issues that people were having required,
464 not just case management from them. The volunteers weren't present enough, the model
465 didn't work. For example, a man was wrongfully incarcerated, and public housing had
466 been verified while he was in jail. He didn't get the mail because he was in jail, but he
467 was wrongfully convicted. I think people were coming because we're volunteers that will
468 help you with anything, but then the level of support that they needed was so intense that
469 the volunteer model wasn't gonna fit it.

470

471 **Rob Graham**

472 Got it.

473

474 **Crystal**

475 I became more interested in working in either a public place like a school, a space that
476 serves all people. That was kind of philosophically my switch to public counseling or
477 work. And then I had a friend who I was always really jealous of her job working in a
478 public school in Brooklyn that had law and justice as their core concept.

479

480 **Rob Graham**

481 That concept does something for me.

482 **Crystal**

483 Every school in our network has some kind of real world theme that connects students to
484 the world like law and social justice, so students are connected with internships, job
485 shadows, career readiness, and college all related to the theme. I always thought her job
486 was really cool, and then, in 2014, she texted that they're opening two schools and they're
487 hiring. Our students are taught through the design thinking process, so it's modeled after
488 the D school at Stanford and other schools like that.

489

490 **Rob Graham**

491 I know all about that. I went on this design thinking bender, and I was teaching it in my
492 classes. I've been teaching freshman transition courses, and I was having my students do
493 design thinking projects to help them become acclimated on campus and solve problems.

494

495 **Crystal**

496 Yeah, nice. So that's what we're about. We do have classes like programming, computer
497 science, and media, but the design thinking is used in all classrooms, all subject areas.
498 Teachers have to develop curriculum around design thinking. I was originally the
499 partnership coordinator, and I switched into the college counseling when the first
500 graduating class was juniors. So, three or four years ago. Then a year into that, I actually
501 started pursuing my social work degree at night, and I finished in two years so that was
502 this past summer.

503

504 **Rob Graham**

505 So the social work degree, do you feel it aligns well with the college preparation and
506 school counseling role? When I think about preparation for the field, that's just not the
507 first thing that comes to mind?

508

509 **Crystal**

510 I think two things. One, the guidance counselor role is becoming less and less powerful
511 because it's connected to scheduling, transcripts, very straightforward kind of technical
512 things. So there's just a general shift toward people doing counseling toward social work
513 as opposed to counseling or mental health because it's more in a box, whereas if you get a
514 social work degree, I could work anywhere. I could have a private practice. Guidance
515 counseling is really specific, so people are kind of stopping or there's a slow down of
516 even pursuing that. I was specifically interested in getting a degree in a program that had
517 community organizing. I'm interested in mental health but that's not what I'm about. The
518 other thing is that I think part of career readiness is organizing, because it's informing
519 people and families. It's not just the student, it's the student's family. I do a lot of, not just

520 one on one, but in student groups, with whole families. I have events every other week
521 where I'm doing kind of mass education, and I view that especially around financial aid,
522 and also not under-matching students, as a form of organizing. I do it with our staff. I'm
523 in charge of all of the 11th and 12th grade advisory curriculum, so that's social emotional
524 but also college and career prep and planning and exploration. So from my perspective,
525 I'm training a cohort of six 11th grade advisors and six 12th grade advisors in conjunction
526 with my principal and assistant principal and our guidance counselor, so our team of
527 staff. I'm responsible for their understanding of college and career readiness. That being
528 said, I get wrapped up in drama all the time at school, so I am doing mediation restorative
529 justice circles kind of stuff. But like I said, I spend 70% of my time on the college prep.

530

531 **Rob Graham**

532 Okay, okay, okay. Interesting. I'd to know a little bit more about your school. Who are
533 your students? Maybe tell me about the neighborhood or how the students wind up in
534 your school. There's something unique about your context. And maybe you could tell me
535 a little bit more about your colleagues and the leadership in your school that you're
536 accountable to.

537

538 **Crystal**

539 In New York City, there's a crazy middle school to high school process where students
540 have parents or counselors who take them to these fairs, and rank high schools they're
541 interested in. It's not a guarantee, but they can just put in an interest form, and the only
542 preference that they can get in the admission lottery is if they live in the borough. We as a
543 school have no say in who comes to the school. All we can do is do open houses, fairs
544 that kind of thing. 50% of the kids have to be random. So that accounts for students who
545 do not have access to fairs. That's how we preserve the balance between students with
546 access, basically. So 50% are random 50% do this lottery process that's semi-informed.
547 The racial breakdown of the school is about 47% Latino, that's our highest population,
548 30% Black African American/Caribbean American. Then, I think it's 8% Asian 10%
549 White and 2% Native American mixed or something that. It's extremely diverse, racially
550 and socio-economically, and ethnically. I mean it's a freakin melting pot, and it's really
551 noticeable when I bring college reps to the school. They always pick up on it. It's a really
552 a different environment because people think that the presence of people of color makes
553 it. That's diversity, but if you're a Black student at an all Black school, that's not diversity.
554 That might feel diverse for a White college rep coming into a school, but that's not
555 diversity.

556

557 **Rob Graham**

558 What about the makeup of the faculty and staff?

559

560 **Crystal**

561 I don't know the exact stats. So our assistant principal is a White male, and our assistant
562 principal's a White female. Both of them have been at the school since it was founded, so
563 both are very closely embedded in the work of the school, more than figureheads. The
564 dean or director of school culture is a Black man. He's kind of seen as an assistant
565 principal, although he doesn't have that license yet. I would say that everyone in our
566 office, the secretary, parent coordinator, staff are Latino women. And then the teachers
567 are kind of a mix. Honestly, I would say that the majority are White but not
568 overwhelmingly. We have Black teachers, White teachers, Southeast Asian teachers,
569 Latino teachers, Russian; I mean all ethnically and racially different. But yeah, I think
570 most notably would be the leadership of the school. And then myself and our guidance
571 counselor are White. Myself, the guidance counselor, and the dean, we are the kind of
572 managers of student support. So, we are a kind of triad under the principal and the AP.

573

574 **Rob Graham**

575 *Okay, that's some interesting personal background. Your road to college counseling had*
576 *its genesis in part in your early community work. You worked for an after school*
577 *program as a teen and were kind of redirected by the universe away from Teach For*
578 *America, a program you and a lot of other folks find problematic. You worked in a few*
579 *non-profits where you had a chance to help community members like the homeless, some*
580 *formerly incarcerated folks, and single mothers get their needs attended to. Eventually*
581 *you became disillusioned by nonprofit work and its propensity to be involved in work that*
582 *should be done by public entities, often inappropriately. This disillusion sparked an*
583 *interest in you to work in a public space that serves everyone like a school. You had a*
584 *friend working doing work in a school, and you kind of envied her job. She subsequently*
585 *made you aware of some openings in the public school network you work for now, and*
586 *you landed a job in your new school working in partnerships before shifting over to the*
587 *college counseling position. The school itself has a curriculum built around design*
588 *thinking, a model inspired by design schools like the one at Stanford. Your social work*
589 *master's program didn't prepare you for college counseling directly, but it did strengthen*
590 *the community organizing lens through which you approach your work. Your school is*
591 *noticeably diverse racially, ethnically, and socio-economically with a student population*
592 *that is 47% Latino, 30% Black African American/Caribbean American, 8% Asian, 10%*
593 *White, and 2% Native American. Your school leadership is mostly White, office staff*
594 *mostly Latinx, and faculty mostly but not overwhelmingly White. So, work duties. I think*
595 *you've said a little bit about it, but what are your official work duties? I know it sounds*

596 crazy, but you know people don't know what counseling contexts look like; I don't want
597 to make any assumptions. What does the space look like physically, and what is your day
598 to day? Can you paint a little picture?
599

600 **Crystal**

601 There's different power imbalances and different access to resources within the campus
602 itself, which is problematic. So, there's four schools in our building. The original school
603 housed in the building used to be prestigious, and has become a dropout factory
604 essentially. Last year I started a college peer-mentoring program to help students from
605 that school go to college. So there's that school which may be phased out in the next two
606 years, there's another school from our network in the basement, and then there's a new
607 high school on the third floor. We are exploding, and our school has become very popular
608 in terms of the amount of kids ranking the school. We have 110 spots for incoming
609 freshmen, and this year we had over 500 kids who ranked us within their top four.
610 Another thing is now being inundated with White families who have kind of caught on
611 with this design thinking tip and now see that the school is actually effective. We have
612 open houses sometimes and I'm like, what the fuck, all White families. But the majority
613 of times where we see groups of students of color at open houses is when a counselor
614 from the middle school is taking them. When kids are coming with parents, it's really
615 heavy White.

616

617 **Rob Graham**

618 *All interesting; the building, the school, and the racial business.*
619

620 **Crystal**

621 The school itself is in downtown Manhattan. Nobody lives by the school. We have kids
622 from every borough- Staten Island, Queens, Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, but I'd say the
623 majority of kids come from Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx. I get to school any time
624 between seven and eight. The bell rings at 8:45 to start school and again at 3:30. I spend
625 the majority of my day right now, because of college application season, doing
626 application prep. Everybody's applying to the City University of New York system on
627 Tuesday, every senior. Then I have a FAFSA night coming up. We just did this three-day
628 college trip. I have 15 kids doing early decision, so I work with them for three additional
629 hours after school. It's kind of a cohort model. And then I have my financial evening for
630 parents coming up. And then after school, I'm the cheerleading coach on Monday,
631 Tuesday, and Thursday. On Wednesday I'm doing Ed prep, and then on Saturdays I'm
632 doing Ed or EA marathons.

633

634 **Rob Graham**

635 You do not get burned out. I don't know how that's possible.

636

637 **Crystal**

638 My work is my wife. I mean I woke up this morning at six to make sure my student was
639 on his plane. Particularly in October through December, it's around the clock. I really feel
640 that Sunday is my day of rest, but I'll still spend at least two hours on Sunday, prepping
641 for my week ahead.

642

643 **Rob Graham**

644 I think it's wonderful. I think you're wonderful for the work you do and your approach to
645 your work. But that strikes me as not being a model of work that everybody can do.

646 You're unique in being able to pull that off, it seems.

647

648 **Crystal**

649 Yeah, I do think that I have kind of hit a groove, but I also think that just personally, I
650 wouldn't want to do a job that I didn't find also personally attached to. People say,
651 where's your work life balance, but I'm like, my work is my life, and that's because of
652 who I am. So I wouldn't dedicate myself to a school, a principal, or a student body that I
653 didn't feel that jell with, and that that extends to a lot of our staff. I mean our dean is at
654 school right now running a volleyball tournament. A lot of people are working late, going
655 to work on Saturdays, want to come on these trips. There's heavy staff student-
656 relationships in general. Um, but yeah I do think that I'm maybe crazy, but that's how this
657 college prep world works.

658

659 **Rob Graham**

660 I definitely don't want specifics, but do you get paid enough to do what you're doing?

661

662 **Crystal**

663 When I switched to college counseling I was still on the same budget line, so they maxed
664 me out at 59,000, which is okay. I have friends who make less than that, but they don't
665 work as hard, but in New York City, you know, it's not great. But my principal is super.
666 Technically I don't have the summer off because I'm not a teacher, I wasn't a social
667 worker yet, but he would pretty much give me the summer off, let me switch days if I
668 worked a weekend, work with me to compensate me in time for my work. But now, the
669 base salary for a social worker is 68. Then they look at all your experience, and I now
670 have my license. So I would say I'll probably be starting somewhere in the 70s and social
671 workers go up to 130k based on seniority. However, I will finally be eligible for per

672 session, money that you get when you work after the bell rings at 3:30. Before,
673 cheerleading or whatever, I did not get paid. Now, every hour I work past 3:30, I usually
674 work until at least six, I'll get paid at 48 an hour, so I'll be making probably an extra 15k
675 per session.

676

677 **Rob Graham**

678 Good. Sounds well-earned. *Crazy to hear about all these students occupying the same*
679 *building yet having these different experiences that will shape their trajectories based*
680 *largely on happenstance, things out of their control, and to an extent, race. The school is*
681 *situated in an area of Manhattan where none of the students live and is comprised of a*
682 *body that comes from multiple boroughs. And again, your salary is well-earned. You*
683 *work these long hours, especially during the October-December application season*
684 *helping students with FAFSA, applications, doing college trips, and educating families.*
685 *The level of commitment you have toward your school and students is commendable but*
686 *perhaps not to be expected across the industry, given that many folks will have*
687 *constraints that won't allow for 12-hour work days and involved Saturdays. Thankfully*
688 *your compensation is beginning to match your efforts.* So you do college prep work, and I
689 can hear the piece about admissions and getting students there. Do you do anything to
690 prepare students for what happens once they get on their college campuses?

691

692 **Crystal**

693 I try. I feel strongly that it's entirely another role of work. So I think college access is one
694 profession, and I think college retention or matriculation is another. I would say about
695 40% of our students enter a College to Opportunity Program for New York State. Those
696 are primarily income-based, so it's based on household size and income, and then every
697 school in the state university public school has its own opportunity program criteria. So
698 it's not affirmative action because in affirmative action you have to balance people, and
699 you say, okay well this person of color is going to get it because they were subjected to
700 more oppression to get here. So it's not exactly that because in Opportunity Program, they
701 lower the GPA and SAT. Similar to a Posse. They get a summer bridge program, full
702 financial aid, of meal plan, books, no financial barrier. And they get an academic advisor,
703 so the kids that are going in through Opportunity Programs, I'm usually pretty confident
704 that they're going to be okay. That being said, I have encountered some opportunity and
705 programs that are fucking bullshit.

706

707 **Rob Graham**

708 I'm sure

709

710 **Crystal**

711 Our school has a bridge to college program where we have former alumni as resources,
712 so I basically got to nominate a former student of mine who goes to University of
713 Rochester. He's a sophomore and comes back in the summer to help me with summer
714 melt. Basically, he will help me with seniors after they graduate in the summer before
715 they go to school, make sure everybody has sent their immunizations, sent all of their
716 registration stuff, parents' stuff, pick their housing. That program helps with a lot. I find
717 personally that managing financial aid should be its own class that students take when
718 they enroll in college, and I think kids in Opportunity Programs get some of that because
719 they have workshops and other additional stuff. But the biggest barrier that I see for
720 students being able to move, even in within freshman year of college from first semester
721 to second semester, is financially, because it holds up registration, it puts a hold on your
722 account, you can't access records. So logistically it's financially. Socially, I'm starting to
723 see trends in schools because all these institutions are predominantly White, and that's not
724 going to change. The only thing I see that can change is the way that the institution thinks
725 about that. I'm starting to see trends in the places that I'm sending students and what their
726 experience narratively is. It's filtering back to me as I think about where to send some
727 students.

728

729 **Rob Graham**

730 That's exactly the whole purpose of this study. How are you receiving this narrative
731 information back?

732

733 **Crystal**

734 I'm in touch with almost all of my former students. I mean, email, text, whatever. I'm
735 always helping students; that's a secondary job that's not in my job description. But I'm
736 constantly helping kids sort out issues on campus. I've often said to people who are staff,
737 I know, we were in contact during their admissions process, and then the kid is having an
738 issue. Why didn't you reach back out to me? I get that there's issues with confidentiality
739 once the kid is on campus but, that's something I think could be fixed. I'd say most of it is
740 just narrative info that's coming back to me or kids who express they want to transfer as a
741 sign of unhappiness. So, I'm starting to see where to send kids and not send kids based on
742 the experience, or if the kid is interested, making sure that they get to the campus and
743 speak to an alumnus. I don't send kids anywhere away that they haven't seen. That's why I
744 do a lot of trips, and that's why I use some of our grant money from the college access.

745

746 **Rob Graham**

747 I need to say, so I don't forget. I don't want this project to be, you do for me, and I don't
748 do for you.

749 I want you to think about me as a resource, as a colleague, as a brother out here in the
750 field. So anything you need, or you have a study that you'd like to be done, or you'd like
751 to collaborate in any kind of way, I'm available to you. I can even make a trip to New
752 York to support your work.

753

754 **Crystal**

755 I was going to ask you, how is George Mason financial aid? Is it full or no?

756

757 **Rob Graham**

758 That's a good question. I can't answer that. Let me just say this, I don't know if we talked
759 about this, but I've got an organization, and we support African American males as they
760 transition to PWI's in the area. So I've seen some of my students, a handful of them,
761 piecing together their monies from multiple places. I don't get the sense that the financial
762 aid is just taking care of them the way it should. I walk the money to the cashier's office,
763 and the money is always needed. Even just that thousand dollars is needed months into
764 their process. I'll deliver the money after the semester has really gotten started, and even
765 then the money is still having an impact on their accounts.

766

767 **Crystal**

768 I mean scholarships are great, but I try to prioritize sending, whether they're eligible for
769 opportunity programs or not, students to schools that meet 100% of need. So that's one
770 thing that I want to prioritize myself this year professionally. I'm making better relationships
771 and connecting kids to those schools. So on this college tour that we just went on, we
772 went to Lafayette, and Albright in PA, and then we went upstate to Syracuse, Oswego,
773 University Rochester and then to Union and Albany. I switch it up on the trips. Now
774 Lafayette is a full need met school, so if you get in, you get the aid you need to go, that's
775 why I prioritize those schools.

776 **Rob Graham**

777 Lafayette has Posse too, right?

778

779 **Crystal**

780 They do. That's a school where I feel I can send the kids, and they will have people who
781 understand what that kid might encounter on their campus and would genuinely be an
782 advocate or support.

783

784 **Rob Graham**

785 We're so out of time. I've got a couple of questions, but, I want to respect your time; I'll
786 save them for our next conversation. *I got a lot out of this conversation.*

787

788 **Connecting Personal and Professional**

789

790 **Crystal**

791 Okay. Really sorry. I'm excited about the collage. I organized my pictures, but I haven't
792 done it yet.

793

794 **Rob Graham**

795 Okay, that's a good start. So, how have you been?

796

797 **Crystal**

798 Pretty good. My student was able to talk to your cousin.

799

800 **Rob Graham**

801 Oh good, that was my first question!

802

803 **Crystal**

804 And he's actually at Lafayette now, doing their overnight program.

805

806 **Rob Graham**

807 Okay, good. Did he get something good out of the conversation?

808

809 **Crystal**

810 Yeah, I think she was just kind of talking about her experience as a student. Is she from
811 New Jersey?

812

813 **Rob Graham**

814 She's from Southern California.

815

816 **Crystal**

817 Oh. He said she was really nice and helpful.

818

819 **Rob Graham**

820 Oh. Good, good, good. She's wonderful, so I figured it wouldn't be a big deal at all. Yeah.

821 So, maybe we dive in a little bit. We're starting cold, so I'm trying to think of a nice

822 warm up question here. Is there anything that you think your school or your district or

823 whatever governance should know about prepping for college or school counseling?
824 Maybe something you've learned through your work that you feel is sort of missing on
825 the radar?

826

827 **Crystal**

828 I don't know. I mean I think that issues are kind of known. It's the lack of investment in
829 the solutions, I guess, particularly around financial aid. There doesn't seem to be much
830 momentum on that.

831

832 **Rob Graham**

833 That's interesting. So, the institutions, they have to have the gumption and the resources
834 in order to make that happen. What do you need to better position your students once
835 they get to the university?

836

837 **Crystal**

838 Oh gosh. I mean I think college access is one job, and college success is a totally other
839 job. In the high school where I am, I'm responsible for the students in my building,
840 whereas a non-profit might be responsible for students through the longevity of their
841 educational career, so they might have that bandwidth to have two roles. Whereas for
842 high school counselors, we just have to trust that the institution we're sending students
843 off to are going to meet their needs. I get narrative feedback from students or even people
844 in the colleges about how students are doing, but it's a whole different job. So, it's a
845 complicated question. I mean that's what I was thinking about in grad school, specifically
846 around students with disabilities because that was the most glaring gap I saw. And all my
847 students get admitted to school, college, every one of them. So, it's community college or
848 something else, but 70% of my students with disabilities didn't actually show up.

849

850 **Rob Graham**

851 I think you probably told me this already, but can you remind me of the makeup of your
852 team? Roles?

853

854 **Crystal**

855 So, I'm the only college counselor. I'm also a social worker. There's a social worker
856 who's handling mostly crisis intervention, teacher issues with students, and then the dean.
857 And then academic counseling. If a parent is worried their kid is failing a class, they'll
858 reach out to set up some kind of academic plan. He does mostly ninth and 10th and I do
859 mostly 11th and 12th. He more does crisis stuff, and I'm more into the college readiness
860 trips, senior activities, that kind of thing. And then we have our dean, or director of

861 school culture, who is our fire-puter-outer. The three of us are really a team, and then we
862 have our principal, assistant principal, and an instructional coach who shares an office
863 with her assistant principal who's primarily working with teachers on the quality of their
864 instruction.

865

866 **Rob Graham**

867 Do you feel your counseling team is sufficiently resourced or, like you have enough
868 people in place? I Do you feel your team is well enough resourced, and that you have
869 enough human power to do what you all are trying to do?

870

871 **Crystal**

872 I really struggle with that with. I've rarely found people outside of my network of schools
873 who are coached to do what we do, that have both the student-centered approach, high
874 level knowledge of the landscape of college access, financial aid, state programs, support
875 programs, everything. I don't find that often.

876

877 **Rob Graham**

878 Maybe this is what you mean by Opportunity Programs, but do your students participate
879 in things like Trio?

880

881 **Crystal**

882 Yeah, so my students aren't in TRIO. Do you know POSSE?

883

884 **Rob Graham**

885 Yeah.

886

887 **Crystal**

888 So posse. I mean that's more of a scholarship program. SEO scholars. Do you know
889 them?

890

891 **Rob Graham**

892 I don't think so.

893

894 **Crystal**

895 That's another college access program that starts when students are in like ninth grade.
896 And then, I mean we definitely have students who do various things in their own
897 community centers outside of school, but they're not school-based. Do you know about
898 opportunity programs in your state, because I don't know?

899

900 **Rob Graham**

901 No, I'm kind of learning for you.

902

903 **Crystal**

904 Not to mention the fact that my kids get quality college counseling in a public school
905 while disadvantaged kids in the school downstairs have no college counselor.

906

907 **Rob Graham**

908 Right, so crazy.

909

910 **Crystal**

911 Yeah. It's crushing. I mean that's why I collect all documents in junior here, so by the
912 time the kids get to be seniors, I have everything, no matter how the cards fall, I have
913 everything I need. The timing of documents is never a barrier to progressing in an
914 admissions process. Again that's just an advantage that they have because they have me,
915 and that's not fair. It's fucking sad.

916

917 **Rob Graham**

918 I can kind of gather how you feel, but how do you feel walking those halls knowing that
919 those students who are in that same building, don't have a you?

920

921 **Crystal**

922 Last year, I was the debate team coach for the whole campus, all four schools, so I knew
923 some of their seniors from mock trial. And they kind of just started coming to me. And
924 then it spread to their friends, and then we started a whole peer mentoring thing with my
925 students and them. I think my principal is sympathetic to other schools, particularly the
926 school that's been there, the longest, which is kind of just a dropout factory. Those kids
927 walk into our campus every day probably wishing they went to our school It's just some
928 fate; our school is non-selective. So it's really just a random algorithm that assigns kids to
929 schools.

930

931 **Rob Graham**

932 *Okay, so when it comes to prepping for college or school counseling, you feel like school*
933 *and district leadership/stakeholders know what they need to know; it's a matter of*
934 *investment in the solutions, especially around issues with financial aid and funding*
935 *college. Also, given the workload associated with doing college access work, you operate*
936 *from a position of hope and faith that the institutions you send your students to will*

937 *support them. In terms of your team at work, you work in concert with a guidance*
938 *counselor and a social worker. Despite the team being rather small, you're not sure if*
939 *there are a lot of folks who would be perfect matches to complement you given the high*
940 *level knowledge necessary around the landscapes of college access, financial aid, state*
941 *programs, support programs, etc. To mitigate any potential problems for students*
942 *preparing for college, you are quite proactive when it comes to collecting student*
943 *documents, while recognizing that your students are luckier than the others inhabiting*
944 *your building because they have a Crystal on their side. You have a lot of field and*
945 *industry knowledge. I mean you're able to articulate things, and you've got the historical*
946 *knowledge and current knowledge. Where did you get all this from? I mean this is not the*
947 *kind of conversation I get.*

948

949 **Crystal**

950 So there's a woman who I kind of consider my mentor. I'm sure she would talk to you if
951 you're interested. She is the head of the network. It's not a charter network, and every
952 school has its own autonomy. One of their wings is not just college access but also
953 alumni success. She's the former president of the New York State Association for College
954 Admissions Counseling, and she is just a fucking guru. She was the one that originally
955 approached me about switching into this work at my school, and she runs monthly
956 meetings for counselors, where there's always a guest from a school. We always do
957 challenging cases. There's various traditions that we do at each meeting, but they're
958 extremely impactful and well attended. I think I got most of the information through her,
959 either through that platform or through things that she suggested that I do so. It's her job
960 to train and support people in this work and she is an expert.

961

962 **Rob Graham**

963 Man, I wish we'd have talked months ago; I'd be asking you if I could join one of those
964 meetings.

965

966 **Crystal**

967 The next one is December 5th.

968

969 **Rob Graham**

970 I'll float that around in my brain around it a little bit. So quick question. Do you feel your
971 master's program gave you what you needed to be successful on your job?

972

973 **Crystal**

974 Um, to make more money (Rob laughs). I mean, I think my master's program gave me
975 the credential that I needed to start having a more professional and financial foundation
976 for my career with a little more stature, but I didn't learn anything about college
977 counseling in it. However, I was able to reflect on various happenings around the
978 interpersonal work, or community work that I was involved in over those three years.
979 That was helpful because a lot of the things I picked to write about were definitely based
980 around people I've worked with, which. But I think that side of college counseling is
981 concrete, but the bigger picture is what I see my role as, preparing students to be able to
982 make authentic decisions, balanced with ensuring that I'm giving them the most amount
983 of information.

984

985 **Rob Graham**

986 So the self. You're in the self-advocacy business.

987

988 **Crystal**

989 Yes, definitely sometimes. But I also think that a lot of times, the students that I work
990 with are taught so much about grit, resilience, self-advocacy, and it kind of pisses me off
991 because I'm like, there still a kid. So, there are times where like, don't worry about it, I'll
992 make the phone call for you, because that's what a kid in a different class or echelon
993 would have a parent doing. Yes, kids need to learn the skills to advocate for themselves.
994 You know, I think it's a balance. I really have a problem with the grit/resilience rhetoric
995 because they're often taught in urban

996

997 **Rob Graham**

998 Yeah, yeah because it sort of removes some of the context. I got the book on my shelf up
999 here by Paul Tough talking about grit, and when I first read it, I was like, this is it, like
1000 the rest of America was. But it's not the grit; it's not the grace. It's just how you explained
1001 earlier, you've got people in the same building having these different experiences because
1002 of this algorithm or their address. The importance of that is removed a lot from the
1003 conversation around grit.

1004

1005 **Crystal**

1006 If I could replace that word with any word that I thought we should be promoting, I
1007 would say relationships, because that's what makes the world; that's what makes people
1008 progress, and that's what makes people be able to solve problems. That's the biggest
1009 barrier that I see students face in a lot of different ways. In college, whether it's socially
1010 because of feeling like they don't fit in, or because they're scared to talk to a professor. To
1011 me that's not grit, that's not having practice at making relationships with people.

1012 **Rob Graham**

1013 I agree. One of the first things, I talk about as I prepare my freshman for success is
1014 relationships, how to talk to your professors. Introduce yourself before you experience
1015 any kind of trouble, so that they know who you are, you're a human to them.

1016

1017 **Crystal**

1018 Absolutely

1019

1020 **Rob Graham**

1021 Are there any questions you have about your students or African American male students
1022 and their first year experience at universities? Is there anything you've wondered about
1023 your students' experience when they leave you and get on the campus?

1024

1025 **Crystal**

1026 Um, I think that I can predict who is going to be successful and who is going to struggle.
1027 I actually think that the way that students move through the college application process is
1028 in itself, kind of a mirror of readiness for college. A lot of those skills that you're talking
1029 about- time management, organization, follow-up, those things come out in the process.
1030 Some kids I drag, and then they make it through, and sometimes I'm confident they've
1031 learned by the end. And then some I'm not sure. I'm thinking about my landscape of
1032 students, and they're all so different that it's hard to think of a uniform question. I think
1033 across race, African American will soon be the second biggest demographic racially in
1034 our school, but across all the races in our school the kids are very scattered in terms of
1035 GPA. It's not all the Asian kids have the highest GPA. We actually really struggle with
1036 Asian students adjusting in our school, interesting thing. But yeah, they're all kind of
1037 spread,

1038 **Rob Graham**

1039 Which is kind of nice, right?

1040

1041 **Crystal**

1042 Yeah, I think it's one of the things that I talked to you a little bit about. The diversity of
1043 the school being pretty special.

1044

1045 **Rob Graham**

1046 Because you don't want to be able to predict success and outcomes based upon race.
1047 What's your vision for yourself professionally?

1048

1049 **Crystal**

1050 Um, that's a good question. I'm definitely kind of curious about being on the other side as
1051 an EOP director or something. Oh, an EOP Opportunity Program Director, that's kind of
1052 interesting to me, but I also don't know if it's wide enough. It still seems like because
1053 you're helping those students, you're not necessarily changing the institutions.
1054

1055 **Rob Graham**

1056 I do think there's value though. We need both. We need that policy changing and in the
1057 meantime, we need to support who we admit.
1058

1059 **Crystal**

1060 Yeah, I've definitely thought about. I mean I don't think I'll leave my school anytime
1061 soon. I've definitely thought about getting on a local community board, get involved in
1062 politics a little bit. I've thought about being an assistant principal or principal. And then
1063 I've also thought about just having my own business and leaving this world entirely. I
1064 don't know if I could do it, but maybe in some years, I would like to have a restaurant and
1065 maybe move to the Caribbean.
1066

1067 **Rob Graham**

1068 Yeah, that's a different direction.
1069

1070 **Crystal**

1071 I think it would be cool to have my own space and community space. It would be for
1072 profit but for the community; I'm not into the nonprofit model. I just became a school
1073 social worker, so I'm gonna stick with that for a little bit. But then there's also other parts
1074 of my job that I enjoy. I enjoy peer mediation. I enjoy being a cheerleading coach.
1075 There's other things that I like about my job that I could do more of, but I don't think at
1076 my school I could leave the college piece
1077

1078 **Rob Graham**

1079 You're well-suited. I feel like your school and your students are very lucky. You're self-
1080 driven, you stay up on the current data and current practices.

Appendix C

Conversations with David

Personal Background Narrative- Who Are You?

1 **Rob Graham**

2 First, personal conversation, figuring out who you are, and then you learning a little bit
3 about me. I'm gonna ask you some very general questions to stimulate conversation. I'm
4 gonna start with my favorite question. And please be super honest, I know you got
5 respect for me because I'm your elder and all that.

6

7 **David**

8 Definitely

9

10 **Rob Graham**

11 But you can, you know, push as far as you can.

12

13 **David**

14 Yeah, I can definitely open up. I'm definitely cool with that.

15

16 **Rob Graham**

17 Okay, so, why'd you agree to help me?

18

19 **David**

20 Well, I agreed to help you, because I felt like this topic really, you know, relates to me

21

22 **Rob Graham**

23 Un hun

24

25 **David**

26 and my journey to make it to where I'm at today. I definitely felt like I needed the
27 assistance of role models. They played an important role, especially after my father died,
28 I really needed a mentor in my life. I felt like I didn't have the right guidance in school,
29 like my peers, they kinda guided me in the wrong direction, you know? And they were
30 too young to actually be role models, so I felt like the need for mentors was really
31 important. Especially in the Black communities, growing up in urban areas, there's

32 definitely a need, especially for kids growing up in those areas that don't have fathers to
33 help them. And a lot of guys, we don't listen to our mothers a lot, so we really need that
34 father figure in our life or that mentor that can just guide us in the right direction.

35

36 **Rob Graham**

37 I appreciate that. I could kind of I could tell from your text, when I asked you to kind of
38 help me. I could tell you were really taking it seriously.

39

40 **David**

41 Of course

42

43 **Rob Graham**

44 That meant a lot to me. Even though I kind of set myself up help others, for some reason
45 it just felt really powerful that you were responding. You know, it's hard to accept help.

46

47 **David**

48 Right. Exactly.

49

50 **Rob Graham**

51 I'm sure you feel exactly the same way. Like even when, even if you're a helpful person,
52 there's something about help that is hard to accept.

53

54 **David**

55 Yes, definitely. Yeah.

56

57 **Rob Graham**

58 Maybe I'll flip the script, and tell you a little bit about me because you said something,
59 and I think it'll be helpful if I tell my story.

60

61 **David**

62 Okay.

63

64 **Rob Graham**

65 I don't know if you know, but I'm from Pasadena, California, Southern California. It's
66 kind of a nice place. It's a place that's being gentrified. When I was young, it felt like it
67 was 50% Black, maybe like 35% Latino. And then there was like a split between
68 Armenians and White folks making up the rest. But now people have discovered
69 Pasadena as this place they want to live, so now it's been gentrified.

70

71 **David**

72 Right

73

74 **Rob Graham**

75 But gentrified in a different kind of way. Most of the time, when you hear gentrification,
76 you think about young, rich White folks, but Pasadena was essentially gentrified by rich
77 Asian American folks, so it's a different kind of cultural shift. But anyway, it's lovely
78 place. When I was young, I had a standard sort of family. There were five of us. Mom,
79 Dad, I got two older sisters. One's nine years older than me, and one's three years older
80 than me. We had a cool upbringing. My dad was a police officer, an army guy, so he a
81 straight-laced kinda guy. My mom, she owned a nursery school or preschool, whatever
82 you want to call it. She was a little bit more liberal, a bit wilder. I'm probably both.

83

84 **David**

85 Yeah!

86

87 **Rob Graham**

88 I started out wild, and as I get older, I'm like, wow, I'm my dad now.

89 **David**

90 Yeah, you transitioned

91

92 **Rob Graham**

93 I look in the mirror, and I'm like, I actually see Dad!

94

95 **David**

96 You can actually see it right

97

98 **Rob Graham**

99 Dad passed away when I was a senior in high school,

100

101 **David**

102 Wow

103

104 **Rob Graham**

105 and it messed me up for a long time. But he was a good dad. I think I got the crucial years
106 you need to not be a knucklehead. I feel like if you got your parents up into a certain
107 point of development, then you get what you need. I didn't get the icing on the cake, you
108 know, and that's why I relied on like my uncle, my cousins' dad and all kinds of stuff like
109 that. But in terms of figuring out my morals and being a good person, I got that.

110

111 **David**

112 Right

113

114 **Rob Graham**

115 I just wanted to say that because I know how big of a thing that is. And, I wanted to let
116 you know we were on the same page on that. I don't know that piece of your story, but I

117 could feel it when we first interviewed you for the MATE scholarship, that jumped
118 through.

119

120 **David**

121 Yes.

122 **Rob Graham**

123 So, tell me about your family situation. I don't know anything about that. Tell me about
124 where you grew up. I mean, I know it's PG.

125

126 **David**

127 Yeah

128

129 **Rob Graham**

130 Largo.

131

132 **David**

133 *Yeah Largo, but there's more to it.* Actually, I grew up in Oxon Hill, a little bit near DC,
134 like the Southeast part of DC. That's where I grew up until I was about 11 or 12 years old.
135 That's when I moved to Largo. But, um growing up in that area, you know, it's pretty
136 rough. At a young age I saw a lot of stuff, terrible things, you know. A lot of experiences,
137 but also I had good experiences. I was able to meet lifelong friends. I went to an
138 elementary school named St. Ignatius

139

140 **Rob Graham**

141 Un hun

142

143 **David**

144 in Oxon Hill, Maryland. Yeah, I think, that environment really shaped the person I am
145 today.

146

147 **Rob Graham**

148 Un hun

149

150 **David**

151 At a young age, my experiences just made me more mature. I grew up early. I was
152 already prepared for a lot of tribulations and stuff that was gonna come in the future from
153 what I experienced. Like in school, it's a lot of violence, fights all the time, stuff like that.
154 And then the transition, I thought it'd be a little different in Largo, but I went to a school,
155 named Charles River Flowers?

156

157 **Rob Graham**

158 Un hun, un hun

159

160 **David**
161 The transition was a little bit different. It's a nicer area, you know, better neighborhood.
162 My school was like 90% Black, and it was a pretty good experience. I really liked high
163 school, but it's still like, you know, the same. Same cycle, just fights all the time in
164 school, peer pressure, a lot of bullying. I used to see a lot of kids get bullied and stuff like
165 that. Growing up around all that stuff and in that particular environment, trying to stay
166 focused on school is really hard. It takes a toll on a lot of students. Like a lot of students
167 decided to drop out because the majority of students don't have fathers in their lives, so
168 they had to defend themselves. At young ages, they had to provide for their family, I'm
169 talking about 12 years old, 13,14; they had to provide for their families at young ages. So
170 that's all they know. They never really had time to think about school; they didn't have
171 time to plan for school. I know a lot of my friends that would like to go to college, but
172 they didn't necessarily have the resources. They're the father figure, you know.
173
174 **Rob Graham**
175 Man, that's heavy.
176
177 **David**
178 Yeah. That's why a lot of people really looked at sports in school. They never really
179 looked at the actual educational part because they thought that was the easiest way to
180 make it while providing for their families. It's easy to just go in a gym and shoot a
181 basketball, but it's harder to stay focused in school and try to work towards a degree, and
182 find the financial stability to actually go to college. And I kind of fell in that circle of kids
183 because my father passed away in a car accident, and after that happened, you know,
184
185 **Rob Graham**
186 When? How were you?
187
188 **David**
189 I was 16?
190
191 **Rob Graham**
192 Yeah, so we were the same age
193
194 **David**
195 Same age, yep. Even when my father was around, my mom was the anchor. Even though
196 they divorced, he was still a part of my life, I'd still see him, we still had a relationship.
197 As soon as he passed away, it was really difficult, because that's like the only male figure
198 in my life.
199
200 **Rob Graham**
201 So you were, 16? Okay, got it. You moved to Flowers when you were?
202

203 **David**
 204 About 12? I'll say 13.
 205
 206 **Rob Graham**
 207 Okay, okay, okay (whispered contemplatively).
 208
 209 **David**
 210 Yeah, but the thing is, my grandfather still lived in Oxon Hill; he still does to this day, so
 211 I'll be back and forth, like from house to house, either Oxon Hill or Largo, Maryland.
 212
 213 **Rob Graham**
 214 Un hun, un hun
 215
 216 **David**
 217 After my father passed away, it was really difficult for me to deal with certain situations.
 218 Difficult for me to stay focused on school, you know, cause there's already enough going
 219 on at school, and then when stuff like that happens, it just takes your mind completely off
 220 of the work. I had a great mother that kept me on track. She always was there. You met
 221 my mom, you definitely know my mother.
 222
 223 **Rob Graham**
 224 I know, man I think about it all the time. I could just tell your mom is not playing around.
 225 She's strong.
 226 You know what I mean? She's not playing. The fact that she called me. A lot of people
 227 will be like, I'm not bothering him. She was like, I'm doing whatever it takes; it's my son.
 228
 229 **David**
 230 Right. Exactly.
 231
 232 **Rob Graham**
 233 Tell me about your brothers.
 234
 235 **David**
 236 Okay, so I have an older brother and a younger brother. My older brother is attending the
 237 University of Maryland. He's on his way to graduate, and my younger brother is in
 238 community college right now, but he's planning on transferring after this sophomore year.
 239 We all been in the same experiences. My older brother, he was always into sports, and
 240 my younger brother as well. But my older brother really loves sports, and that's what
 241 shaped him, you know. He made a lot of his friends from playing football. He's a really
 242 good football player, a good athlete. With my older brother, we've been through the same
 243 situation. He was older, so there was a lot more pressure on him when my father died and
 244
 245 **Rob Graham**

246 Step up kinda stuff

247

248 **David**

249 Yes, exactly. You have to be the man, you know. And he felt that pressure from a young
250 age. So, I remember growing up, he would kind of fall off the track, look up to other
251 people in the neighborhoods and stuff like that. I think he grew up the hardest out of all
252 of us, because when we first moved to Flowers, the school was really bad at the time.
253 Fights, stabbings inside of school; people doing crazy stuff. He had to protect himself
254 while attending school at the same time, really hard for him. The only way he could really
255 protect himself was to start meeting people, and that made him go on the wrong path
256 even more, you know, the peer pressure. But he managed to get through it.

257

258 **Rob Graham**

259 He kind of paved the way, made it a little easier for you?

260

261 **David**

262 Yes, definitely because if I didn't see what he went through, I wouldn't know what to
263 expect. I feel like my situation was more of a lenient situation than him because we had a
264 new principal by the time I moved into Flowers, and he wasn't no joke at all. Like, he'll
265 suspend you right away, immediately. And when my brother attended the school students
266 from different areas could attend the school. So were a lot of DC students coming to
267 Flowers. There were policies where the school would accept DC students that got kicked
268 out of DC schools, so that made the school even worse, you know?

269

270 **Rob Graham**

271 It's like, conflict, neighborhood conflict.

272

273 **David**

274 Yes, definitely. The neighborhood conflict, that's the biggest thing, like rival
275 neighborhoods. That's why they hired a new principal, because it was getting out of hand.
276 That's the point where my brother was in that school. He used to talk about how people
277 would try to mess with him all the time. I remember him coming back just upset about
278 that. It's just hard in general to focus on school and think about your future when you're
279 going through stuff like that.

280

281 **Rob Graham**

282 If you didn't tell your story, nobody would have any idea. You know that, right?

283

284 **David**

285 Yes, definitely.

286

287 **Rob Graham**

288 How did you stay so positive? You don't have a defensive personality. I mean, you
289 protect yourself. And I think you protect yourself by being quiet.

290

291 **David**

292 Right, yeah, definitely.

293

294 **Rob Graham**

295 But you don't come off as defensive. How are you so positive? And like, your grades
296 were good and all that? How were you able to hold down your spirit? And handle your
297 business, and be a positive dude that people want to, you know, be around?

298

299 **David**

300 Well, first, I credit that to my mother. My mom, she used to always keep me in church.
301 She provided me with mentors at the church. That played a really like big role. You
302 know, she's like, every Sunday, I'm making sure that like you have a mentor you discuss
303 anything with, any problems I have.

304

305 **Rob Graham**

306 Un hun

307

308 **David**

309 So, mentors really played an important role in my journey, especially mentors at the
310 church, you know, because it's really convenient. I can actually have one or two mentors
311 I could just vent to and release all this negative energy. One of my mentors from church,
312 I remember talking to him about how it's hard to stay focused on school, and he would
313 tell me, every day you gotta do the small things, be cool with the teachers, stay out the
314 way. Just mind your business. I was to myself a little bit in school, but everyone knew me
315 already because my brother went there. So it was kind of hard to stay out of the mix.

316

317 **Rob Graham**

318 Un hun!

319

320 **David**

321 I was already in the mix when I first got to the school, so he was like, you can still have
322 friends, you don't have to have be fake and not say anything to them, but you have to do
323 it from a distance. That's the only way you can focus and get to college, and I knew I
324 wanted to go to college since about the ninth, 10th grade. That's when I really knew that,
325 so I was like, all right, I need to start working now to get to the towards that goal. Yeah.

326

327 **Rob Graham**

328 Tell me about your mom.

329

330 **David**

331 Alright. Like how she helped me? Oh, yes,
332
333 **Rob Graham**
334 Whatever. Some of what I want to know is about the important relationships in your life.
335 And obviously, she's super important.
336
337 **David**
338 Okay, She's actually born in Alaska. That's pretty interesting.
339
340 **Rob Graham**
341 What!
342
343 **David**
344 Yeah. Because my grandfather was in the military, so he had her in Alaska. And then
345 they moved to California at a young age. My grandfather end up moving to Washington
346 DC because of the military. That's how we got on this side of the fence. I remember her
347 telling me she grew up really strict because her father was in the military, and you know,
348 he's a general.
349
350 **Rob Graham**
351 Oh, wow.
352
353 **David**
354 Yeah. He was really high up. He's serious business. I remember her telling me that she
355 was always focused on school just because of that. Her mother also you made sure she
356 was focused and stuff like that. I don't really recall any challenges she went through, but I
357 do remember her saying that it was hard growing up, also in Oxon Hill area, because she
358 grew up in that area as well.
359
360 **Rob Graham**
361 Mmmm
362
363 **David**
364 It was like the same struggle, and for a female, it's even harder to go through that type of
365 stuff and that environment. But my mom managed to go to college. She went to
366 University of Maryland and graduated from there. Now, she's a statistician for the
367 government.
368
369 **Rob Graham**
370 Oh. She's a math person.
371
372 **David**

373 Yeah. Different but not completely different. I'm econ, so we kinda on the same page.
374 But yeah, my relationship with my mom is pretty good. She's always been there for me. I
375 can talk to her about anything. She always provided for me by herself. She could have
376 easily given up a long time ago, like, forget it, I'll put you in foster care. But she provided
377 for three boys by herself,
378
379 **Rob Graham**
380 Whew, that's rough, three boys?!
381
382 **David**
383 You know, it's hard for boys to pay attention already. She really had to step up, put us in
384 church at an early age, do a lot by herself, provide food. There were a lot of times we
385 used to struggle with that, like food and stuff. The bills, I remember a lot of arguments
386 because it's a lot of stress, and for us to not listen because we're children, like, that's what
387 kids do.
388
389 **Rob Graham**
390 She's grinding, and
391
392 **David**
393 Yeah, she's grinding.
394
395 **Rob Graham**
396 and you guys are wildin!
397
398 **David**
399 Yeah, we just wildin basically (both chuckle). But she always stayed there for us. I could
400 always say that. So that was really hard for us to get over that cycle. But she always
401 taught us to be respectful. That's the biggest thing. So regardless,
402
403 **Rob Graham**
404 Oh, yeah. I can tell! It's gonna take you a long way. She knew what she was doing.
405
406 **David**
407 Definitely. Yeah.
408
409 **Rob Graham**
410 It's opening doors, right?
411
412 **David**
413 Yeah, definitely. I appreciate that. So that's the biggest thing. We've been through this
414 struggle, like a lot of Black people. I'll say, semi-inner city; PG County is kind of like the
415 inner city. We've been through the same struggles as almost everybody else. Times when

416 we thought we had to move out, we thought we had to move back to Oxon Hill, and stuff
417 like that. I know God helped us through these situations. And my mom was just always
418 on top of me. She would come to the school. She's the type of mother to come to the
419 school and embarrass me in front of other people.

420

421 **Rob Graham**

422 Un hun

423

424 **David**

425 I got embarrassed many times in high school for doing the wrong thing like skipping
426 class. Even if I had an A in the class, the teacher would call my mom because she knows
427 she'll come up there and embarrass me in front of the whole school, so

428

429 **Rob Graham**

430 That's the number one rule! Black mamas are like, don't have them call me.

431

432 **David**

433 Yeah, exactly. If they call me, you know I'll be up there in a second!

434

435 **Rob Graham**

436 Right! (laughing)

437

438 **David**

439 Now that I look at it, I'm grateful to have a mom like that. You know, a lot of these
440 children without their fathers wish they had a mom that could step up like that. Not every
441 mother could step up like that.

442

443 **Rob Graham**

444 It's remarkable. I just got some conversation questions. Who are you as a person?

445

446 **David**

447 Okay to describe myself, I say I'm a very caring person. I don't want to just do for myself;
448 I always want to change the world the best way I can. That really describes me. I like
449 sports a lot. I played basketball my whole life. I'm a very introverted person. I always had
450 a lot of friends, but I was like really introverted growing up because of what I
451 experienced. I didn't really have trust for a lot of people. As I start growing up, I start
452 trusting more people. I remember you told me when I first met you to build those
453 connections. I'm glad as a mentor you brought that up to me because coming into college,
454 I wasn't sure how to do that. Networking is basically trusting people, and in my
455 environment I grew up in, people don't have trust because you friends will just do you
456 wrong. It's like a lot of bad stuff that you experience in the inner cities. So, having a
457 mentor is really important for me. I feel like I could be a mentor one day; you really
458 inspired me to be a mentor as well.

459 **Rob Graham**

460 I appreciate that, the way you've taken support and decided that you want to pay it
461 forward. That's nice.

462 I cut you off a little bit. So you are a nice person, introverted. I can feel that; I could see
463 that. I wasn't sure though, I was like, is he a legit introvert, or is it just being respectful?
464 Or is he protecting himself?

465

466 **David**

467 I say I kind of grew out of it in college. Now I like to go around and talk more. I wouldn't
468 say I'm introverted socially because I can socialize and have fun and all that. I mean
469 introverted as far as protecting myself, and trying to reach my goals. I felt like you had to
470 be introverted to do that because it's easy to get caught up in wrong stuff.

471

472 **Rob Graham**

473 Okay, okay. Any other relationships that are really important to you outside of family?
474 Like if somebody's telling your story, some relationships they need to know about?

475

476 **David**

477 I'll say my relationship with my grandfather. I became close to him at a young age. He
478 was in the military, so he's always strict as well. I learned the small things from him, how
479 to fix the tires, or how to pump the tires on the car, just the small things to help me save
480 money. I really appreciate him for that. He'll teach me something new every time I visit
481 him. I also have a lot of distant family. Growing up, it was always hard for me to reach
482 out and find like that person or the group of people that could actually support me. I
483 think the mentors at my church really played a big role for me because my family is kind
484 of isolated all around. I have a California family, Chicago, and stuff like that, you know.
485 Even in DC I don't have that much family. It was just like my grandparents, my mom,
486 and my brothers.

487

488 **Rob Graham**

489 How's little bro?

490

491 **David**

492 He's all good. He's in PG Community College.

493

494 **Rob Graham**

495 Okay. Where's he going?

496

497 **David**

498 He's planning on maybe transferring here? Or he might transfer to Maryland. He's trying
499 to figure out.

500

501 **Rob Graham**

502 Right. Maryland's more fun though, hun?

503

504 **David**

505 Yeah, definitely. (both laughing) Yeah, my mom didn't want me to go to Maryland.

506

507 **Rob Graham**

508 She's smart!

509

510 **David**

511 Yeah, I know a lot of people that go there. She's like, you're not going there; you need to
512 come here, and stay focused. Maryland's just a party school. It's all trouble, so

513

514 **Rob Graham**

515 And this is almost no party. I mean, even if you think it's a party school, this isn't a party
516 school

517

518 **David**

519 Yeah. They're shutting the parties down now. Literally every party that's thrown here is
520 shut down so quickly.

521

522 **Rob Graham**

523 *Just to keep it all straight, you agreed to help me because this work speaks to your*
524 *experience. You had an up and down experience growing up and at school because of the*
525 *makeup of school, the communities you came up in, and the passing of your father. Your*
526 *brothers had similar experiences to yours, and your mom held it down for the family*
527 *despite life's hardships. She got you into church early and wisely connected you with*
528 *some mentors brothas at the church who helped you navigate school and planning for*
529 *your future. Mentors have been big in your life. Okay, so grandfather was really*
530 *important in your life. So what do you want to do?*

531

532 **David**

533 So now I'm looking at being an attorney. I'm doing econ right now, and I started a minor
534 in entrepreneurship just in case I'm gonna get more into the business side? I'm looking
535 into corporate law.

536

537 **Rob Graham**

538 Okay, okay. Why?

539

540 **David**

541 I was always interested in the court system as a whole. I used to always watch stuff like
542 Maury. It's just entertaining to me to see how they deal with certain situations, and I
543 believe that I could be the one to deal with situations in a fair manner just like they.

544

545 **Rob Graham**
546 Judge Joe Brown?
547
548 **David**
549 Yeah Judge Joe Brown (both laugh). I need to learn how to be more aggressive.
550
551 **Rob Graham**
552 I saw her crying on the stand, and I was like they can't resist all that, they can't resist all
553 that. Any other important relationships or special places you go to that have meaning to
554 you?
555
556 **David**
557 So a special place I've been to is the Bahamas. I really like the Bahamas. That's one of
558 my favorite vacation spots now. We went there last summer?
559
560 **Rob Graham**
561 Who'd you go with?
562
563 **David**
564 I went with my family, so my mom and my two brothers.
565
566 **Rob Graham**
567 Oh nice!
568
569 **David**
570 Yeah it was really nice. We stayed out there for about a week, and we went jet skiing. It
571 was like really cool. I don't know about the jet skiing part though. I don't know if I'm
572 doing that anymore. (Rob laughs). I really saw sharks in the water as I'm jet skiing.
573
574 **Rob Graham**
575 Okay. Let's me make sure you know a little bit about my story. I went to Xavier in New
576 Orleans when I graduated from high school. Black college. Cool, wonderful. The
577 beautiful girls studied.
578
579 **David**
580 Right. You were like, this is a different transition.
581
582 **Rob Graham**
583 Yeah, it was like, if you want to be part of the in crowd, all the beautiful people were in
584 the library.
585 It was the oddest thing in the world. It's a great place, great atmosphere. Everybody takes
586 care of you. But I visited Howard, and was like, OMG. I've never seen anything like this
587 before. I'm going to Howard. So went to Howard which brought me to DC. Worked at

588 this restaurant in Southwest, and just kind of met all my friends; everybody you met
589 through MATE, I met them there. Most of them went to Maryland. Now I really want to
590 help Black folks in education. That's where I'm at. I came to the university to do
591 something else like studying English grammar. Then I started reading about Black folks
592 in education.

593

594 **David**

595 Right.

596

597 **Rob Graham**

598 And you know, some of the stuff you think is accidental, some of the struggles have been
599 intentional.

600

601 **David**

602 Right, exactly. So that's what really stuck out to you.

603

604 **Rob Graham**

605 Yeah, I thought some of our troubles were just we didn't clean up after slavery tight
606 enough. But there have been intentional steps. People have been intentionally sabotaging
607 Black progress for forever. And when I heard about what's been done to Black males
608 historically, I changed my research focus. If I have the power to do it, I need to do it.

609

610 **David**

611 Right. And I feel like you really relate to us in a good way.

612

613 **Rob Graham**

614 I do. I was a wild boy. And then, you talked about God. I mean, something happened. I
615 got, I woke up.

616

617 **David**

618 Yeah, exactly. It's just that one day, suddenly. I was like that in high school. I was in the
619 wrong groups doing all this other stuff, hanging around the wrong people, and I just woke
620 up one day. It's like, God just opened my eyes.

621

622 **Rob Graham**

623 So that's what I'm on right now. I mean, MATE's a piece of it. This dissertation is a piece
624 of it.

625

626 **David**

627 Right? Exactly. So I want to mention how the MATE scholarship really helped me as
628 well. I remember when we first interviewed. Honestly, I did not expect to win it out of
629 like thousands of people. You know,

630

631 **Rob Graham**
632 It wasn't thousands.
633
634 **David**
635 Oh (laughing)
636
637 **Rob Graham**
638 That's the trick. Um, it wasn't thousands. And in fact, that's another thing that tripped me
639 out. So we were looking for brothas at Mason who are from PG or DC, that had applied
640 for financial aid. It was like five! So DC is right here. PG is right here, and you mean to
641 tell me there's only five? And I know that just about every brotha on this campus has
642 applied for financial aid, because
643
644 **David**
645 That's how it is.
646
647 **Rob Graham**
648 But you see advertisements for Mason and they always mention how the school's close to
649 DC. I'm like, we can't have DC as a draw, an attraction, something that gives us value and
650 at the same time we're not bringing brothas here from DC.
651
652 **David**
653 Right, exactly
654
655 **Rob Graham**
656 Or PG. It just blew my mind. Anyway. So you weren't part of a thousand; you were part
657 of five.
658 Who can we help? Whose story speaks to us? We just felt you.
659
660 **David**
661 Yeah, I appreciate it. The MATE scholarship really changed my life, and you as a mentor
662 has been really helpful.
663
664 **Rob Graham**
665 I appreciate it.
666
667 **David**
668 Coming to this school I was just completely lost, and you just guided me completely in
669 the right direction. I remember you providing assistance financially with the books in my
670 first few semesters. You know, I can speak to you about anything. You told me how I
671 need to get close to the teachers. You basically told me everything I should expect in
672 college, and it actually ended up happening, so I was already prepared for it.
673

674 **Rob Graham**
675 Good. I think this is a nice spot to stop our personal conversation. Next conversation
676 we'll get into the educational space a little more specifically.
677
678 **David**
679 Okay.
680
681 **Rob Graham**
682 I appreciate it. I'll see you soon.

683 **Educational Experience Narrative**
684
685 **Rob Graham**
686 Okay! As usual, I'm gonna ask you some questions, but if you're rolling along, I'll just go
687 that direction.
688
689 **David**
690 Okay
691
692 **Rob Graham**
693 You did a little bit of this in our last conversation, but it would be great if you could tell
694 me about your high school, like, where it is, who the students are. Maybe a little bit about
695 your experience, including how you did.
696
697 **David**
698 I attended high school at Charles Herbert Flowers. It's in Prince George's County in
699 Largo, Maryland.
700
701 **Rob Graham**
702 Okay.
703
704 **David**
705 Everybody knew me. It was pretty cool. I enjoyed it a lot, because my brother was there
706 before me. He's two years older than me, so I basically came to the school knowing
707 everybody.
708
709 **Rob Graham**
710 Wait! Were you and your brother there at the same time at all?
711
712 **David**
713 Yes. When I was in the ninth grade, he was in the 11th grade.
714
715 **Rob Graham**
716 Okay I didn't understand that overlap. Okay.

717 **David**
718 The students were pretty good. It was a really good high school. We had pretty good
719 teachers that really cared about us for the most part. I played basketball my ninth and
720 tenth grade year, but I got injured after my tenth grade year, so I just stopped playing. I
721 broke my ankle.
722
723 **Rob Graham**
724 Oh, okay.
725
726 **David**
727 Actually, before I attended Charles Herbert Flowers High School, I attended Bishop
728 McNamara. It's in Suitland, Maryland. It's a private school, and I attended there for
729 basketball, but I ended up leaving school once basketball didn't work out.
730
731 **Rob Graham**
732 So how long were you at that first school?
733
734 **David**
735 I was there for my entire freshman year, so one year.
736
737 **Rob Graham**
738 Ahhh! This is interesting. So Flowers, it's in Largo. Um, do you know where that
739 Bojangles is in Largo?
740
741 **David**
742 Yes, that Bojangles, yeah.
743
744 **Rob Graham**
745 Is it close to there? Is it the same kind of neighborhood and the same kind of families?
746
747 **David**
748 Yeah, it's near the Bojangles, and, yeah, it's the same neighborhood, same families.
749
750 **Rob Graham**
751 It was my impression that that little area, I used to live right there, is middle-class kind of
752 Black folks.
753
754 **David**
755 Yeah, it's middle class.
756
757 **Rob Graham**
758 Okay. How about the space? Was it nice, the actual buildings and all that?
759

760 **David**
761 Oh yeah, the buildings were really nice. They redesigned the building a few years ago.
762 But it was also a mixture of students that attended the school. There were some students
763 from Washington DC because there wasn't really a district rule at first for the schools, so
764 basically anybody from like any district or area can attend our school.
765
766 **Rob Graham**
767 You know, I talked to some of my friends, and Flowers had kind of like a good
768 reputation. Why did Flowers have a good reputation for being kinda of a good school in
769 PG?
770
771 **David**
772 I think it's because of the science program, the STEM program, it was really good. We
773 also had a great business program, a finance program. I was in the finance program, and
774 that had a really good reputation. Yeah, also the basketball team.
775
776 **Rob Graham**
777 It sounds to me like there were multiple student programs in the school, like a business
778 program, a science program, and then what? Were the rest of the students just like
779 general?
780
781 **David**
782 Yes, the rest of students were just general. They just took basic, regular classes.
783
784 **Rob Graham**
785 Okay, so they were not as high achieving?
786
787 **David**
788 Well, I think they could choose to be in a program, but I think you did need a certain
789 GPA? And certain credentials, such as the National Honor Society. I was also in that, so
790 that also helped me.
791
792 **Rob Graham**
793 Okay. Um, and the makeup of the school. You know to me race is a weird thing, but
794 what about the races or the ethnicities? Who were the students?
795
796 **David**
797 The students were predominantly Black. I believe 98% Black.
798
799 **Rob Graham**
800 How'd you do there?
801
802 **David**

803 I did really well. My GPA was a 3.8. I think the lowest GPA that I had at the school was
804 a 3.5. Every teacher liked me. I made sure every teacher knew me and stuff like that. I
805 always put in the effort.

806

807 **Rob Graham**

808 What about your buddies? Did they do as well as you did?

809

810 **David**

811 My friends from the program that I was in, yes, they did well. I also had friends that
812 weren't in the programs; they didn't do as well as me.

813

814 **Rob Graham**

815 So the program was kind of like a key?

816

817 **David**

818 Yes

819

820 **Rob Graham**

821 I don't know if you can do this, but could you tell me a little bit about PG as a school
822 district in general terms?

823

824 **David**

825 Oh, the whole school district, like the culture?

826

827 **Rob Graham**

828 The culture, how successful it is. Maybe compare it to DC Public Schools or something
829 like that.

830

831 **David**

832 I could definitely do that because I actually attended elementary school in DC. It's kinda
833 the same, actually. PG County is a little bit more upper class than DC schools, but as far
834 as the culture, it's the same. It's still a lot of conflicts going on inside of the schools,
835 neighborhoods going against each other. I think the entire PG County District is like that
836 other than Bowie. I think Bowie, MD is a little bit more upper class than Largo and
837 Suitland. I don't know if you ever heard of that area?

838

839 **Rob Graham**

840 I have.

841

842 **David**

843 Yeah, that's also PG County, so that area is a little more dangerous; that's closer to DC.

844

845 **Rob Graham**

846 Is that Kevin Durant's neighborhood?

847 **David**

848 Uh, no, Seat Pleasant.

849

850 **Rob Graham**

851 Okay.

852

853 **David**

854 Seat Pleasant is not far from where I'm at. That area is also really bad over there. Kids
855 from Seat Pleasant attended my school. I think that's what made my school a little bad
856 because we have a mixture of PG County, PG County inner-city kids, and also DC kids.

857

858 **Rob Graham**

859 Let's see here. So, you described your school, told me a little bit about your experience,
860 said that you did pretty well and that teachers liked you. You had some friends, people
861 knew you because of your brother, and maybe all of that, the combination of all that stuff
862 kind of made your experience doable and allowed you to handle your business, including
863 being part of that special finance program.

864

865 **David**

866 Right

867

868 **Rob Graham**

869 In what ways did your high school prepare you for college?

870

871 **David**

872 We had a few clubs that were designed to help us prepare for college, and I got involved
873 in those. One of the clubs was college preparation. It's a specific club for students at my
874 high school, and basically we had specialists. They asked us many questions to make sure
875 we wanted to actually attend the college like, why do you want to attend the college?

876

877 **Rob Graham**

878 Un hun

879

880 **David**

881 They made sure we knew all the background of college. We had to do research papers on
882 the college,

883

884 **Rob Graham**

885 Mmm!

886

887

888 **David**

889 and actually look into the college before we made a decision. They also educated us on
890 the importance of keeping your GPA up, so we could get admitted. They helped us with
891 our resumes as well. So, yeah, we had a few useful resources. The teachers as well. I
892 believe they helped prepare me for college. Definitely my English teacher, with the
893 essays. I think that's a big part of me getting into the school, being able to write.

894

895 **Rob Graham**

896 So, when you were writing your college essays, you kind of felt confident, and you
897 wound up writing a pretty strong essay?

898

899 **David**

900 Yes, exactly.

901

902 **Rob Graham**

903 So you had teachers or an adviser, club adviser?

904

905 **David**

906 Yeah, we had a club adviser, but mainly the teachers decided to volunteer in clubs.

907

908 **Rob Graham**

909 Mmm. Okay, so you would stay after school?

910

911 **David**

912 Yes, we stayed after school.

913

914 **Rob Graham**

915 The focus in the club, mostly about getting into college or preparing you for the college
916 experience?

917

918 **David**

919 It was both, but more getting into college, and also preparing our minds for what is to
920 come in college. But they didn't actually prepare us for like what we'll have to go through
921 in college, like specifically.

922

923 **Rob Graham**

924 When you say preparing your mind, what do you mean?

925

926 **David**

927 They basically informed us about the mindset that we had to have. They used to give us
928 certain discussions and talk about college. Like, don't stay up too late. Don't get
929 distracted. They'll talk about how you need to be close with your teachers and stuff like
930 that. Don't follow the wrong crowd. They'll basically try to discipline our minds before
931 we get into college.

932 **Rob Graham**
933 Knowing that your mom went to college, and your brother, how much help did you get
934 from family in preparing you for college? What kind of help did you get if you got any?
935 How effective was that help?
936
937 **David**
938 My mom, I think her generation was kind of different from mine as far as preparing for
939 college. I believe that resumes are more important now than they were back then.
940
941 **Rob Graham**
942 Un hun
943
944 **David**
945 I believe she kind of shifted more towards trying to build up my resume. She got me
946 involved in a lot of activities outside of school
947
948 **Rob Graham**
949 Mmm!
950
951 **David**
952 as far as like helping the homeless, doing extracurricular activities, and community
953 service. I got involved in a lot of stuff in church like sign language ministry. I also
954 volunteered with the principal of my high school. I helped him do a few things with his
955 programs that help students out and to get into college.
956
957 **Rob Graham**
958 So Mom knew that you needed to be more than just a student; you needed to be active in
959 order to make yourself a better candidate?
960
961 **David**
962 Yes, exactly, right.
963
964 **Rob Graham**
965 Um, what about brother? Did he,
966
967 **David**
968 Well my brother, I wouldn't say he prepared me for the big college experience because he
969 attended PG Community College, so he didn't really know how it would be, you know.
970
971 **Rob Graham**
972 Oh, got it.
973
974 **David**

975 I attended the actual university before he attended a university.
976
977 **Rob Graham**
978 That's interesting. What about your counseling experience in high school? Tell me about
979 your school counselors.
980
981 **David**
982 Well, I didn't really have that many school counselors in high school. Mainly I used the
983 teachers as counselors, but I believe there were resources there that I didn't use. I wasn't
984 really involved in school counseling at all.
985
986 **Rob Graham**
987 Interesting. So I'll tell you a little bit about my high school and counseling. My high
988 school, I think it's better now. I look online, and they seem to be some kind of college-
989 focused and technology focused, and I think a lot of schools are doing that, adding tech
990 programs and stuff. But when I was in high school, I don't remember ever having any
991 conversations with my counselors at all.
992
993 **David**
994 Right.
995
996 **Rob Graham**
997 I don't remember talking to anybody about college. I knew I was gonna do well on the
998 SAT because I've always been sort of a good test taker, but I didn't know anything about
999 like SAT preparation.
1000
1001 **David**
1002 Right, I didn't either.
1003
1004 **Rob Graham**
1005 None of that; You sign up, pay your money, and take the test. Right? And then I found
1006 out, and I felt a little bit cheated later. People were preparing to take the test?!1007
1008 **David**
1009 Right, exactly.
1010
1011 **Rob Graham**
1012 So that surprised me a little bit. In terms of figuring out what schools I was going to go
1013 to, I just kind of followed my sisters' lead. One went to Howard; one went to Xavier in
1014 New Orleans. My oldest sister, she's nine years older than me. So, basically whatever she
1015 did, that's what I was supposed to do. She went to Xavier, so I was like okay, that's
1016 college.
1017

1018 **David**
1019 Right
1020
1021 **Rob Graham**
1022 And then we had TV shows. There's a TV show, I don't know if you ever heard of this
1023 TV show. You're so young it's crazy to me. Um, A Different world?
1024
1025 **David**
1026 Oh no, I never heard of that.
1027
1028 **Rob Graham**
1029 You heard of The Cosby Show?
1030
1031 **David**
1032 The Cosby, oh yeah, definitely. Yeah.
1033
1034 **Rob Graham**
1035 So The Cosby Show had a spin off, and the spin off was the oldest girl, the second oldest,
1036 Denise, goes to college. She went to a Black college. I think it was maybe set in Virginia
1037 or somewhere like that.
1038 So that's how I learned about college. That's how I learned about Black college.
1039
1040 **David**
1041 Right
1042
1043 **Rob Graham**
1044 My school didn't prepare me at all for college. We didn't really have a big college going
1045 culture. I remember hearing the announcements of where people were going. It shocked
1046 me to hear where the White students were going. Our valedictorian was going to Harvard,
1047 and I was like, what! I couldn't believe it. I didn't even know it was possible. I thought
1048 Harvard was just like fiction.
1049
1050 **David**
1051 Yeah it did feel like that.
1052
1053 **Rob Graham**
1054 You know what I mean? Now you know my wife went to Harvard. So getting older, and
1055 a lot of my friends went to Ivy League schools. It's like, how did you guys know this was
1056 even possible? Who told you that? I know it sounds crazy, but Harvard, Yale, Princeton, I
1057 probably thought those were schools for White people. Who told you, you could do this?
1058
1059 **David**
1060 Right, exactly.

1061
1062 **Rob Graham**
1063 I didn't know anything. I didn't know what to do, what to buy, how to study, who to hang
1064 out with; I was just learning as I went.
1065
1066 **David**
1067 And that's the same, yep. I agree with that as well, same situation with me.
1068
1069 **Rob Graham**
1070 The culture was really different. They were Black folks but Southern Black folks, and
1071 that was a new thing for me; the clothes, the dancing, the culture. I was like, what are
1072 y'all doing? (David chuckles) You know I was coming from LA, and I'm looking at these
1073 folks from like Mississippi and Alabama and New Orleans. They were having a good
1074 time, and I just couldn't understand what they were doing. The music was crazy! The
1075 dances were crazy! The styles were crazy to me. I basically was starting from double
1076 zero. I didn't understand any of the cultural stuff. I didn't understand any of the
1077 academics. I picked my major based upon my sister's major.
1078
1079 **David**
1080 Yes
1081
1082 **Rob Graham**
1083 So, boom. You're in high school, have a pretty good time there. You made it out. There
1084 were some rough patches, but somehow you were able to just make it through. You got
1085 some of that discipline from your mentors, right?
1086
1087 **David**
1088 Right, definitely.
1089
1090 **Rob Graham**
1091 You got some game from your mom who kind of gave you some strategy
1092
1093 **David**
1094 Yes, my mom.
1095
1096 **Rob Graham**
1097 on how to make yourself look like a strong candidate. It sounds to me like you got
1098 prepared to get admitted to college
1099
1100 **David**
1101 Admitted to college, yes, but not for the actual college experience.
1102
1103 **Rob Graham**

1104 but not for the college experience! You didn't really have a relationship with school
1105 counselors. Is that what you're saying?

1106

1107 **David**

1108 No, not at all. Yes.

1109

1110 **Rob Graham**

1111 Damn, so if it weren't for that club, would you have had preparation for college?

1112

1113 **David**

1114 I would have zero preparation. The clubs helped me prepare for getting admitted, so I
1115 didn't really have that much preparation for the actual experience; what I would be going
1116 through on a day to day, meal plans, struggles with the classes, money, financial stuff.
1117 Yeah, I wasn't really prepared for much of that.

1118

1119 **Rob Graham**

1120 Why do you think you didn't have a relationship with school counselors?

1121

1122 **David**

1123 I believe that the counselors and many of the services in our own school, I think you
1124 could have gotten involved if you really reached out, but it's not a big thing. They don't
1125 really enforce it. It's something you had to find, and it takes time and a lot of talking to
1126 different people. It's not readily available to us. You had to really dig deep to get
1127 involved, and it's kind of hard to get involved with that stuff when you're already dealing
1128 with school. And many of the counselors were volunteers, and some of the volunteers
1129 might choose to do different things, so they won't be volunteering anymore. So it's just a
1130 mixture of different stuff.

1131

1132 **Rob Graham**

1133 Damn. That's unfortunate. Boom, you get to college. I'm here, but you know, my
1134 experience has been different because of my roles. Could you maybe give me like a one-
1135 minute description of Mason?

1136

1137 **David**

1138 So George Mason, I like this school. It's a pretty good school. It's not really a big party
1139 school. The teachers here are really strict; they don't allow you to turn in late
1140 assignments. At Mason you really have to pace yourself and pick and choose what groups
1141 you want to be in or associate yourself with. It's kind of like high school, but it's a bigger
1142 high school as far as the Black community. I think everybody in the Black community
1143 knows each other because it's not that big. There's still problems that occur on the campus
1144 between different groups and stuff like that, but for the most part it's avoidable. Time
1145 management, that's a big thing here. You have to take the time and do your work. George
1146 Mason also has a lot of clubs you can get involved in; like I was involved with the BSA,

1147 Black Student Association, for a little bit. I'm not African, but I was involved with the
1148 African Student Association.
1149
1150 **Rob Graham**
1151 Maybe you are African.
1152
1153 **David**
1154 Yeah, yeah.
1155
1156 **Rob Graham**
1157 You know, I'm just saying! Anyway, we'll talk about that later! (chuckling)
1158
1159 **David**
1160 So it's a lot of clubs here that you can get involved in. Many opportunities as well. I
1161 believe the teachers, are very helpful at this school, the majority. But one thing is, for my
1162 major econ, I believe that a lot of the teachers expect you to have a certain amount of
1163 knowledge before you come to the school.
1164
1165 **Rob Graham**
1166 Mmm
1167
1168 **David**
1169 So that was a hard thing, trying to figure out what major was good for me. I was initially
1170 a biology major, and I switched over to be an econ major because my first class, I didn't
1171 know what I was doing at all. And even the econ major, I'm enjoying it now that I had a
1172 teacher that was able to sit down with me and teach me some of the economic principles
1173
1174 **Rob Graham**
1175 Mmm!
1176
1177 **David**
1178 and stuff like that, but before that, I didn't know anything about economics. My high
1179 school didn't provide me with any economic classes, so I was lost. Everybody else knew
1180 what they were doing. A few students would tell me they were involved in clubs growing
1181 up, like since middle school, economic clubs to help them prepare for college. So they're
1182 doing these things since middle school, and I'm coming to college not knowing what
1183 economics is!
1184
1185 **Rob Graham**
1186 Just fresh!
1187
1188 **David**

1189 Yeah, exactly! It just sounds good! (Rob chuckles) So I'm like, let me get into
 1190 Economics. That was the biggest thing about this school, they really expect you to have
 1191 some type of background in the field.
 1192
 1193 **Rob Graham**
 1194 Wow. That's interesting. You form any relationships outside of Black folks?
 1195
 1196 **David**
 1197 Oh yeah, definitely. I don't just stick with Black folks. I have different races of friends,
 1198 different ethnicities. Asian friends, a lot of Ethiopian friends, Caucasian friends as well. I
 1199 don't really discriminate. I have many friends from almost every race on the campus.
 1200
 1201 **Rob Graham**
 1202 And Mason's real diverse. Do you feel that?
 1203
 1204 **David**
 1205 Yes, I feel that.
 1206
 1207 **Rob Graham**
 1208 And that's a plus for you? You're enjoying the diversity?
 1209
 1210 **David**
 1211 Yeah, that's great. Yeah, definitely, I'm enjoying that.
 1212
 1213 **Rob Graham**
 1214 Okay, I'm sure you imagined college would be a particular way. You know we all have
 1215 imaginations. Was Mason what you had imagined before you got here?
 1216
 1217 **David**
 1218 Um, no. I thought every college was the same, so I thought it'd be like big parties
 1219 everywhere, like everywhere you go, you just see parties and stuff and like
 1220
 1221 **Rob Graham**
 1222 Like in the movies
 1223
 1224 **David**
 1225 Yeah, in the movies, exactly. That's basically exactly what I thought it would be. But,
 1226 coming to this college is actually good for me because I don't have that peer pressure to
 1227 actually be involved in parties. Everybody works for the most part.
 1228
 1229 **Rob Graham**
 1230 Un hun, un hun. So not the party situation you thought, more diverse than maybe you
 1231 anticipated. Any other thoughts about your imagination vs reality?

1232 **David**
1233 Right. Well in my imagination I also thought there would be, I don't want to say mentors
1234 necessarily, but people that will be available to help, more advisors around, but you kind
1235 of have to find that yourself. I thought they would be more on top of us, but it's like, no,
1236 we're adults now, so I wasn't ready for that transition.
1237
1238 **Rob Graham**
1239 Did you seek out support from like advisor type people?
1240
1241 **David**
1242 Yes, I definitely sought out support for academic advisors, so I was able to talk to them. I
1243 also think your advising was a different level advising that I needed because they advised
1244 on picking your classes, but they can't advise us on the college life. So when I sought out
1245 and met you, that was really the big difference in me actually learning how to develop
1246 and how to come into college being strong and successful. That's the biggest support that
1247 I needed coming in.
1248
1249 **Rob Graham**
1250 Un hun, un hun
1251
1252 **David**
1253 Because that support isn't really available. The academic advisors that's here, they tell us
1254 what classes to pick, how to graduate, how many classes and credits we need to graduate,
1255 but they don't really advise us on how to survive in college.
1256
1257 **Rob Graham**
1258 Why do you think that is?
1259
1260 **David**
1261 I think that's not their primary job, so they don't really focus on that, but I think if we did
1262 reach out and had those conversations with them, they would actually advise us on how
1263 to survive in college.
1264
1265 **Rob Graham**
1266 So you had some conversation with Ebony (Pseudonym).
1267
1268 **David**
1269 Ebony, yes. See that was a different advisor, that's different. I could actually talk to her,
1270 and she'll like check up on me. She is a different academic advisor, but for the most part,
1271 I think that she understood my situation. That's what it takes, for someone to understand
1272 where you come from.
1273
1274 **Rob Graham**

1275 Let me give you some of the behind the scenes work.
1276
1277 **David**
1278 Okay
1279
1280 **Rob Graham**
1281 There was a point where we were talking, and I was advising you, and I started feeling
1282 like I was getting out of my league a little bit in terms of like helping you pick your
1283 classes and such.
1284
1285 **David**
1286 Oh, okay
1287
1288 **Rob Graham**
1289 I was an advisor here; now I'm faculty. I had been advising special international students,
1290 and I was mostly helping my students with meeting program requirements and culture
1291 shock kind of stuff. Maybe an important conversation for Black folks as well but, um...So
1292 anyway I started feeling like I was getting out of my lane a little bit. I wanted to make
1293 sure I was giving you get the best advice possible.
1294 I had done some work with Ebony, so I talked to her. I was like, look, I got this kid. I'm
1295 out of my depth. I'm looking for somebody to support him, but he's a special kid. This is a
1296 special program. I need somebody who's going to advise him differently. I need you to
1297 advise this kid like you're advising your son or your nephew. I need you to add some love
1298 to the mix. You know what I mean?
1299
1300 **David**
1301 Yeah.
1302
1303 **Rob Graham**
1304 She was open, she was excited about the prospect. We kind of shared the same values and
1305 stuff, so that's why I asked her. Maybe that's a little bit of the difference maker, her
1306 mindset. You know rather than just you just being another student in her portfolio, I was
1307 like, I need you to treat him like special cargo.
1308
1309 **David**
1310 Right, and I definitely felt that, yeah.
1311
1312 **Rob Graham**
1313 Would you say that brothas need a bit more than the help with the schedules when they
1314 come to Mason?
1315
1316 **David**

1317 Yes, definitely. That's a big thing that brothas really need on this campus. They need
1318 more support than the average student, because the average student already experienced
1319 college from high school. That's basically college for them as far as the classes, the
1320 difficulty level of the classes. But we come to college introverted. Who are these different
1321 races? There's a lot of factors that throw us off in college and possibly make us go in the
1322 wrong direction. I mean it's not really peer pressure, but it's like a whole different world.

1323

1324 **Rob Graham**

1325 Do you think you were prepared for college? I know this is kind of a broad question.

1326

1327 **David**

1328 I don't think I was completely prepared for college at all, no.

1329

1330 **Rob Graham**

1331 So what would you need? What could your high school counseling have done to make
1332 your experience smoother?

1333

1334 **David**

1335 Smoother? I think they could have educated me more on the financial part of college as
1336 well because I come to college expecting books to be cheap. That's one part, and books
1337 are like \$1,000 a semester!

1338

1339 **Rob Graham**

1340 Un hun

1341

1342 **David**

1343 As far as like the dorms and stuff like that, just being able to get along with different
1344 people. I think they should have educated us on how to get along with different people in
1345 different races and stuff like that. My first roommate I had, he's a different race, and he
1346 didn't have the same values as me.

1347

1348 **Rob Graham**

1349 Did you ever hear about summer bridge programs like TRIO or anything like that?

1350

1351 **David**

1352 Oh yes, yes I heard of it.

1353

1354 **Rob Graham**

1355 Or Upward Bound? Why didn't you do that?

1356

1357 **David**

1358 I wasn't aware until one of my friends told me about it. They were like, oh, I was in the
1359 summer program that we had, and they were able to like live with different people, so
1360 they already had their roommates,
1361

1362 **Rob Graham**

1363 Right. And they get a little bit of a jump I think in terms of understanding what they're
1364 about to get into.
1365

1366 **David**

1367 Yes, they had a whole summer to understand what they're about to get into. So I'd have
1368 definitely got into that if I knew about it before college.
1369

1370 **Rob Graham**

1371 Why did you pick biology initially?
1372

1373 **David**

1374 Initially I was interested in being a doctor. I was interested in that because I had family
1375 that were doctors, and I used to watch what they were doing, and I thought it was cool.
1376 But I learned, just because you think something is cool (Rob chuckles), that doesn't mean
1377 it's meant for you, you know?
1378

1379 **Rob Graham**

1380 Right.
1381

1382 **David**

1383 And that's another thing that I wish I knew before coming to college because a lot of
1384 people be like, alright, do whatever you like to do as a hobby, do what you want to do
1385 deep down inside. They would tell me that, but the thing is, sometimes what you think
1386 you like or you will enjoy, when you actually get into it, you don't enjoy it. So if we'd
1387 have had some resources in high school where I could go out and shadow workers,
1388 actually see what doctors do, I probably wouldn't have been as interested.
1389

1390 **Rob Graham**

1391 But econ works for you?
1392

1393 **David**

1394 Yes, econ definitely works for me. I like doing work that also benefits people on a bigger
1395 scale, the economic scale.
1396

1397 **Rob Graham**

1398 I think I learned some really interesting stuff about you. Your high school needed to do
1399 some things, but I think it's also important to understand that the high schools are not
1400 doing those things. So what needs to happen on the college side? You know I don't want

1401 to let the college off the hook. The college needs to be realistic about what's happening
1402 on that other side, and they need to respond. My sister says this thing, don't admit people
1403 to the school if you're not going to support them.

1404

1405 **David**

1406 Right. I kind of noticed that when I'm talking to minorities at this school, a lot of them
1407 choose the easy majors, the easy route out. They'll do like history, but they'd be like, I'm
1408 interested in economics, but you know, I don't know how that will go. But if they just had
1409 that one person to talk to, they would know what to expect in these classes, and they'll
1410 know how to prepare. You helped me with that, but if I didn't have a MATE scholarship,
1411 and the MATE foundation to support me in that way, I wouldn't know what to expect
1412 from a lot of these majors. I probably would have picked something like history to get the
1413 easy way through.

1414

1415 **Rob Graham**

1416 Yeah, doing what you really want to do seems like a risk. Damn, that's deep. I could talk
1417 to you for hours about this stuff. So, I appreciate it.

1418

1419 **Connecting Personal and Educational Through Collage**

1420

1421 **Rob Graham**

1422 Good to see you again.

1423

1424 **David**

1425 Good to see you too.

1426

1427 **Rob Graham**

1428 You're gonna construct this collage telling the story of who you are, how it connects to
1429 your educational experience, including your experience in high school, college and all
1430 that. You're in control of your story and the way you present it. Please do me a favor. As
1431 you're moving stuff around and making decisions, kind of talk it out a little bit.

1432

1433 **David**

1434 Okay, cool.

1435

1436 **Rob Graham**

1437 Oh! You got started already! I didn't need for you to be finished but okay! I definitely
1438 want to hear what you got going on here.

1439

1440 **David**

1441 Okay so, I'll start with the first picture. What's for lunch? (now discussing collage) I value
1442 my health. I think that's really important, especially since I'm getting older. And I think
1443 that it's important to eat healthy, to avoid bad foods like sweets, sugar. I want to have a

1444 balance in my diet. I think that's important to get me started with the day; breakfast is the
1445 most important meal of the day. Usually without breakfast, I can't really function.

1446

1447 **Rob Graham**

1448 Wherever did all that come from?

1449

1450 **David**

1451 Um, so

1452

1453 **Rob Graham**

1454 First of all, how old are you now?

1455 **David**

1456 I'm 21. Yeah.

1457

1458 **Rob Graham**

1459 As I'm getting older, okay, whatever. (both chuckling)

1460

1461 **David**

1462 I think my mom made me value that a little more, because she would see me walking
1463 around eating candy a lot. People used to call me Candy in high school. That's actually a
1464 nickname I had. Growing up I had high cholesterol.

1465

1466 **Rob Graham**

1467 Hmm!

1468

1469 **David**

1470 I was kind of sick from high cholesterol. I want to start avoiding that early in my life, so I
1471 won't have any problems in the future. The next picture describes a balance in life, and I
1472 believe that equality is very important. So, the picture that has men and women on the
1473 same balance scale. I believe that regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or anything, we're
1474 all the same at the end of the day. We all can bring something to the table. We all have
1475 great ideas that we can share. Men and women are on the same platform, especially
1476 growing up with my mom providing for me. I believe that women also have the power to
1477 do what men do in society today. I believe that's very important for us to realize.

1478

1479 **Rob Graham**

1480 Or more even! I mean, our country's in this craziness right now. What if we tried another
1481 angle? We have some strong women who are all set up to lead. What if that's the magic
1482 stroke that we need to get back to balance?

1483

1484 **David**

1485 So that's what I believe, that a balance in life is definitely important.

1486

1487 **Rob Graham**

1488 And this comes from Mom. What about the equality piece?

1489

1490 **David**

1491 The other piece, that's more general. That's not more referring to my mother, but that's
1492 more referring to society as a whole, there should be a balance regardless of ethnicity,
1493 race or gender, as far as like job opportunities. I think there's still discrimination in
1494 certain job areas like economic law. You see more men in that category. I believe that we
1495 need to shift towards more balance in certain fields of labor. The next image. Well I used
1496 it as an image of God. Basically God is everything. Without God, nothing is possible,
1497 you know. I'm a Christian, and I believe in God. I know for a fact that I couldn't have
1498 done anything without God. There has to be a spiritual entity in my life, because there's
1499 so much stuff that I've made it through, so many obstacles, and so many positions he put
1500 me in.

1501

1502 **Rob Graham**

1503 Have there been some moments, any moment in particular, where you're like, wow, that's
1504 a God thing.

1505

1506 **David**

1507 Yes, definitely. There's been times where we didn't have food really, we'd have a shortage
1508 of food. My mom would be short on the rent, and she'd be like, how am I gonna do this?
1509 How am I gonna pay the rent? How am I gonna provide? The water would go off, and
1510 we'll have cold water. And there'll be times when a week later, she'd just randomly get
1511 money in the mail from the bank or something like that at the perfect time. It's like every
1512 time like my mom's in this struggle, she always just finds money out of nowhere and it's
1513 like, I know that's God for a fact. That's just one of the biggest things.

1514

1515 **Rob Graham**

1516 *I get it. The hard times have certainly revealed a higher power to me.*

1517

1518 **David**

1519 Right. My next image. So, you see on the outside it says, negativity, worries, despair,
1520 anxiety, pessimists, and all that, you know, negative stuff, basically. And then I put a
1521 magnifying glass on confidence. I believe that confidence gets us really far because if
1522 we're being honest, we live in a society that's like negative, you know. It's a competition,
1523 first of all. People are always trying to bring you down. We have fear naturally, but fear
1524 isn't real. We have fear and anxiety as we're living life every day. How am I going to pay
1525 my bills? How am I going to do this? What job am I gonna have in the future? You know,
1526 when will I graduate college? All that stuff brings anxiety, depression, and stuff like that.
1527 I believe it's important to take life like every day, one at a time, don't focus too much on
1528 the future because you start to stress out. And I believe that you should always have

1529 confidence in your decision making. I think that's very important to reduce anxiety and
1530 fear, to always be confident in the next move that you take.

1531

1532 **Rob Graham**

1533 And this is interesting because I hear what you're saying, and I appreciate it. I'm reading
1534 this differently. I'm reading this like, yeah, you have the option. You've got this
1535 magnifying glass, and you have all these options that you can choose from,

1536

1537 **David**

1538 Right

1539

1540 **Rob Graham**

1541 that you can focus on. So you can choose to focus on the negatives, or you can use your
1542 magnifying glass, and focus on the positives.

1543

1544 **David**

1545 Right

1546

1547 **Rob Graham**

1548 And that's going to guide the way that you look at or see the world, depending on what
1549 choice of lens to focus on.

1550

1551 **David**

1552 Exactly, that's good, yeah.

1553

1554 **Rob Graham**

1555 You know actually, just to be flat out honest with you, today I was like okay, where's
1556 David? (both chuckle referring to David being late for conversation). There's just a choice
1557 when you're confused, or you don't have all the answers. I was like, what's the right way
1558 for me to interpret that? And again, I'm 44, and these kinds of conversations within
1559 yourself, you never stop having them. You might look at me like, and my mom used to
1560 tell me this all the time, you might look at me like Mr. Graham's older, but the inside, on
1561 the inside, we don't change. The body changes, and you accumulate

1562

1563 **David**

1564 Knowledge as we

1565

1566 **Rob Graham**

1567 knowledge and experiences, but our essence, that doesn't change. So I'm still having these
1568 same conversations. But anyway, I just had faith, you know what I mean? I just looked at
1569 you not being where I thought you were going to be, and I took it as a positive. I started
1570 looking at all the ways that everything was going to be okay, and then sure enough, you
1571 reached out.

1572 **David**
1573 Yes, definitely.
1574
1575 **Rob Graham**
1576 You know what I mean?
1577
1578 **David**
1579 It's always great. I believe when we look at stuff positively, good always comes out of the
1580 positive, right?
1581
1582 **Rob Graham**
1583 It does! Now we're here! And actually, because I'm choosing the positive lens, it makes
1584 me appreciate you even more! I choose to take a positive lens, especially with my
1585 brothas, and you know, there it is.
1586
1587 **David**
1588 Appreciate it. I like the representation that you made with the picture, how you could
1589 focus your lens on certain things and block out the negativity and choose to focus on the
1590 positive. I definitely agree with that as well. I think we have to start focusing more on our
1591 personal health as well. Growing up, I had a of anxiety and a lot of worries and fears
1592 about the future, and I used to isolate myself sometimes to get away from certain
1593 anxieties that I had. I do believe that isolation is really important to figure out yourself,
1594 because when you're in the mix too much, you know, you can't really learn from yourself.
1595
1596 **Rob Graham**
1597 You just wait till you get in your lane and get some momentum. People will be lined up
1598 trying to get some of your energy and your time and your attention. Let me tell you I still
1599 have, we still have fun. We're in our 40s.
1600
1601 **David**
1602 Exactly
1603
1604 **Rob Graham**
1605 You've seen my group. We have a good time together. So don't worry about the
1606 temporary. I mean you need to have experiences. They're important, but you're going to
1607 have them, so there's no reason to press for em' and get knocked off your game. What
1608 else we got here?
1609
1610 **David**
1611 My next picture is representing my family. I love my family. Without my family, well of
1612 course I wouldn't be here, but it's deeper than that, you know. My mom is really, she's a
1613 big impact in my life. Without her, I definitely wouldn't be here right now. I'd be doing
1614 something else that's not good, you know.

1615 **Rob Graham**
1616 Un hun
1617
1618 **David**
1619 I could be on the street anywhere; there's no telling. I'm in college because of her, so I
1620 value that. I also value the rest of my family. They're always supportive. My grandfather
1621 helped fund my college, so I really appreciate him for that.
1622
1623 **Rob Graham**
1624 And you're making him proud.
1625
1626 **David**
1627 Yeah, yeah, definitely. And I'm doing great this semester. Like this is my best semester
1628 so far. I think I have like a 3.8.
1629
1630 **Rob Graham**
1631 Beautiful, beautiful.
1632
1633 **David**
1634 This picture is an image of Washington DC. I like the museums, like the Air and Space
1635 Museum. I like to go jogging in DC a lot. I also enjoy the new scooters in DC that you
1636 can ride. My next image is a picture of basketball. I grew up playing basketball; that was
1637 like my first love. I thought I was gonna be in the NBA. I think basketball kept me out of
1638 a lot of trouble like, kept my mind focused on doing something positive, working with a
1639 team? That was basically the biggest theme and the biggest lesson I learned from
1640 basketball, that teamwork. And that's the same thing with football.
1641
1642 **Rob Graham**
1643 Un hun
1644
1645 **David**
1646 I grew up playing football a lot as well. I stopped playing after I broke my rib.
1647
1648 **Rob Graham**
1649 Mmm!
1650
1651 **David**
1652 So yeah, after I did that, I stopped playing.
1653
1654 **Rob Graham**
1655 I bet you did.
1656
1657 **David**

1658 So this picture is of the school I attend, George Mason, of course. That was a big shift in
1659 my life, you know, you know, attending George Mason University, and when I was
1660 accepted, I still remember the feeling today. I was really excited, you know.

1661

1662 **Rob Graham**

1663 Had you been to Fairfax before, before Mason?

1664

1665 **David**

1666 Not at all. I didn't even know Fairfax existed (Rob laughing hard). I heard of Richmond,
1667 Virginia. That's like really the only part, and I was surprised in Richmond how it's a lot of
1668 brothas out there. I never knew that.

1669

1670 **Rob Graham**

1671 That's where we are. It's Richmond, and then you get over there to like Virginia Beach
1672 and Norfolk.

1673

1674 **David**

1675 And basically, meeting you at George Mason helped me just to have a mentor because I
1676 was really lost when I came to this school. I didn't know nobody. I didn't know how to
1677 get around. I didn't know what classes to pick. I didn't know how to survive in college. I
1678 was going through different experiences, and I didn't know what to expect. Like y'all
1679 helped me pay for my books, and my first semester, I couldn't afford books at all, and
1680 then I happened to join the MATE Foundation. You gave me advice with advisors, you
1681 know Ebony, and you spoke with her to make sure that she actually cares for me. That
1682 was really helpful for me.

1683

1684 **Rob Graham**

1685 She was exactly what I was looking for. So what you got going on with this brotha right
1686 there?

1687

1688 **David**

1689 I was saving the best for last (both chuckle). That's a picture of Martin Luther King, you
1690 know. That's who I look up to because he is a representation of equality. I want to be an
1691 image of equality, peace, just bringing everybody together. I believe that Martin Luther
1692 King has done a great job in doing that. We definitely wouldn't be here today, in the
1693 position that we are, there probably wouldn't even be Blacks attending colleges like this
1694 one if it wasn't for him. I believe that.

1695

1696 **Rob Graham**

1697 We're not gonna win if you just in the Black lane, we're not gonna win anyway. The
1698 secret is building connections and coalitions. There's not enough of us; we're only 13%;
1699 we're not going anywhere alone.

1700

1701 **David**
 1702 Right
 1703
 1704 **Rob Graham**
 1705 We hook up with Brown people and Red people and good people. We're moving in the
 1706 right direction,
 1707
 1708 **David**
 1709 Yes, and it's good you made that point because a lot of people think Martin Luther King
 1710 fought for Black rights. He fought for everybody.
 1711
 1712 **Rob Graham**
 1713 Really for poor people. That was his dying message, poor people come together. Poor
 1714 people have been divided on purpose.
 1715
 1716 **David**
 1717 Right, on purpose, right. It's systematic, everything.
 1718
 1719 **Rob Graham**
 1720 Yeah, systematic!
 1721
 1722 **Rob Graham**
 1723 Is there anything you think freshmen, entering freshmen brothas should know about the
 1724 first-year experience?
 1725
 1726 **David**
 1727 Yes, definitely. It's important that all your teachers know you. That's one thing for a fact.
 1728 It's important that you don't get distracted. I think TV promotes college life as partying
 1729 all the time. We're going to be turning up 24/7, but in reality, that just throws you
 1730 completely off track. I believe my first year, I was doing a little bit too much partying. It's
 1731 cool to meet people and network, but you have to come in with a balance. And advise
 1732 them all to get a mentor. That's a must, especially for African Americans, because this is
 1733 a new environment to us.
 1734
 1735 **Rob Graham**
 1736 Un hun
 1737
 1738 **David**
 1739 Pick and choose the group of people you associate with as well because some people
 1740 influence students to do the wrong things like drugs and alcohol abuse. I remember you
 1741 told me, people think, oh I'm gonna meet all these girls at parties and stuff, but you go to
 1742 the library here, you see the pretty girls in their books studying, so (chuckles). You can
 1743 network in the library. That's a party.

1744 **Rob Graham**
1745 The library is full!
1746
1747 **David**
1748 This is a party. Like while they're doing their work, you still having fun, talking, you
1749 know, eating, sit down, and chilling and stuff. I try to stress the level of importance of not
1750 over-partying and coming in with a balance. That's the biggest thing, having balance in
1751 your schedule.
1752
1753 **Rob Graham**
1754 Is there any way that brothas can start preparing themselves for college while they're still
1755 in high school?
1756
1757 **David**
1758 I think shadowing. You know, shadowing and attending college a few times before you
1759 actually attend the college. You get to actually see the college life when you shadow. I
1760 shadowed for Maryland.
1761
1762 **Rob Graham**
1763 When you say shadow, how long do you mean?
1764
1765 **David**
1766 The whole day, like day and night.
1767
1768 **Rob Graham**
1769 Oh, okay.
1770
1771 **David**
1772 I did a shadow from 10 in the morning to like six o'clock pm, so, I was able to see the
1773 college life. I actually did a shadow here before I attended the school as well.
1774
1775 **Rob Graham**
1776 That's a Mason program?
1777
1778 **David**
1779 Um, yes, it's a Mason program for shadowing on campus. Yeah, you can just sign up. I
1780 forgot exactly what it's called, but I remember I just typed in Google, shadow Mason, and
1781 some website popped up. I was able to just schedule it online, and they assigned me to
1782 somebody, and they sent an email out.
1783
1784 **Rob Graham**
1785 Hmm! If you could have done high school a different way that you think would have
1786 made you more successful in college, what would that be?

1787 **David**
1788 That's a great question. I spoke last meeting about how a lot of people inner city keep to
1789 ourselves. You know we don't really speak on the bigger picture, have those deep
1790 conversations. I believe having those deep conversations creates stronger bonds that last
1791 longer, you know. I believe I shoulda had those deeper conversations because I believe
1792 that that would have allowed me to grow socially in college, you know.

1793
1794 **Rob Graham**
1795 Mmm! Hmm, interesting. That's real interesting right there. Anything you think high
1796 school counselors should know about the first year of college for African American
1797 brothas? What do you want those high school counselors to know about our experience,
1798 your experience?

1799
1800 **David**
1801 I want high school counselors to be aware that when we first attend college, we're
1802 completely lost. That's just the reality of it, especially coming from a predominately
1803 Black area, and attending predominantly Caucasian institute. It's a different culture here,
1804 so you're feeling out of place a little bit. I kind of felt out of place. I also had a weird
1805 feeling that people were smarter than me because everybody just looked so intelligent. I
1806 felt like it'll be hard to make those social connections, like they like might feel like they're
1807 better than me. They have to understand that we have to start building the mindset early,
1808 like in high school.

1809
1810 **Rob Graham**
1811 When did you start feeling like, I'm smart? I'm just as smart as anybody else here on
1812 campus. When did that transition happen for you?

1813
1814 **David**
1815 I needed the male figure to talk to. So just me going out and doing different things, being
1816 in the environment. Like, I remember you sent me to go talk to Dr. Geoff. Just going out
1817 and doing these different things and having these different experiences, you're like oh
1818 okay, I could do this. And when you're actually looking at the work and communicating
1819 with these people you're like, oh okay, we're all on the same platform here, nobody's
1820 better than me. Me building study groups and just talking, putting myself out there. I had
1821 to really put myself out there and get involved in clubs and stuff like that.

1822
1823 **Rob Graham**
1824 How long did it take?

1825
1826 **David**
1827 I'm not gonna lie. I'd say after my freshman year, like two semesters. That's how deep it
1828 really is.

1829 Coming into sophomore year I felt more comfortable, but freshman year I felt like I was
1830 completely lost and like I didn't belong in the culture at all.

1831

1832 **Rob Graham**

1833 When you were having those thoughts like, hey everybody's smarter than me, did you
1834 ever think about leaving?

1835

1836 **David**

1837 Yes, I'm not gonna lie. I honestly thought about leaving my first year. I thought I didn't
1838 belong here at all. I wasn't familiar with most of the majors, a lot of the classes, like the
1839 prerequisites for these classes. A lot of these students I spoke with, especially during my
1840 first year, I'm like, how do y'all know this stuff? Our high school taught the subjects. For
1841 instance, a lot of these chemistry classes and physics and stuff like that, I never had in
1842 high school at all. So I was just thinking about saying, you know what, forget it. I just
1843 want to leave. That's what the university needs to understand. This is a different world.

1844

1845 **Rob Graham**

1846 It's a different world.

1847

1848 **David**

1849 It's a different level of education. I had to start from ground zero with a lot of the work I
1850 did, especially with math, because I didn't take any calculus class in high school. I don't
1851 even think they had a calculus class, to be honest. So I had to start from ground zero and
1852 do a lot of the prerequisites when I got here. I had to get tutors and go to the math
1853 tutoring center. I was the one in there all the time, just to learn.

1854

1855 **Rob Graham**

1856 I can't believe you did it. One of the things I just think is so special about you is, you hear
1857 advice, and you do it!

1858

1859 **David**

1860 Yeah

1861

1862 **Rob Graham**

1863 A lot of people hear advice, and they don't do it. You literally do it! It's amazing.

1864

1865 **David**

1866 Appreciate it. I remember you gave me that advice, to go to the math tutoring center. I
1867 talk to a lot of people, and I give them the same advice. I'm like, you need to do this; this
1868 is the only way. The extra-curricular stuff you have to do outside of school, to succeed,
1869 you just have to do it. We have to do extra. It looks easy for them because we kind of get
1870 disadvantaged; we feel like we're disadvantaged, and we start losing faith in school.

1871 We're looking at these people like, okay y'all, just do the work quickly. They're done in
1872 five minutes, and they could just go and have a social life, but we're sitting here working.
1873
1874 **Rob Graham**
1875 What you forget is, what you're doing is more remarkable because you're coming from a
1876 completely different place! The fact that you're here and fighting is more remarkable than
1877 somebody who's doing something that's already super familiar.
1878
1879 **David**
1880 Right, exactly. It's more remarkable right. And towards the end, it's always a bigger
1881 reward, right?
1882
1883 **Rob Graham**
1884 Right
1885
1886 **Rob Graham**
1887 I think that's a good stopping point for us. You're so free flowing with the talk, I feel like
1888 I haven't had to work to get all the answers. I've learned a lot with you, and from you, and
1889 about you. By the way you've grown up a lot. You've matured a lot. Yeah, you just have
1890 an amazing outlook on life, and I think it's healthy and strong. You should be proud of
1891 yourself.
1892
1893 **David**
1894 Thank you, Mr. Graham.
1895
1896 **Rob Graham**
1897 You know, to me, you were a boy when you got here, but you're a man now.

Appendix D

Conversations with Ejike

Personal Background Narrative- Who Are You?

1 **Rob Graham**

2 First question, not typical, but it's just an intriguing question that seems to get at who
3 people are. Why'd you agree to help me?

4

5 **Ejike**

6 One of my fraternity brothers, one of my neos, Vertner (Pseudonym)?

7

8 **Rob Graham**

9 Yes. Now he's my man, now. (Rob laughing and Ejike joining)

10

11 **Ejike**

12 Yeah, so he sent the flier to us, and I was like, the experiences of Black men at PWI's.
13 That's something that's fun and interesting, and I talk about it every single day, so might
14 as well talk about in a way that can help somebody with their research. The topic just
15 seemed interesting.

16

17 **Rob Graham**

18 Okay, good. I appreciate that. Oh, by the way. What makes this research a little bit
19 different also is that normally, interview, one directional, but I'll be telling you a little
20 about me also. We'll get to know each other, and it's supposed to be conversational, so if
21 you're saying something important, I'm just gon stick with that and disregard my
22 questions.

23

24 **Ejike**

25 Okay.

26

27 **Rob Graham**

28 So you said you talk about this stuff every day. What do you mean?

29

30 **Ejike**

31 As an example, I was talking to my little cousins. I'm from PG County, Maryland,
32 predominately Black county, and they are what, 17? They're seniors in high school, so
33 they're in the process of applying to university. I was just talking to them about the
34 differences between an HBCU and an PWI because they're writing their essays. And then
35 one of them, she was asking me, how does one write about why they would want to
36 attend a PWI?

37

38 **Rob Graham**

39 Mmm

40

41 **Ejike**

42 I told her I could provide insight because I grew up in the same county, and I go to a PWI
43 now. I let her know all the different aspects of diversity of thought, of background, of
44 culture, and all these different things. And then as it relates to the W part of PWI, I was
45 telling her the differences between PWI's and places like Mason; it's a predominantly
46 minority institution, more so than a predominantly White institution. I was telling her that
47 I have no reason to go to a predominantly White institution. I was like, I have nothing
48 nice to say about wanting to go to a predominantly White institution, because that type of
49 space is not a space that I would want for either of us. So that's just kind of one example
50 of talking about a PWI and the aspect of being a minority at a PWI. And one of the main
51 reasons why I chose to go to Mason is the diversity aspect, because I've seen it show up
52 in many aspects of my personal life, day to day life, whether it be interning, talking with
53 friends that attended universities like Howard or other HBCU's, or interacting with other
54 people in the National Society of Black Engineers who attend HBCU's. Just different
55 background and different train of thought.

56

57 **Rob Graham**

58 Un hun. Well your cousins sound lucky because you got it, I mean you do a nice job of
59 laying it out there for them. Okay, let's see here. Who are you are as a person? It's a
60 difficult question, but, you know, do your best.

61

62 **Ejike**

63 Who am I as a person? In what context, though, because everybody has multiple
64 identities, and they don't all bring all their identities to every place they go, and really any
65 place that they go. They always have to shift and code switch and all the fun things.

66

67 **Rob Graham**

68 Okay. That's a good rebuttle or whatever (laughing). What's the first thing that comes to
69 mind, gun to your head, who are you?

70

71 **Ejike**

72 I'd say, if anything, I'm a driven, passionate leader.

73 **Rob Graham**

74 Un hun

75

76 **Ejike**

77 This is my seventh year in university. Ever since the first year, I've been doing some sort
78 of leadership something. I came in being freshman class president, and I'm currently a
79 regional chairperson for a Black engineering organization, overseeing a membership of
80 about 4,600 across 62 different chapters and leading an executive board of 22. So, from a
81 point of where I was just a freshman class president, to leading regionally and sitting on a
82 national executive board, I've never been one to shy away from leadership or growing my
83 thought process in order to be a better leader. No matter how long one has been at
84 leadership, there's always room for improvement.

85

86 **Rob Graham**

87 Absolutely. You're one of the few names of brothas that I've been hearing since I got
88 here. Your name made it all the way to my office on the other side of campus. I was
89 doing some research work for a course I was taking, a qualitative research methods
90 course, and it was about Black folks supporting one another on campus. One of my
91 participants brought you up as somebody I might want to talk to. I can't remember why it
92 didn't happen, but I sat in on one of your meetings where you guys had some seventh
93 graders come in, and you did some projects with them? You guys made like catapults out
94 of...was that you guys?

95

96 **Ejike**

97 It was probably NSBE, but I'm not involved with the chapter, not as hands on. I was on
98 the e-board for a time back, and I do what I can to stay involved, but just availability.

99

100 **Rob Graham**

101 Got it. So I'll tell you a little bit about myself, my background. I've been here since 2013.
102 I'm a PhD student, education policy. Interested in Black male education, specifically the
103 transition experience from high school to college, what's that's like, how we're supported.
104 I got social justice reasons. I want to make sure that we're having an experience that's
105 equal in terms of brothas being able to reach their goals, not being set up for failure. In a
106 lot of the literature I've read and the experiences I've had, even brothas that did very well
107 in high school, I'm talking about like valedictorian, student of the year, they still get to
108 PWI's and places like Mason and wind up experiencing struggle, despite putting in all
109 kinds of work. There's something amiss there. I decided that I'd make this little piece, this
110 little lane, where I can be of service. I have an org that supports brothas in that exact
111 transition. I've got some students right here on campus who my org supports.
112 Scholarship, pay for books and supplies, mentoring, academic advising. This is not just
113 academics for me; this is my life's work, being an advocate for brothas, Black folks in
114 general. I'll expand after I get my degree, but this is my current lane. I work with
115 international students, English learners. They're just a wonderful population, and it's
116 actually informed my work, looking at the ways they're supported and what their needs

117 are. It adds to the ways that I look at supporting Black folks as we come on the campus.
118 I'm from Pasadena, California. Standard family. Lots of educators, people putting in
119 service for Black folks. I'm just grateful to be able to do this work, and that's about it.
120 Um, tell me about growing up, family, that sort of thing. What was your experience
121 growing up like? Role in the family? Family dynamic? How all of that contributed to the
122 man you are today. What shaped you?

123

124 **Ejike**

125 Well, as relates to family, I am the youngest of four. Nigerian immigrants. Immigrated to
126 the States in early January, 1998. Born in 95. At that point in time when we immigrated
127 over here, my parents were like, it was harder than they thought to be in the States, and of
128 course when you add children to the mix, it complicates everything.

129

130 **Rob Graham**

131 Un hun

132

133 **Ejike**

134 Initially it was going to be my mom being here while my dad took us back to Nigeria. My
135 mom made the decision like no, I'm not going to be here without my kids, so we stayed
136 here, and my dad went back to Nigeria. And that right there was the foundation of my
137 entire upbringing, being raised by my mother in seemingly a single parent household with
138 my parents still being together. That was such a very odd thing to explain to other people.
139 No, my mom and dad, they're still married; my dad just is in Nigeria. I didn't really think
140 anything about it. I feel as though maybe sixth grade and middle schoolish where I would
141 hear my classmates talking about, oh, my mom did this or my dad did this or my dad's
142 picking me up. I was like, oh, your parents live in the same household? That's a thing that
143 actually happens? That's normal? That's the standard? That itself is an entirely different
144 conversation that needs to be unpacked in therapy down the line (chuckles).

145

146 **Rob Graham**

147 Un hun

148

149 **Ejike**

150 But bringing it back, that laid the foundation for how my upbringing would be. My
151 mother raised us to be independent in a way that has now allowed me to do for myself
152 regardless of if somebody else does for me. I've seen that show up in many ways in my
153 life. Very core Nigerian values to a degree, and just constant reminder of who you are
154 and all those fun things. The question that you asked is such a complex question.

155

156 **Rob Graham**

157 Un hun

158

159 **Ejike**

160 Short question, long answer type of thing. So, I hope I answered the question in the way
161 that's suitable for what you need.

162

163 **Rob Graham**

164 No, it's suitable, and it's good, and it's generic because the decision you make and how
165 you answer it, is telling in itself. You know people approach that question in all kinds of
166 ways, and your decision, it is what it is. I'm going to prod a little bit. But before I prod,
167 when you said Nigerian values. Tell me some of those.

168

169 **Ejike**

170 Nowadays when I look at it, I see the folly in those values, but then it made sense, and it
171 has made me the man that I am today. I heard a lot of, we came to this country for a
172 better life. Never settle for less. Always push yourself. You're not like these Americans
173 that are here. Remember you're Nigerian. Remember who you are, where we come from.
174 Always pushing excellence. Always pushing academics. Always pushing us to go faster,
175 farther than any of our peers. That constant drive to be the best no matter what. It makes
176 sense but to a degree. There's never a need to put down another culture, ethnicity, racial
177 group in order for us to understand why we should do and be better. Nigerians are very
178 proud people, and we're naturally hard workers or go-getters. Once we set our minds to
179 something, we chase after it like mad, and that's who I am as a person. I always tell
180 people when it comes to my personality, I am like a bull, and to a degree, I don't make
181 excuses for it. I also recognize that not everybody can handle bullish type personalities,
182 and over the years that has cost me a great deal: relationships, friendships, working
183 relationships, especially being a leader. All in all, those types of core values and those
184 types of things allow me to keep going because I know the family that I come from, and I
185 know who raised me and the sacrifices.

186

187 **Rob Graham**

188 Interesting. I think we have some things in common. First of all, on the family tip,
189 standard family, two parents, two sisters, older. Dad was a Pan-Africanist type brotha.
190 Somehow, he developed a love affair with Nigeria, and he spent, I guess, his health, his
191 body attempting to build up the Nigerian economy. I've been digging through some of his
192 old stuff now that he's passed and looking at some of his plans for like, developing
193 agricultural spheres in Nigeria. Half of my life as a kid was my dad gone for like six
194 months at a time in Nigeria. Also, my wife's parents. My wife's Haitian-American. Dad
195 lives in Haiti; Mom lives in New York. Married. So, when you say that, I get it, off top.
196 Talk to me about your siblings. You're the youngest. What's that dynamic like? You said
197 you're a bull? Bulls don't come from nowhere. Are y'all all bulls?

198

199 **Ejike**

200 I have two older brothers and one older sister. My two middle siblings are twins, a boy
201 and a girl, and the oldest brother is a male. And then that dynamic. My oldest brother was
202 sent back to Nigeria around fifth or sixth grade for behavioral things, sent back to live

203 with my dad. So just three of us here. I was always like I am today, setting my own path
204 in life. I don't like following after anybody's footsteps. I want to blaze my own trail. With
205 my siblings, there was I might say, somewhat of a distance between us. We went to the
206 same elementary school, and then I went to a different sixth grade than them. They went
207 to the same middle school, but then they went to a military academy, which is just a local
208 school in our area. And then I ended up at a magnet program at another school in the
209 county because I was able to test into it. They both took the test, but they didn't make it,
210 so I was already in a different, I was exposed to a lot of things.

211

212 **Rob Graham**

213 Un hun

214

215 **Ejike**

216 That's also a whole different world in terms of education and future career life. Regarding
217 the bullish personality, all of us are extroverted. All of us want big things for our
218 individual lives. We certainly don't settle. All of us are college educated. My oldest
219 brother, he got his law degree in Nigeria. He came here, doesn't want to do law anymore,
220 wants to get an MBA. My sister's currently pursuing her masters at GW in health
221 administration, wants to end up being a CEO of a hospital one of these days. My brother
222 did Accounting, so he's currently an accountant, has aspirations of being a controller or
223 CFO and is interested in seeing what IT can do for him. Accounting is not really his thing
224 anymore.

225

226 **Rob Graham**

227 Un hun. Tell me about your neighborhood stuff. Neighborhood in PG, town, what city,
228 what town is it? Just tell me how your surroundings shaped you a little bit too.

229

230 **Ejike**

231 They didn't do a damn thing for me for real. We grew up in Forestville, Maryland, which
232 would be a lower income part of PG County. We stayed in the same apartment well into
233 my formative years, from about 1999 to 2017. So that's damn near 20 years we were in
234 the same two-bedroom apartment.

235

236 **Rob Graham**

237 Un hun

238

239 **Ejike**

240 At a point it was a two-bedroom apartment where the youngest person that occupied that
241 space was 22. Imagine being in that space. We have two older siblings, full college
242 degrees in a two-bedroom apartment. It was trash. That apartment itself, did things for
243 our sibling dynamic if anything, just in terms of us always being on top of each other and
244 nobody having their own individual space to kind of go and be to themselves. But as it
245 relates to the outside culture and outside the community, I attribute that to my mother and

246 how she raised me in the close-knit groups of like aunts and uncles that are in the general
247 area or just came in and out. One of my aunts, she'll always tell my mom that, oh, you've
248 done what even Nicodemus couldn't do, in terms of raising my siblings and me. No
249 teenage pregnancies, nobody's on drugs, nobody's doing alcohol, everybody went to high
250 school. Everybody went to university. Come May, I'll be the last of our mom's children to
251 finish college.

252

253 **Rob Graham**

254 She knocked it out the park.

255

256 **Ejike**

257 With all those different things, we were never swayed by the environment that we're in.
258 Never had interest in running with the Joneses, doing what all the local area boys were
259 doing because I knew what I wanted for myself, and I knew that that wasn't the path to
260 get to it.

261

262 **Rob Graham**

263 Where'd that clarity come from though? I keep having these conversations, and I keep
264 hearing, I dabbled a little bit, and then I straightened my path, but you, what's the word
265 y'all use, curved? Y'all curved (laughing). You curved all that.

266

267 **Ejike**

268 Honestly, I don't know what it is. For me, even at a young age, it was a combination of
269 knowing what my end goal was, because for the Gallup top five strengths, the fifth one
270 for me is futuristic. And my number one is input. I'm always very future-focused on
271 where I want to go, the end goal. And with my mother's like upbringing and culture what
272 it is, knowing that all these different things would be a deterrent to my ultimate end goal.

273

274 **Rob Graham**

275 Un hun

276

277 **Ejike**

278 I knew who I had to answer to when I got home, and despite my dad not being there,
279 there was always this looming threat, if you don't shape up right, we'll send you back to
280 Nigeria. Growing up the one thing that I struggled with the most I was, I was as my
281 grandmother would call me, small and mighty. I was the troubled child. I was one that
282 was always very mischievous, you know, talking back, going into my bullish personality.
283 I was the youngest thing, and you know, in Nigerian culture age is a very big thing. That
284 didn't make any sense to me, didn't matter. If I had an opinion, I was gonna say it. So,
285 that got me in a lot of trouble, but I have not changed.

286

287 **Rob Graham**

288 *Great. So, you joined this project because Vertner hooked me up and shared my*
289 *recruitment details with you. Things sounded interesting and like an opportunity for you*
290 *to make a contribution using your personal expertise. You were given Nigerian cultural*
291 *values that were reinforced regularly, including drive towards excellence, independence,*
292 *and Nigerian exceptionalism when compared to your American counterparts. You grew*
293 *up in a humbler part of PG County in a small apartment with your mom and two older*
294 *siblings. Things were tight spatially, but Mom managed to guide all three of to academic*
295 *and professional success. You're a bull and a leader for life that has managed to shrug*
296 *off the negative community forces, guided by your goals and accountability to your folks.*
297 Tell me about some important relationships outside of family that have sort of shaped
298 you, you know, influenced who you are.
299

300 **Ejike**

301 Sixth grade was really the time point when the teachers that I had started becoming
302 mentor type figures for me, kind of guiding me. Almost teacher's pet, but not like, oh,
303 I'm gonna tell the teacher. Just getting to know them more on a personal level, and having
304 other types of conversations like with my sixth grade teacher, Miss Givens (Pseudonym).
305 It's actually very funny. Because our relationship took a turning point after, she had said
306 something to me, and I called her a bitch.
307

308 **Rob Graham**

309 Whoa! Sixth grade?
310

311 **Ejike**

312 Yes
313

314 **Rob Graham**

315 You're still alive. This is a great story.
316

317 **Ejike**

318 So, you know, got to the principal's office, all these different things, they called my mom.
319 After I came back from suspension, I don't know what changed in our relationship, but
320 we just got closer.
321

322 **Rob Graham**

323 I knew it!
324

325 **Ejike**

326 She started relying on me to do things. She would trust me to go to her car to collect
327 snacks for our fundraiser, to help her out around the room. Then, my seventh grade
328 algebra teacher, Miss Woodson (Pseudonym), we still keep in contact. She was another
329 person that really helped me in terms of just learning, and learning math. And seventh
330 grade taking algebra is like a big deal.

331 **Rob Graham**

332 Right. I remember seventh grade algebra. I never got it; I needed Miss Woodson. (Ejike
333 chuckles).

334

335 **Ejike**

336 But when I would stay after to get tutoring, I was getting to know her on a more personal
337 basis. She always says that we were really the only class that she's been able to have real
338 conversations with. So, we would of course talk about math because that's the class, but
339 there are instances when CNN would be on in the morning as students came in. Then
340 we'd spend a good chunk of class talking about politics and what was going on in the
341 world. Talking about different things allowed me a different perspective into the world.
342 She was somebody that always had students she would take to church or take under her
343 wing and mentor, and I was one of them. She knows my mom and my siblings and what
344 not. She permeated my family life. In high school, I had numerous teachers that held me
345 down in that way, taught me more than what the book said, taught me different things
346 about life, and that has shaped my upbringing.

347

348 **Rob Graham**

349 Okay, okay. What's your vision for yourself?

350

351 **Ejike**

352 My vision for myself? In what regard?

353

354 **Rob Graham**

355 I hate to do the cliché, five-year/ten-year thing. I went to a funeral a of couple years back;
356 my best friend's mom passed. The funeral hit me in ways that I didn't expect. She was a
357 warrior type sista. Oakland, seemed to be part of the Panther sphere. She taught at one of
358 the North Carolina Black colleges. Anyway, I was at her funeral, and she's draped. I
359 didn't want to look, but it's my buddy; he wanted me to see his mom. She was draped in
360 this warrior garb, staff, just regal, even in death, real regal. But what struck me was just
361 people lined up to say something, these testimonies about how she'd improved their lives
362 and put them on the right path. I mean everybody from immigrant Black folks, local
363 Black folks. It was at that moment, I kind of knew. I want this life for myself, influencing
364 and helping people reach their goals. What do you want people to say about you when it's
365 said and done? What do you want to have accomplished?

366

367 **Ejike**

368 From a young age, I always wanted to see my name in lights. I always wanted to kind of
369 be out there. When I was younger, I wanted to be an actor. Then after some time, I was
370 like, oh, this acting thing is too hard to break into. Then I started trying to figure out
371 another way to get out there and see my name in lights and what not. That's when I kind
372 of got into the realm of politics. Had I been born in this country, I'd definitely run for
373 president. I'm a big Beyonce fan, stan if you will.

374 **Rob Graham**

375 Un hun

376

377 **Ejike**

378 And my favorite song from her is, I Was Here, and the particular lyrics, I want to leave
379 my footprints on the sands of time. I'm about just letting people know that I was here.

380 That's the type of impact that I want to have in this world, to know that I did something
381 that made a difference in the world and changed it for the better. That's the type of impact
382 that I would want to have. I thoroughly believe in the realm of mentoring; it's about
383 lifting as we climb.

384

385 **Rob Graham**

386 Un hun, un hun. I can work with that. Been to Nigeria lately?

387

388 **Ejike**

389 Yes, I was in Nigeria last in 2017. I'm actually going there for Christmas and New Year's
390 this year.

391

392 **Rob Graham**

393 Where are your peoples?

394

395 **Ejike**

396 Um

397

398 **Rob Graham**

399 And I don't know; I'm learning. Um, Lagos? What, Abuja?

400

401 **Ejike**

402 Okay, okay, okay. We're Anambra State, and then in Anambra, my people are from
403 Agukwu. Agukwu; that's my village back at home. But, you know, when it comes to
404 being based somewhere, your family and what not, cousins are in Lagos.

405

406 **Rob Graham**

407 Got it. I think that's a good warm up there. I got a sense of you at least. I like to kill it
408 before it's dead, ride this good energy out. *You mentioned earlier that you were a bull*
409 *and that regardless of age, you say what you need to say knowing there can be*
410 *consequences. I picked some of that up when you talked about important relationships*
411 *outside of your family and how your special bond with Miss Givens was formed.*
412 *Foundationally, teachers like her and Miss Woodson expanded your world view, and*
413 *provided mentoring and support. You've always wanted your name to be in lights and out*
414 *in the world somehow, and if you were eligible you'd run for president. Politics have*
415 *replaced acting as your vehicle for having a wide impact, and you'd like to life others as*
416 *you make your professional and personal climb in this world. You and your peoples are*

417 *from Anambra State, and within Anambra, Agukwu. Does all of that get to what we talked*
418 *about.*

419

420 **Ejike**

421 That sounds about right.

422

423

424 **Connecting Personal and Educational**

425 **Rob Graham**

426 All right. So today I want to talk to you about your academic life, hear what that's been
427 like, your road to that seat right there. I'll just dive in, do my thing, ask you some
428 questions. Tell me about high school. Maybe tell me about the neighborhood in which it
429 sits, the type of students that go there, and your experience there.

430

431 **Ejike**

432 The neighborhood in which it sat is in Springdale, Maryland, the affluent part of PG
433 County. Of course, PG County is the most or one of the most affluent predominantly
434 Black counties in the country.

435

436 **Rob Graham**

437 Un hun

438

439 **Ejike**

440 Springdale is vastly different than where I grew up in Forestville, Maryland.

441

442 **Rob Graham**

443 Who were the students at Flowers?

444

445 **Ejike**

446 It was interesting. Because Flowers had a magnet program, there were a subset of
447 students there. Here's the thing with Flowers. Flowers took in students from of course the
448 local affluent parts, but it was also the high school for students in Glenarden, on the lower
449 income side of things. But, even though Glenarden was on the lower income side of
450 things, it wasn't even to the point of the general area in which I grew up. You had
451 students who for the most part grew up in two-parent households or maybe grew up in a
452 single family home or townhome. They grew up well enough off, but for some reason,
453 still wanting to perp that they're from the streets, from the hood type of thing. I was like,
454 okay, do you, it's none of my business.

455

456 **Rob Graham**

457 So, the folks from Glenarden sort of walked around having this sort of identity that they'd
458 given themselves that they were more hood than everybody else?

459

460 **Ejike**
461 Yeah, don't get me wrong. Like Glenarden, Bright Seat Road, do have their gangs, hoods,
462 and all those different things. So you had people who came from that type of background,
463 and of course you have people who were on the more affluent side. Then within the
464 science and tech program, those students more or less would come from two parent
465 households, townhouses, single family homes, you know, nice sized houses and things of
466 that nature.
467
468 **Rob Graham**
469 Mini mansions (chuckles)
470
471 **Ejike**
472 And there's a good number of people in science and tech that are second generation
473 Africans. So the parents who came over to the States grinded, they went school, got the
474 degrees; they're doctors, some lawyers, some engineers, some are accountants, and
475 they're well off. Their children are reaping the benefits of what they've sown. So, ideally
476 it would be my children when I make it to where I want to make it, reaping the benefits of
477 what I've sewn, my parents have sewn. That's the group, the circle that I ran around with.
478
479 **Rob Graham**
480 Who were those people that weren't Black? What are the other populations?
481
482 **Ejike**
483 I mean, a lot of people. We had a little sprinkle of Filipinos, a quick dash of White. We
484 had a little sprinkle of some Brown folk, but for the most part, Blackness was what it
485 was.
486
487 **Rob Graham**
488 You got this, you have a real genuine two culture thing happening. Is that a fair
489 assessment?
490
491 **Ejike**
492 Un hun
493
494 **Rob Graham**
495 I mean you have a full mastery of and full experience of two cultures.
496
497 **Ejike**
498 Un hun
499
500 **Rob Graham**

501 Making sure I tell your story right. Okay. So, how would you judge your experience in
502 high school? Was it a positive one? Was it a negative one? And were you active? What
503 were you up to?
504

505 **Ejike**

506 I've been active, with regards to involvement in organizations and different things since
507 elementary and middle school honestly. In high school, the first two years I did soccer.
508

509 **Rob Graham**

510 Mmm! Like your boy.
511

512 **Ejike**

513 Yeah, yeah. Then the third year I did football. The fourth year I started the lacrosse team
514 along with some other of my friends. Sports weren't really my things, still aren't, but it
515 was nice to do. The lacrosse thing was a lot of fun because we didn't have one. There are
516 other high schools in the county that had one. Maryland is the biggest state for lacrosse,
517 so the fact that we didn't have one, was like, oh.
518

519 **Rob Graham**

520 Hmm, I didn't know that.
521

522 **Ejike**

523 In my third year, I also did drama club. I was also part of the Future Leaders of
524 America's Government. Then I also did mock trials. I was also co-president of the
525 African Student Association and the president of the Future Leaders of America's
526 Government. Then of course, we still had the whole science and tech thing that was going
527 on. I was also National Honor Society my senior year.
528

529 **Rob Graham**

530 You just been a busy brotha from the gate! How'd you do in high school?
531

532 **Ejike**

533 I did fairly well. I believe I was about 36th in my class out of like 600 and something.
534

535 **Rob Graham**

536 What kind of GPA did that get you?
537

538 **Ejike**

539 I finished off around a 3.66 or something. I didn't do too bad. I credit it to my own work
540 because I was always the type of person where a lot of things came naturally to me. And I
541 did the amounts of work that I needed to do to not fail.
542

543 **Rob Graham**

544 Okay

545

546 **Ejike**

547 And doing that landed me with, you know, B's, and some C's, and some A's here and
548 there. I take extracurricular seriously. I mean that's shown up throughout my entire
549 collegiate career as well. I didn't really face any courses that were like, oh, I actually don't
550 know what I'm doing. Aside from physics. Of course I'd have to put in some extra time
551 here and there to do what was necessary, but for the most part.

552

553 **Rob Graham**

554 Un hun. And your siblings, they went somewhere different?

555

556 **Ejike**

557 Un hun.

558

559 **Rob Graham**

560 You mentioned physics, and there's some literature out there that says if you take classes
561 that are advanced to a certain degree, it helps you prepare you for your collegiate
562 experience. Did you take any AP classes or did,

563

564 **Ejike**

565 I did. I took AP Lit.

566

567 **Rob Graham**

568 *This is good. Flowers sits in a more affluent section of PG County, different than where*
569 *you're from. The school was a Black space in terms of student body, with some*
570 *sprinklings of Filipinos, White students, and Brown students. Within the school there was*
571 *a split between the affluent, the somewhat low income that took on a hood mentality, low*
572 *income, and the children of immigrants. You were part of the social circle of high*
573 *achieving children of African immigrants, you were engaged in the science and tech*
574 *program, and you did quite well academically. Like you've been in college, you were also*
575 *super involved in extra-curricular activities. So, tell me about how you were prepared for*
576 *college by your high school. Maybe it was some counseling. Maybe it's a particular*
577 *college program or an individual or just tell me the ways in which people at your school*
578 *intentionally prepared you for college. This is the meat of this sandwich that we're*
579 *making here.*

580

581 **Ejike**

582 Flowers prepared me primarily via the science and technology program with the science
583 of technology program and the teachers. They always pushed us to that extra level, and
584 their main thing was like, oh, we're teaching the way that we're teaching you because
585 when you get to university, teachers are not going to care about whatever. They will care
586 you just have to make them care, which is an entirely different conversation, and granted

587 there are some people who literally won't care, but the main thing that was ingrained in us
588 is they're not going to reach out to you individually. Furthermore, the Flowers science
589 and technology program provided me with a good deal of exposure to different courses
590 and ways of thinking, if you will. We're able to do our research practicum at the end of
591 our high school career which is similar to a bunch of the poster presentations that people
592 in their master's or PhD programs do. That exposure to that way of thinking and
593 operation was really, really dope.

594

595 **Rob Graham**

596 What about the counselors? Tell me about your school counselors, what role they played
597 in your college preparation.

598

599 **Ejike**

600 I don't recall them playing that much of a vital role in my college preparation. I will say
601 that the science and technology program coordinator was more of our counselor than any
602 other actual counselor. She was very vital in a lot of the things that were going on. She of
603 course is a Black woman. She was a Delta which brought another level of complexities in
604 the understanding of the collegiate experience. She was a Hampton alum. Her son was
605 also in my grade, so she had a visceral connection to the students in my class. She was
606 very honest, always very willing to help. The way she talked to us wasn't really the way a
607 coordinator of a program would talk to students; she talked to us like a Black mom.

608

609 **Rob Graham**

610 Excellent

611

612 **Ejike**

613 And one thing that Flowers did do around the university, around the school on the
614 teachers' doors, they had these posters that had the degrees that the people had, and
615 whatever university they went to, just to start reinforcing the whole collegiate thing. That
616 was was pretty nice.

617

618 **Rob Graham**

619 So did you get any intentional, sort of direct talk about college? You got to college;
620 somebody worked with you to help you get here. Was there anybody at school where you
621 could say, okay this person helped me pick a school, this person introduced me to this
622 field, so I understood this better. Was there anybody like that, doing straight up, pure
623 college conversation?

624

625 **Ejike**

626 I did. Can't remember what it was called, but it was those habits, half a year-long course
627 just on collegiate preparation. Granted, looking back on it now, it could have been better,
628 there was room for improvement. But we'd look up different universities, find out their
629 tuition, room and board, different majors. It didn't make sense then; it didn't click, for

630 whatever reason. It wasn't until after I accepted my offer during the summer that I did
631 some real intense research. I started realizing like, although a university may have a
632 computer science degree, the way they go about doing that computer science degree is
633 completely different. But that that college class was definitely helpful, and there were
634 other teachers who were younger who talked to us about university from their experience.

635

636 **Rob Graham**

637 Ok, ok, ok. So, your siblings being older, did they assist you in your

638

639 **Ejike**

640 My older brother was schooled in Nigeria. My second oldest brother was an athlete, so he
641 got a full ride to college, and his football coach helped him with that. My sister got a full
642 ride to St. Augustine's in North Carolina and ended up changing to NC State, but her
643 experience was different than mine. When both of them were, again they're twins, when
644 they were applying to universities, I was in the 10th grade. So, what I was focusing on
645 was completely different from their approach. And then when I was applying, both of
646 them were in their sophomore year of university, out of state. So I didn't see nor use them
647 as a resource for anything. So it was really just kind of like finding out a lot on my own.
648 Of course, more or less being first generation, my mom couldn't help me. I relied on other
649 people I knew from Flowers that did well. I remember the class before us, there were
650 some high performing students, so I would lean on them more than anything else like, ask
651 them some questions. Like, how do I do this, how do I do that? Those are the people who,
652 if I had questions I would go through because I knew their experience was somewhat
653 similar to mine to a degree.

654

655 **Rob Graham**

656 Okay so peers. Older peers were really helpful, as you kind of figured things out solo,
657 bull style. *Flowers High School prepared you in a couple of ways. Officially or*
658 *programmatically the college preparation course that you took was helpful, differently*
659 *helpful in retrospect. The information on faculty doors kept the spirit of college and*
660 *college familiarity stirring. The school counselors didn't help with college preparation*
661 *but the science and tech coordinator was. She approached the work as a Black mom to*
662 *the students, and the fact that she was a Delta added some complexity to the thinking*
663 *about the college experience. The science and tech teachers provided a rigorous course*
664 *experience that was intended to serve as a preview of what was to come after high*
665 *school. Given the fact that you are a first generation college student and your siblings*
666 *journeys' were so different, you relied on older peers to close information gaps you had*
667 *in preparing for Mason. How did you pick Mason? Why?*

668

669 **Ejike**

670 I got rejected from my number one school, Stanford. Okay, so we're going to community
671 college. And then after some conversation, with surprisingly my siblings, and then my
672 mom, they're like, no, don't go to PG. PG is the 13th grade or whatever. Go to a four-year

673 institution.Okay. I'll do that. From there, I was now like, so what universities do I know?
674 I don't want to be close to home, Stanford my number one is all the way across the
675 country and I wanted to explore, but I ended up out of all my siblings, being the one
676 closest to home. It's something that I do not regret because it has come in handy. Mason
677 had given me a call. Oh hey, just letting you know that we're here, we got your
678 application. I visited Mason's campus to see what's good. It was during International
679 Week, so they had all the different flags in the JC at the perfect time. I saw the Nigerian
680 flag, and it was good. During that time, I ran into my would-be freshman-year roommate.
681 He was also an Igbo boy. He was from PG County, and then his mom and my mom
682 started talking. And we started talking during the visit, and you know from there said,
683 let's be roommates. So after the visit ended, I was like, I don't really see any other
684 university that I really care to go to. They have my program that I want to do, people are
685 telling me it's a nice institution, it has nice name recognition in the general area, so why
686 not.

687
688 **Rob Graham**
689 No Howard?

690
691 **Ejike**
692 Never crossed my mind, I didn't want to do it. This is my whole thing. I grew up in PG
693 County around Black people. I did not want to be in another environment that would put
694 me around Black people. Love Black people, but I was more so, again, that futuristic
695 strategy. Thinking forward into the future. Like, I will have my entire life to be around
696 Black people. When I walk into this workplace, I'm going to be around all those different
697 people, so I need to be in an environment where I'm exposed to that and it can be
698 controlled. And I can learn, grow build from that. So, when it is necessary, and I'm in that
699 environment I would have already been exposed, so it would not be a culture shock.

700
701 **Rob Graham**
702 That's well put. Okay. You can answer this question anyway you want, obviously. This is
703 a tough question. How did you think college would be, and did it wind up being how you
704 envisioned it?

705
706 **Ejike**
707 Surprisingly, I didn't even know what college would be like. Again, first generation
708 student, more or less, so I didn't have stories from parents, like oh, when I was in
709 university, I did this as part of this. I had none of that. When I got here, I was just going
710 off that independence that my mom instilled in us and taking it one day at a time. Any
711 and everything that came my way, I just approached it head on and kept pushing. I wasn't
712 really scared of college. I knew who I was, and this is the one piece of advice that one of
713 my friends from high school told me. Know who you are, know your core values, and be
714 uncompromising in this college environment. Everything will be tempting and try to
715 persuade you to change and to compromise who you are. Do not let it do that.

716 **Rob Graham**

717 First year. Would you describe it as a struggle, as smooth, or something else? How
718 would you describe your transition to this place?

719

720 **Ejike**

721 My transition to here was definitely interesting because there was a part of me that felt
722 lonely, primarily because I would look around the university and see a lot of people that
723 came from Virginia Beach or Hampton or Richmond. They have their individual cliques
724 from their similar upbringing and surroundings, and that makes sense because Mason is
725 in Virginia. Normally, there's one other girl from Flowers here but her and I aren't that
726 close. So, I joined organizations and what not. I was freshman class president, but at the
727 end of that year, they disbanded that entity. So I was like, no, I'm, I haven't really found
728 my place; I don't think I'll find my place here. I was considering transferring back to MD
729 because I knew like a lot of my friends from high school went to UMD. But, I decided I'd
730 give it one more semester here at Mason; then I would make a decision. My sophomore
731 year I was the vice president of an African organization, and I was also a senator in
732 student government. That whole aspect of being a vice president was really the turning
733 point of my finding my niche at Mason, staying here, and of my leadership. I was at the
734 starting point of my rise in the ranks in the Black community here.

735

736 **Rob Graham**

737 So it sounds to me, I'm reaching into your brain a little bit, if somebody would have
738 asked you about the secrets of your success here at Mason, you would attribute a lot of
739 that to being so active in your extracurricular stuff,

740

741 **Ejike**

742 Precisely, precisely because I thoroughly believe that you want to not simply attend a
743 university, but be involved and have a holistic experience. I'm sure that some do, but it
744 just does not make sense to me because I couldn't imagine just coming here going to class
745 and going back to my room and doing nothing. That's just not my cup of tea. The best
746 part about university is not the classes, not the education. You can learn all that stuff on
747 YouTube. The best part about this is the experience, the conversation, the people, the
748 arguments. The differences of opinion, the exposure, the workshops, the talks. The
749 professors, the advisors, just like everything in between, the demonstrators. All of that
750 makes up so much of a holistic collegiate experience.

751

752 **Rob Graham**

753 I agree. You know that's why I like working here. I think all the time that I can make
754 more money or whatever, but I like being on a college campus because you can sit down,
755 and you never know what kind of conversation you will find yourself in with an expert in
756 some field and just kind of complete whatever mental map you've got going on. What
757 kind of support, did you have when you got here from professionals, in terms of advising

758 or anything like that? Would you say that you had some strong advising to help you with
759 your transition once you got here?

760

761 **Ejike**

762 Oh, most definitely. I would not be the man that I am today without the strength, support,
763 love, care, and advice of the people who have gotten me to where I am today. Going back
764 to being freshman class president, the advisor was a Liberian woman who was doing her
765 master's at the time. I'm 24, and she's probably like three, five years older than me, more
766 like a big sister than anything else. There were other people in the organization, but the
767 way she talked to me and interacted with me was coming from that mutual background of
768 we're African, we think differently, we operate differently, we should show up and
769 represent ourselves differently. She really held it down for me over the years. I've met
770 with many advisors, many people, mentors official and unofficial that have really shaped
771 who I am in my thought process and all of those different things. One of the most
772 influential doesn't work here anymore, Gavin Graves (Pseudonym).

773

774 **Rob Graham**

775 I remember him. Used to teach the first generation transition courses.

776

777 **Ejike**

778 He was phenomenal in helping me find myself and my voice.

779

780 **Rob Graham**

781 It sounds a little bit, I don't want to use random like a negative word, but it sounds like
782 the support you got was a little bit random in that it's sort of unexpected. Random that
783 you would click with the Liberian sista. Random that you would click with Gavin. Would
784 you say that there's enough support for freshmen coming in? Freshmen brothas coming
785 in?

786

787 **Ejike**

788 They have to fight. They have to be willing to find it and fight for it. The support is there;
789 people just have to know how to find it. And you know, knowing how to find it is going
790 out of your comfort zone or asking questions of older Black people you see on campus:
791 Black faculty, Black students, Black student leaders, the different group organizations on
792 campus. If a Black freshman came to me and said, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't
793 know how to do the college thing. I'm struggling. Can you give me some advice? I would
794 find time in my schedule and have a conversation.

795

796 **Rob Graham**

797 I got two questions that I just feel like I need to ask you, and I don't even know if they fit
798 what I'm trying to do here. If you had a couple of freshmen brothas come to you and say,
799 what's a good organization to join early in my college career to help me kind of navigate

800 and get my bearings and all that kind of stuff? Because you know, they can be floating in
801 the wind a little bit. What would be the organization or the group?

802

803 **Ejike**

804 That's hard for me to see at this point. It's hard for me to say, because the offices,
805 organizations, and people that I knew are no longer here. So I can't wholeheartedly
806 recommend something or someone to somebody because I don't know what their impact
807 is with students.

808

809 **Rob Graham**

810 Got it.

811

812 **Ejike**

813 I honestly would even only be able to say the general ones. Of course, Diversity Services
814 (Pseudonym) are there. In its heyday, my freshman and sophomore and junior year it was
815 a place where Black students just went to chill, talk, kick it. It used to be a big after dark,
816 but now Diversity Services has become like a transactional space. People just go there to
817 get their needs met, and they keep it pushing. There's no longer that that safe space. From
818 what I've seen, it has transitioned from a space for Black folk to a space more for like
819 Brown, which kinda leaves Black folk out. And for me, you know, this being my seventh
820 year in university, I have literally seen the Black community transition from it being
821 somewhat close-knit, to it being what it is today, almost night and day.

822

823 **Rob Graham**

824 I made this assertion, and you kind of went with it a little bit, on the fact that you've got
825 these two cultures. Do you think that the fact that you've got these two cultures has been
826 a plus for you and your educational journey?

827

828 **Ejike**

829 Definitely. Because I don't consider myself African American, I don't consider myself
830 Black American, I consider myself probably Nigerian American. Born in Nigeria, raised
831 The States, but I was raised in a very Nigerian household. So Nigerian, within closed
832 doors, and then, African American, outside or in the other community. So it's very much
833 a dichotomy of how I see things, so I can understand how Black Americans process and
834 how they think and understand. And then of course you have the Nigerian Americans and
835 the Nigerians and how they think and process different things, and the, the two different
836 cultures have shaped my way of thinking. So definitely very much a benefit, very much.

837

838 **Rob Graham**

839 Man, I could talk to you all day, got some good stuff. You should write a memoir. *This*
840 *place was your second choice after Stanford, decided upon after a campus visit presented*
841 *some positive signs in the hanging of the Nigerian flag, linking up with a fellow Igbo*
842 *brotha from PG County, and a conversation between your moms. Once here, you relied*

843 *on advice you'd received imploring you to remain true to your identity and values; that*
844 *was your protection against the forces that made transitioning to the university an up and*
845 *down experience. Part of your "secret sauce" on all academic levels has been your*
846 *extracurricular activity, the piece of the university experience that you think is the most*
847 *important in crafting an enriching, holistic experience. You believe the resources are*
848 *there to support the transition to university for Black freshmen males, but they must look*
849 *and fight for them. Unfortunately, the Black campus community no longer has a safe*
850 *space for Black students that Diversity Services once was, as it has transitioned away*
851 *from Black and toward an emphasis on Brown. You believe your inner identity as a*
852 *Nigerian coupled with your outer identity as an African American has given you a*
853 *broadier lens and thus a general advantage as you have navigated Mason and the world.*
854 *You've been here for seven years, you've seen the history, Man. You got a lot to say, and*
855 *I think people can learn a lot from you, and people should really hear your voice. That's*
856 *just real you know, and helping Mason decide about policy issues and where to spend*
857 *their resources, who to spend their resources on. My Brotha, I appreciate you.*

Appendix E

Conversations with Eve

Personal Background Narrative- Who Are You?

- 1 **Rob**
2 My first question I've been asking; I think it's informative. Why did you agree to help
3 me?
4
5 **Eve**
6 Because our friend made me. (They both laugh)
7
8 **Rob Graham**
9 He blackmailed you?!
- 10
11 **Eve**
12 No, I called him for a professional favor for my principal. So then he was like, oh, by the
13 way, I have a friend that needs help.
14
15 **Rob Graham**
16 Okay, so it was based upon our mutual friend; I can accept that. You know, it doesn't
17 have to be some kind of romantic answer.
18
19 **Eve**
20 No, it's not. Sorry. (Both laughing)
21
22 **Rob Graham**
23 Okay, okay. I appreciate it. My first sort of real question that I have lined up here, and
24 again, it's just to stimulate you to get going, is, who are you as a person? Maybe I'll start?
25
26 **Eve**
27 Okay.
28
29 **Rob Graham**
30 So I'm from Pasadena, California. You familiar with Pasadena, California?

31

32 **Eve**

33 Other than, isn't that where the Rose Bowl Parade is? (chuckles)

34

35 **Rob Graham**

36 That's exactly right. That's us. Los Angeles County, about 10 minutes from Dodger
37 Stadium. It's a lovely town. I grew up sort of in a typical kind of home. Mom, Dad, two
38 older sisters. Dad was a police officer. from Little Rock, Arkansas. Served in Vietnam.
39 Sort of a straight-laced kind of dude, very into supporting Black folks, Black businesses,
40 and really a Pan-Africanist. He did a lot of work in Nigeria, trying to help them boost
41 their agricultural economy or something like that. He passed away when I was a senior in
42 high school. Mom from Chicago and a little bit more liberal, not as straight laced as cop
43 dad. She owned a preschool growing up. So those are my early memories, of sort of
44 running around and playing in the preschool. Having a family business and that sort of
45 thing. But yeah, they had that sort of story book hook up. Dad pulled her over (Eve
46 laughs warmly), and, you know, the rest was history.

47

48 **Eve**

49 Well did she get a ticket?

50

51 **Rob Graham**

52 That's a good question. I need to revisit this whole hook up.

53

54 **Eve**

55 I need to know (laughs)

56

57 **Rob Graham**

58 Yeah, two older sisters, one nine years older than me, the other one three years older than
59 me. Just a good family life. When I was about 11, my folks got divorced. But in sort of
60 typical Black fashion, it wasn't your straight up legal divorce. They were just like, okay,
61 we got to do something different. So there was still love there, but their arrangement was
62 a little bit different. In fact, my dad lived with my mom's mom after that, so everybody
63 would see everybody.

64

65 **Eve**

66 Hmm. And what brought you to the east coast?

67

68 **Rob Graham**

69 Howard. So, you know how it goes. You do what your older siblings do. My oldest sister
70 went to Xavier University in New Orleans, so I was like, okay, that's college, and that's
71 where I'm going. I went there for two years, and then my other sister went to Howard. I
72 visited her and then my cousin. Immediately after one homecoming at Howard, it's like,
73 I'm transferring to Howard. (Both laughing)

74
75 **Eve**
76 Based on the parties (laughing)
77
78 **Rob Graham**
79 Based on the parties! Xavier is like a perfect little community. Everybody looks out for
80 you. The cool kids, you know, the pretty girls, they were in the library. So, there's this
81 super incentive to be a strong student there. Everybody knows your business, and they
82 take care of you. You know Howard, it's like, good luck.
83
84 **Eve**
85 Right, right.
86
87 **Rob Graham**
88 I essentially fell in every trap there was, but got myself together, graduated from Howard,
89 went back to went back to Cali. Got my master's degree in Cali a couple years ago, and I
90 was like, I need some more school.
91
92 **Eve**
93 Wow, really
94
95 **Rob Graham**
96 My undergrad degree I just scraped through. Graduated with like a 2.0. Master's program,
97 I got my masters in English, and I just enjoyed the experience. All of a sudden, I became
98 a school guy.
99
100 **Eve**
101 So where are your sisters?
102
103 **Rob Graham**
104 My sisters are both in Pasadena. They went back. One is an English teacher, eighth grade.
105 And the other one, she's chief diversity officer at an arts college in Cali. So they're doing
106 their thing. They're both educators. So tell me about you. Who are you? Where you come
107 from? I know nothing, so this is great. It's nice and crisp.
108
109 **Eve**
110 Yeah. I was born and raised in New York City. I moved out of New York City after I
111 graduated high school, which was in 90. Went away to a SUNY school? I don't know if
112 you're familiar with them, State University of New York. They're very popular there.
113 They were mostly junior colleges then, but they've expanded to being four-year colleges.
114 Mine was a junior college that had a campus where you can live on campus.
115 **Rob Graham**
116 Oh. So which borough were you?

117
118 **Eve**
119 I lived in Queens. I went there, and then after a year, my parents told me that they
120 couldn't afford to send me to school and that I had to get financial aid. I go to the
121 financial aid office, and there used to be a walk through for kids to cut through to the
122 other side of campus. I saw these guys there that I knew, and I was embarrassed! So, I
123 never went through with the whole financial aid thing, because my best friend that was
124 there with me, her parents had money and they still have money.
125
126 **Rob Graham**
127 You were embarrassed because you needed some support?
128
129 **Eve**
130 Right. Not that they knew why I was there, but it was just, you know, my young, dumb
131 mind. And my mom and dad didn't really know enough about college to explain how it
132 works. We never really had conversation other than you're going to go to college, right?
133 And I'm like, yeah!
134
135 **Rob Graham**
136 Un hun
137
138 **Eve**
139 Yeah, kinda like what you said. My brother went to this school, so I went to the same
140 school. So that only lasted for a year because after that I couldn't go back to school. And I
141 didn't complete the financial aid process. I didn't know how. I didn't have that support,
142 because my parents didn't even know how. I went back to New York City, but my parents
143 moved to upstate. So, they were out of there, and I was just chillin', wildin' out, got
144 pregnant with my first daughter. That was around 19, 20 years old. I moved upstate with
145 my parents, and they helped me raise her. I ended up going to a community college,
146 graduating from there, and transferring to Syracuse University. While I was living in
147 Syracuse, I met my husband at the time. So he was
148
149 **Rob Graham**
150 I hate to cut you off. So, this move upstate and giving birth to your daughter eliminated
151 all that, hey, I'm embarrassed about needing some financial aid and all that?
152
153 **Eve**
154 I had a totally different way of looking at life then because I had a daughter. I didn't give
155 a crap what people thought. That opened up my door to a lot of aid, being a single mom,
156 low income. So, Syracuse University, met my husband. We moved to Maryland because
157 he's from this area, and then we had two children together. He helped me raise my oldest
158 daughter like she was his own. And then in 2007, my father passed away.
159

160 **Rob Graham**

161 Sorry

162

163 **Eve**

164 I knew then that I wanted to a divorce. I was like, oh no, I can't do this. I just saw my
165 father die. I just brought life in, I've seen life go. I'm not doing this in-between thing
166 where I'm not happy.

167

168 **Rob Graham**

169 Un hun

170

171 **Eve**

172 We had been struggling for a while within our marriage, so we separated, and he was
173 kind of surprised because I had no family here other than my kids. I left and had no one
174 but my kids and my good girlfriend. She's what I consider my family here. She was my
175 rock, my support system, and she happened to be going through a divorce. I had been a
176 stay at home mom and loved every minute of that. My kids loved it. To this day, they still
177 talk about what a great time we had. My friend was also a stay at home mom.

178

179 **Rob Graham**

180 That's nice. We don't usually have the opportunity to have or be a stay at home mom.

181

182 **Eve**

183 Right! Our kids are similar in age, so it worked out great. And then she ended up going
184 back to work. And then like I said, I knew that I wanted to get a divorce. I was like, what
185 can I do? I needed to work, so I started working in PG County. From there, I was like, oh,
186 I want to be a counselor. Went back to school to get my master's degree

187

188 **Rob Graham**

189 What were you doing initially for PG County?

190

191 **Eve**

192 I was a paraprofessional. I had my degree, but I didn't have a teaching degree.

193

194 **Rob Graham**

195 Un hun, un hun.

196

197 **Eve**

198 My goal was to be able to still support my family, not financially, but I mean, in the way
199 that I did, because I still managed their lives. You know, games, practices, medical
200 appointments, all kinds of stuff like that. They were in private school, so I was like, I'm
201 going to move to an area where they can go to public school, and that money that you're
202 using for private school is going to become the money that you're going to support us

203 with. That's how the transition happened. Three years later, we got a divorce, and then
204 five, six years ago, I moved to Virginia. I absolutely love it.

205

206 **Rob Graham**

207 Okay, so you have all girls or?

208

209 **Eve**

210 Two girls and a boy. My oldest and youngest are girls, my boy is the middle one.

211

212 **Rob Graham**

213 What are their ages?

214

215 **Eve**

216 27, 22 and 19.

217

218 **Rob Graham**

219 Wow! It seems impossible that you have a 27 year-old (laughing).

220

221 **Eve**

222 Un hun. Well I had her when I was 20.

223

224 **Rob Graham**

225 *Okay, I'm going to keep track of things for a moment. You're a native New Yorker,*
226 *Queens to be exact. You, like me, followed in your older sibling's footsteps when it came*
227 *to your first college journey. You needed financial support, but you were too*
228 *embarrassed to seek it out because you were worried about what your well-off friend and*
229 *homeboys might think. You wound up dropping out of college, hanging out perhaps a bit*
230 *too much, and becoming pregnant with your first child. Your daughter's birth helped you*
231 *to rethink your priorities, get back into school, and seek the financial support you*
232 *needed. Your parents were supportive of you, especially as it pertained to your daughter,*
233 *but they didn't have the experience to be of much help when it came to navigating*
234 *college. You got married, moved to Maryland, expanded your family, and after your*
235 *father's passing, you knew you needed a divorce. You became a paraprofessional in PG*
236 *County with your eyes on being a school counselor. You talked mostly about your adult*
237 *family that you created. So maybe tell me about growing up a little bit more, childhood*
238 *and such.*

239

240 **Eve**

241 I had the best childhood in the world. I was broke, lived in the hood but didn't know I live
242 in the hood. I heard Chris Rock sum this up, and I was like, oh my gosh, that is me. He
243 said something about leaving Brooklyn one time or wherever he's from. He said, I didn't
244 even know I lived in the hood until I left the hood. And that's how I felt. I went far away
245 to school on purpose. My sister was like, you're not going to go to the neighborhood

246 school like we did, so I took two buses across town to go to school. I met my best friend,
247 and when I saw how she lived, it was like the Huxtables! I was like, what the heck! I had
248 my mom and dad; they just didn't make a lot of money. I didn't know people could live
249 like this!

250

251 **Rob Graham**

252 Mmm!

253

254 **Eve**

255 You know what I mean?! And so that was kind of eye opening, game changing for me.
256 Like I said, I had the best childhood. I played outside until it was dark. I mean, literally
257 all day long. I didn't sit up under my mother like the kids do nowadays. I feel like we
258 were out just creating our own fun. Run, catch, and kiss, you know, tag, all kinds of stuff.
259 I was a tomboy 100%.

260

261 **Rob Graham**

262 So Queens. I don't know a lot about New York. I have sort of mixed ideas about what
263 Queens is. I mean, there's Nas Queens, and then there's that neighborhood. Sorry, all I've
264 got are the hip-hop references!

265

266 **Eve**

267 That's okay

268

269 **Rob Graham**

270 And then there's 50 Cent's Queens, sort of looking more like a neighborhood

271

272 **Eve**

273 Right

274

275 **Rob Graham**

276 Which Queens?

277

278 **Eve**

279 So a combination of the two. We lived in a single-family home. It was a two bedroom
280 with six of us. I have two brothers and a sister. I'm the youngest. My brothers didn't have
281 a bedroom, so they slept in the basement that was unfinished. But they couldn't sleep
282 there in the winter, so they slept on the couch. I don't really remember a lot about my
283 brothers because they were so much older than I was, and I have a terrible memory. Then
284 my oldest brother went away to the military, and my second oldest brother went to
285 Queens College. That's why I said I followed in his footsteps. My sister kind of did her
286 own thing. She went away to college for a little while, didn't really work out. I just want
287 to note this note this, please record this. I have the most education out of all my siblings,

288 but I make less than \$100,000. My sister who has no education makes almost \$200,000.
289 Hurts my heart.
290
291 **Rob Graham**
292 Yeah, I've done more school than any of my buddies, and I make the least amount of
293 money in my whole
294
295 **Eve**
296 Crew?
297
298 **Rob**
299 Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. I mean, I make the least. People are like, so what
300 are you going to do when you're done? I'm like, going to be tenure track faculty, and I tell
301 them what my starting salary will be, and they're like, that's it?
302
303 **Eve**
304 Un hun!
305
306 **Rob Graham**
307 People think that professors start out making a lot of money and that they have like this
308 cushy sort of life, but really, it's sort of, it's a mission. So certain things you got to do
309 them because you love them. And I mean, you could be doing less stuff for work.
310 Obviously, I mean, you know, you could be
311
312 **Eve**
313 Oh, we're going to get into that (Rob laughs) much later. But I want to say I don't know
314 how I can be a help to people when I'm struggling right now. I don't know. I'm like, don't
315 follow what I did. Do the opposite. That's what I tell my kids.
316
317 **Rob Graham**
318 But you do have a wisdom about you, so when you say you don't know what you can
319 help, I mean, you have a wisdom, and you have a pure delivery.
320
321 **Eve**
322 Do the opposite of what I did. (both chuckle)
323
324
325 **Rob Graham**
326 I don't want to cross over into the professional realm quite yet, but I can just see your
327 wisdom and your life experiences and the care for your children and sort of doing what
328 you have to do. And making it happen. To me, that's a thing. I don't know if kids are
329 getting enough of that conversation?
330

331 **Eve**
332 My kids, or?
333
334 **Rob Graham**
335 Kids in general
336
337 **Eve**
338 Oh
339
340 **Rob Graham**
341 Anyway, I just want to give you some kudos real quick.
342
343 **Eve**
344 Thank you.
345
346 **Rob Graham**
347 So, some important relationships in your life? Family is important, but how about some
348 other important relationships outside of family that have been pivotal or put you on a
349 certain path?
350
351 **Eve**
352 Like I said, my girlfriend who lives in Maryland, and my best friend who lives in New
353 York, but it was just more like supportive. Not like they influenced me necessarily, if
354 that's what you're looking for. I hear people talk all the time, I remember this one teacher
355 said this to me. I don't have memories like that. Not to say that someone didn't do that,
356 but obviously it didn't touch me, so I don't know. I've always felt like I've been super
357 independent, and I know that we don't go through this life alone. I'm well aware of that,
358 but I'm an independent thinker.
359
360 **Rob Graham**
361 What did your parents do?
362
363 **Eve**
364 My father was a chef for the Mobil Corporation, but back then cheffing wasn't
365 glamourized. And my mom was a dietitian.
366
367 **Rob Graham**
368 Mmm!
369
370 **Eve**
371 So basically, she was for the New York City Public School system. She planned all of the
372 menus for the school system, and all that good stuff. And when they hosted stuff, she
373 would do the catering and stuff for that.

374
375 **Rob Graham**
376 I know this is out in the air a little bit, but what are some values that drive you? Some
377 things that are important to you?
378
379 **Eve**
380 Stability.
381
382 **Rob Graham**
383 Un hun
384
385 **Eve**
386 Having stability, especially after getting a divorce, and financially having to adjust to that
387 divorce, to that lifestyle. So that was very important to me. And I'm just, after however
388 many years of being separated, let's say nine years, getting to a point of stability in my
389 life. I needed to provide stability for my kids because we moved a lot. I gave up the
390 marital home because I didn't want to live in PG and my kids to go to PG schools. So,
391 tried the Charles County, Maryland thing. My son hated it. In fact, he hated it so much
392 that I said, hey, what about moving to Virginia? He was like, let's do it, and he was going
393 to be a senior in high school.
394
395 **Rob Graham**
396 Wow, that never happens.
397
398 **Eve**
399 Right! Whereas my youngest one hated it! She hated Virginia. Or hates it still. She had
400 the worst experience ever.
401
402 **Rob Graham**
403 What did she hate about it? I mean, I know it's not the Blackest thing in the world.
404
405 **Eve**
406 This is the most diverse place I've ever lived, and I love it. But for my daughter, she was
407 looking for, I guess she liked the Black experience, if you will. But the Black people in
408 Virginia are a little different when they're native to Virginia, and there's a lot of Black
409 people. People don't understand, like Alexandria used to be nothing but Black.
410
411 **Rob Graham**
412 Right. Virginia, in fact, is 20% Black.
413
414 **Eve**
415 Anyway, she didn't have a good social thing. And this whole growing up at this age, uh!
416 It wasn't easy. She got into some social issues, she trusted this girl that I couldn't stand.

417 And of course, I had to let it all play out. But it really would got to a point where, and I
418 don't say this often, she was being bullied!
419
420 **Rob Graham**
421 Mmm!
422
423 **Eve**
424 And it was like breaking my heart because I'm from New York. I'm like, talk about their
425 mama!
426
427 **Rob Graham**
428 Right. I'll tell you some values that drive me maybe, tell you why I'm even doing this
429 work. I came to Mason, back to school for more action. I've been working with
430 international students and ESL students,
431
432 **Eve**
433 My favorite population.
434
435 **Rob Graham**
436 Un hun. I thought I was going to be studying grammar or something to that effect, that
437 would make it easier for students to acquire language. My strategy was to take some PhD
438 classes as a non-admit, prove myself, and also get a sense of the landscape. They didn't
439 have the classes I was interested in, so I took an educational policy class focused on
440 school reform in the U.S. Took the class, and started learning about Black folks and our
441 educational history and our educational experience. I was very disturbed by what I heard
442 and read. I was like, damn it! The things I thought were sort of accidental, just sort of
443 legacy of slavery, were intentional,
444
445 **Eve**
446 Systemic? (chuckles lightly),
447
448 **Rob Graham**
449 Systemic, and intentional sabotage. I wasn't trying to deepen my awareness of the
450 struggle. I avoided it, but I just started reading, and decided that if I could do this work,
451 then I must. So I switched over. And then of course, watching the news cover Trayvon
452 Martin, Mike Brown, all that stuff was killing me, killing me. It determined that I would
453 support brothas in a sort of hands on way along with research.
454 I essentially gave the first half of my professional career to English learners and
455 international students. It's been wonderful. I owe everything to them, but I'm intent on
456 giving the rest to Black folks.
457 **Eve**
458 Right
459

460 **Rob Graham**

461 Is there anything else I should know about you, or that you'd like people to know about
462 you?

463

464 **Eve**

465 No, in fact, I'm the exact opposite. I don't do social media. I don't take pictures. I don't do
466 any of that stuff.

467

468 **Rob Graham**

469 That's why I don't know who you are. (chuckles)

470

471 **Eve**

472 Un hun! I know. That's why I told you I'm a loner. I don't want to say a loner. I'm very
473 independent. I'm an independent thinker. I don't need a group of people. Like I'm totally
474 the opposite of most people.

475 **Rob Graham**

476 Un hun. Well, I appreciate you giving me this time. I think maybe, I think this is a nice
477 natural stopping point for our conversation. You know, kill it before it's dead!

478

479 **Eve**

480 Right.

481

482 **Rob Graham**

483 So our next conversation we'll talk a little bit more about the the piece that people really
484 don't know, which is what you do. I think if you ask 20 people, what counselors do, you'll
485 get 20 different answers. If you ask people what the context looks like, the workload,
486 even the physical space. I think nobody knows, so people just have their imaginations. I
487 mean, I don't know, and I read and this is of super interest to me.

488

489 **Eve**

490 I'm ready for this conversation (and chuckles).

491

492 **Rob Graham**

493 *Let me put this stuff in a nutshell. You had a great childhood in Queens, NY where you*
494 *were raised with three siblings in a single-family home in the hood. Despite your dad*
495 *being a chef for Mobil and your mom being a dietician for New York City Public Schools,*
496 *your family was low-income. You didn't realize you lived in the hood until you were*
497 *exposed to the home and neighborhood of your best friend that you met at the high school*
498 *away from your own neighborhood. You met your husband in Syracuse, moved to Prince*
499 *George's County, MD, and grew your family. After your dad's passing you realized that*
500 *it was time for a divorce. This was a daunting experience given that you'd been a stay at*
501 *home mother for years and out of the workforce that you would need to rejoin. You*
502 *became a paraprofessional before deciding on school counseling as your next act. You*

503 *moved to Virginia to get away from the PG school system and the need for private school*
504 *for your kids. You love Virginia for its diversity, with your son loving it and your*
505 *daughter hating it. You are an independent thinker and person that has focused on*
506 *stability for you and your kids. That has been your driving force.*

507

508 **Educational Experience Narrative**

509

510 **Rob Graham**

511 Thank you for being here again, of course. Today we're going to get a little bit more into
512 the professional side of things, exploring your job and what got you into it and all that
513 kind of stuff. I'll just jump in and start asking away. Forgive me if some of the questions
514 are a little bit redundant. So, tell me how and why you got into school counseling.

515

516 **Eve**

517 So when I was in high school, they had this career and college center. It was a room full
518 of books, cause back then, you know, things weren't really on computer. Lot of books on
519 a lot of colleges, and we had this one teacher that was a psychologist. I don't know how
520 he got into the position of being in charge of that room, because he wasn't always there,
521 but you could go there, and he would say, here you can do this, you can do that. In my
522 mind, I always thought I wanted to be a psychologist,

523

524 **Rob Graham**

525 Un hun

526

527 **Eve**

528 and as life progressed, things just didn't play out for me where I could spend that much
529 time focusing on becoming a psychologist. I started a family early and I focused on that,
530 being a stay at home mom. While doing that, I continued to pursue my dreams of going
531 into counseling. I was on my way to becoming a licensed therapist, but this fluke thing
532 happened where I found out the school that I was going to didn't have accreditation for
533 their LPC license, practical whatever counselor, I forget what it stands for.

534

535 **Rob Graham**

536 Un hun

537

538 **Eve**

539 On the last day to drop classes I found out, so I had to go run and drop a class because
540 they were not accredited. So it forced me into the school counseling piece because that
541 program was still accredited.

542

543 **Rob Graham**

544 Mmm! It's kind of a natural shift, right? Not too much of a departure, right?

545

546 **Eve**
547 Not too much of a departure. Well, kind of. We'll get into that.
548
549 **Rob Graham**
550 Okay
551
552 **Eve**
553 So I was thinking, okay, well, it's kind of like parallel, so why not? And that's how I got
554 into the school counseling realm.
555
556 **Rob Graham**
557 Okay, okay. I said, not too much of a departure, and you were like, well...What do you
558 mean by that?
559
560 **Eve**
561 In school, we don't do a lot of counseling. We do a lot more academic counseling and a
562 lot more Band-Aids on a bleeding heart. Oh, like I'm feeling this way; I have anxiety.
563 Mmm, sorry, do you feel better now after we talked because you got to go back to class
564 now. Because we're not licensed therapists we don't have a couch in our office. We don't
565 have a lot of time to dedicate to that piece, the personal-social growth piece. We're more
566 focused on graduating you, graduating you on time, getting you to your post-secondary
567 goal. That's more of the focus versus your overall well-being.
568
569 **Rob Graham**
570 Do you have a school psychologist?
571
572 **Eve**
573 We do, but the school psychologist is divided between schools, so he's only there maybe
574 two days a week. He is phenomenal. When I talk to him about a student, he will go out of
575 his way to meet with the student. But we do more of a triage. We can refer out, but we
576 only have this one resource that's now in the schools, and they're not always going to be
577 in the schools. It's like a grant, so, we have it for right now, and at the beginning of the
578 year, we didn't have it.
579
580 **Rob Graham**
581 Mmm. Interesting. I think that's a nice transition. Before we get into the specifics of your
582 work, maybe you could give me a little sense of the context, and I'll just lump these
583 questions together, and you can just hit them however you want. And just you know, I'm
584 not beholden to my questions. I just want to stimulate conversation. Tell me about your
585 school. What kind of students do you have? Tell me about the neighborhood, maybe
586 where the students are coming from. Tell me about your colleagues and the leadership in
587 your school.
588

589 **Eve**
590 I'll start with leadership.

591
592 **Rob Graham**
593 Okay.

594
595 **Eve**
596 I feel like Prince George's County has underdeveloped leadership. There are basic things
597 that come with Leadership 101 that I've felt in my 12 years. Well, I'm going to take that
598 back. The team that I started with was strong. They were outstanding, but that was at the
599 elementary school level. Both of the elementary schools I worked in in PG County had
600 strong leadership. Then I shifted into high school when I came out of the classroom into
601 counseling and leadership. That particular principal was new at the same time she hired
602 me. But my gosh, she lived in a fantasy world with unicorns and rainbows. It was crazy.
603 And for six years, I was under that leadership, and she had a lot of personal issues going
604 on.

605
606 **Rob Graham**
607 So this is high school now?

608
609 **Eve**
610 This is high school. She had a lot of personal issues that she brought to work with her
611 when she came to work, so she wasn't consistently at work. She left us astray to the point
612 where people from the area office had to step in for her in her absence. For the last two
613 years of my six years being there, everything was awry. I mean, everything. The students
614 walked the hallway like it was the mall. They had no respect for education. They were
615 completely and totally disconnected from education. That particular population didn't
616 really go to college. They didn't really understand post-secondary goals. But where I am
617 now, same thing, weak leadership because they can't deal with confrontation within the
618 workplace.

619
620 **Rob Graham**
621 Do you think there's a different set of skills required between elementary and high school,
622 like a different type of person needs to be in that leadership role?

623
624 **Eve**
625 Absolutely. Clearly. The first principal I had in high school would be great as an
626 elementary school because I felt like she lived at Disney World where she could make all
627 dreams come true (Rob chuckles). Clearly she needs to be in elementary, but when you
628 get into high school, the instructional staff is a lot more clickish. I hear a lot of "I"
629 statements, whereas in elementary it's a lot of teamwork. It's, we're in this together.

630
631 **Rob Graham**

632 Un hun

633

634 **Eve**

635 I see a lot of that. A lot of them are new to being assistant principals. So there's four
636 assistant principals and one principal, and this is her second year of being a principal. I
637 was quite shocked when she got this school because ours is known as like the high school
638 of the South. It's like the mecca of the South.

639

640 **Rob Graham**

641 Just because I know so little, when you say of the South, are you saying they

642

643 **Eve**

644 Of the county

645

646 **Rob Graham**

647 Okay, so even though it's one county, were talking about two different contexts? South
648 and north?

649

650 **Eve**

651 Absolutely, and even central, but they don't divide it up that way.

652

653 **Rob Graham**

654 Un hun

655

656 **Eve**

657 But it's clear, the northern end of the county, they get more, bottom line. They get to
658 schedule classes the way that they want. I mean, they are the only school that has no
659 uniform policy in the county, as far as high schools. They get a lot more. They're always
660 making the list U.S. News top 100 schools or whatever, so they have more resources
661 available to them. And so my school, it's important to know the population because it's
662 roughly 1100, 1200 students. 600 of them belong to the science and tech program, and
663 you have to qualify to get into the program. What I've noticed is those parents tend to be
664 together still, mom and dad households. This is shocking to me because the high school I
665 came from, it was rare that it was mom and dad at the table together. So this is totally
666 different. I have about 400 students, and about 300 of them are science and tech students,
667 so I'm having totally different conversations with the students and parents.

668

669 **Rob Graham**

670 So it's like the old adage, school within a school. Two schools within one building
671 almost.

672

673 **Eve**

674 My current students cry because they can't get into AP classes, whereas the school I came
675 from, they cried because they had to go to class. They make me sharpen my skills. We
676 get requests from colleges all the time. I didn't get those requests when I was at my
677 previous school. We barely could get colleges to come out. But now they're banging on
678 our door. I'm talking about like, Princeton, Harvard, Georgetown, like

679

680 **Rob Graham**

681 Really?

682

683 **Eve**

684 These kids really go to colleges, and they go to strong colleges, like solid academic
685 colleges. So like I said, the conversations are way different but in a great way. The
686 parents, awesome. We can agree to disagree when they come in, want something for the
687 kids because they want it.

688

689 **Rob Graham**

690 When you say awesome parents

691

692 **Eve**

693 Science and tech. I've actually appreciated all the parents that come to the table because
694 even our non science and tech parents who are single parents, like working two jobs, we
695 may have a different view on how life should be lived, if you will, but they're there to
696 support their students no matter what. Anytime a parent comes to the table, I'm just happy
697 to have them.

698

699 **Rob Graham**

700 *Let me make sure that I'm keeping up. You got into school counseling as an alternative to*
701 *your first choice of being a therapist because the program you wanted to be was no*
702 *longer accredited. You're at a school of about 1,200 students in the half of the county*
703 *that is less-resourced, with a population that is mostly focused on science and tech.*
704 *Despite that fact, colleges regularly visit and try to recruit students. While on the job you*
705 *don't have the opportunity to counsel students holistically in the way that they often need*
706 *it because of your professional training and because the focus is really on graduating*
707 *students and getting them to their post-secondary destinations of choice. You have a*
708 *psychologist in your school that is responsive and effective, but he splits his time between*
709 *there and other locations so he is not there every day. Your school leadership is not very*
710 *effective which adds to the challenges of the job. Your 400-student load is a mixture of*
711 *mostly high achieving students that qualified for the science and tech program and*
712 *regular students. You appreciate the ambition of your science and tech students and find*
713 *that they force you to develop as a professional. Both populations have parents that are*
714 *as active as they can be in their students' academic lives, and you appreciate both the*
715 *parents of the high achieving students who regularly attend parent-teacher programming*

716 *and the parents of regular students that are less able to be active but still committed to*
717 *their students' success.*

718

719 **Eve**

720 Yep

721

722 **Rob**

723 Well, I entered this research under the idea that everybody has ideas about what school
724 counselors are doing, but nobody really knows except people who are actually in the
725 profession or in the schools. Tell me about your team, how your team is organized and all
726 that. Is there team leadership? How about the space? What does it look like? If you had a
727 GoPro on your head, what would it look like?

728

729 **Eve**

730 The high school's relatively new. I think it was built in or opened in 2012, 2013? And it's
731 called a one to one school, so it's supposed to, it's supposed to be this high tech school.
732 Every student gets a Chromebook. And not everyone in the county gets that. Most
733 schools don't get it in the county that I'm in. It's a beautiful looking space.

734

735 **Rob Graham**

736 Hun!

737

738 **Eve**

739 The counseling suite is bright and nice, but our offices are small. I call my office
740 cellblock two (Rob laughs). In fact, I wish I had my keys because on my key it says,
741 CB2, and I have the second office (both chuckle). But as far as the team, we are a broken
742 team, and I knew that going into it, but I had no idea it was that broken. So we have one
743 counselor that's our lead counselor. I think maybe she has eight years of counseling
744 experience. She knows a lot. She is gifted in that area; she just understands. She can read
745 policy and understand it and just memorize it. I kind of looked forward to working with
746 her because I knew that she had that, but I just didn't know she was this intense.

747

748 **Rob Graham**

749 Are you intense? I think you've got some intensity to you.

750

751 **Eve**

752 No, not like this. Let me just say, we have four counselors. She's the lead. She has the
753 most experience, then I come in at six years. And then the other two come in at maybe
754 three years experience of counseling, and one of them is super. I'm the oldest, the least
755 experienced two are maybe 30 and 20 something, and the lead is late 30's. I'm 40
756 whatever, so it's an interesting dynamic, that I'm the oldest person.

757

758 **Rob Graham**

759 But still not old.

760

761 **Eve**

762 Right. But I come in with a team spirit 100%, and as I transitioned into this school, I had
763 a hard time. I really I hated it. I was feverishly looking to get out of the county at that
764 point. But then when people would come into the building, they'd say things like, Eve,
765 you're here because you are known in the county as a change agent.

766

767 **Rob Graham**

768 Hmmm! That's nice.

769

770 **Eve**

771 That doesn't make me feel good though. They say, look, you turned that team around at
772 your last school. It was super dysfunctional when I was started, and it was still
773 dysfunctional when I left, but we were a happy, dysfunctional family. We came at it
774 together. We were a united front 100%. Here, oh my gosh, our team lead is so enveloped
775 in herself! It is insane! To the point where she has one of the team members shook, where
776 she cries almost daily because you can't approach her. She has the least amount of
777 experience, and our team lead thinks it's her way or no way. I learned under a different
778 model, if you will, and there's more than one way to skin a cat. So I'm like having to
779 retrain that particular counselor. I think this is really important to know because that
780 particular counselor was put on administrative leave her first year because she was about
781 to graduate a student that didn't meet the requirements. So our county went under a lot of
782 fire because of graduation. We had an audit recently by the state,

783

784 **Rob Graham**

785 Un hun

786

787 **Eve**

788 well by a private company, and a lot of things were found, including the reality that we
789 don't operate in the 21st century. We literally go like this, Eve- English 9, English 10,
790 English 11, English 12 (acts out process of writing a student record by hand).

791

792 **Rob Graham**

793 Yeah, that's how you have human error, right?

794

795 **Eve**

796 Right. So this particular counselor, who was not trained because there's not great training
797 in the county for counselors. It's like, it's like sink or swim. She was baptized in fire
798 because she ended up on administrative leave at the end of the year, not knowing what
799 was going to happen. It wound up running into the next school year. But you have a
800 seasoned counselor that could have helped from day one, and she chose not to. So there's

801 a lot of disconnect. A lot of working in offices with their doors closed. I can't do it
802 because I work in the cell block. Like I said, it's like sitting tight. So doors always open.

803

804 **Rob Graham**

805 Are you guys organized by grade level?

806

807 **Eve**

808 Yes.

809

810 **Rob Graham**

811 Okay, got it.

812

813 **Eve**

814 Last year was the first year for this school, but I've only operated under grade level. They
815 went under grade level under protest. We're very dysfunctional, and I had to come to a
816 place in my mind where I'm going to serve out this year, do my bid if you will, and then
817 look at other places because I'm not sure that Prince George's County is for me. I want to
818 sum this up. I believe that Prince George's County specifically uses their counselors as
819 glorified secretaries. That's what I feel like I am.

820

821 **Rob Graham**

822 *That's sad and again, maybe not what people imagine is happening. So you're in this*
823 *beautiful new building, but your office is jail-cell small. The school is high tech, so all*
824 *students are issued a Chromebook. Unfortunately, and unlike the dynamic at your*
825 *previous school, your counseling team is disjointed, with a lot of individual focus. The*
826 *lead counselor is behind the disjointed culture of your team because of her intolerance of*
827 *any approach other than her own and the insufficient onboarding and training of the*
828 *junior counselors. You feel like you are operating in an archaic system in which you have*
829 *to do things that should be automated or computer driven by hand. You would describe*
830 *the job as one that is at least in part, that of a glorified secretary. You are committed to*
831 *completing this school year, but you are looking around for opportunities outside of PG*
832 *County. Did I get it right?*

833

834 **Eve**

835 *That's about right.*

836

837 **Rob**

838 Okay. Tell me about your work duties and maybe a typical workday.

839

840 **Eve**

841 So I can go in with the plan. I'll wake up in the middle of the night and write my lists on
842 my phone of things I want to do that comes to my mind because we stress over it all the
843 time. It's like an, I gotcha, if I do this wrong. It's like you work every day as if you're

844 going to be threatened somehow. That's how I feel. That's how my other co-workers feel,
845 even the seasoned counselor. Now I will say she doesn't do that to me anymore because I
846 kindly told her, you don't have to. You don't have to oversee my work. You're not my
847 boss; I can do this, and she does it to the other two.

848

849 **Rob Graham**

850 Hmmm. And your boss is the assistant principal?

851

852 **Eve**

853 Our direct supervisor. Additionally, we have grade level administrators, so you can call
854 her my supervisor as well.

855

856 **Rob Graham**

857 Un hun

858

859 **Eve**

860 I can't even believe she's an assistant principal, she's clueless. I have to undo a lot of her
861 work, and coming in as a new counselor to the building, they've already built rapport with
862 this assistant principal. It's even harder for me to undo the work because they have a
863 rapport with her, so they believe her word is bond. I come in, and I'm like, no, that's
864 crazy, and this is how it should be. That's a personal aside that I think is unique to the
865 situation that I'm in.

866

867 **Rob Graham**

868 Okay. Sorry I derailed you there. So talking about your work day to day.

869

870 **Eve**

871 For example, for the past month and a half, I have had morning meetings. We do our
872 parent-teacher conferences in the morning. We're on duty at nine, parent meetings start at
873 nine because teachers need to be in their classrooms by 9:20. Well, guess what? Teachers
874 don't come to the meeting or they come ill-prepared. Most of the parent-teacher
875 conferences I've been in have been a waste of my time in my opinion. I have yet to be in
876 a parent-teacher conference that was actually comprehensive where we're actually getting
877 into something. We talk about grades instead of areas that need improvement, strategies
878 for future success, or getting the appropriate supports. That's how my days start.

879

880 **Rob**

881 *Wow*

882

883 **Eve**

884 So when do we address students with needs, right? It's called SIT, school instructional
885 team, where we sit down to discuss a particular student. So Rob is having a problem, but
886 Rob has to be referred to the team. How does that happen? Usually through the teacher.

887 Now counselors can put kids on SIT, but sometimes teachers will come and say, Rob is
888 having a problem doing what he's supposed to do. We kick it back to the teacher ask that
889 they put all of best teaching practices on steroids and try all those things, including a
890 parent teacher-conference. Then it can be brought to the table because maybe Rob has
891 other issues that aren't related to learning or his ability to learn. Maybe there's some type
892 of social issues going on. Then we come to the table if Rob is still not performing. So
893 now we take a deeper look that may involve a student advocate and/or crisis intervention
894 teacher. We have prometours that work through the Department of Social Service,
895 services that can

896

897 **Rob Graham**

898 Prometours?

899

900 **Eve**

901 They're called prometours. It's like promoters but in Spanish perhaps.

902

903 **Rob Graham**

904 Ohhh! Okay.

905

906 **Eve**

907 They just refer you out to different agencies throughout the Department of Social
908 Services for whatever reason. Mental, medical sometimes; it depends. And they also help
909 your family as well, not just the student. And now we have a therapist that just started
910 like last week.

911

912 **Rob Graham**

913 Un hun.

914

915 **Eve**

916 And then we have a school psychologist, like I told you, that's super active. So basically,
917 we triage the situation, and we say, okay, this is what needs to be done. Sometimes we're
918 also a resource. Maybe the student just needs to come and reset. But for the most part, it's
919 paperwork.

920

921 **Rob Graham**

922 I've heard this piece before recently, and it's like, oh my goodness. So lots of workload
923 inefficiencies that are keeping you from

924

925 **Eve**

926 meeting with the students. I meet with students. I have an open period during lunchtime
927 that is between 11:15 and 1:15, so they can come in without a pass. The issue with that is
928 I'm meeting sometimes during that time. I don't always know, but they can come anytime
929 without a pass. And the reason that is, is because we don't want you to miss instruction.

930 We want you to be in class. Even though you can get a pass from your teacher to come
931 see me, I prefer you to be in that AP physics class. So I just tend to have an open door
932 policy during lunch period.

933

934 **Rob Graham**

935 Do student, do students take advantage of that?

936

937 **Eve**

938 They do. They're excellent. I've never worked with a student body like this before. It's the
939 polar opposite of what I worked with at the other school. Our conversations are deeper.

940 They don't just come and cry about not liking their teacher. They come in like, I know it's
941 junior year, but I'm already ready to plan for senior year. (chuckles)

942

943 **Rob Graham**

944 Right, that's nice.

945

946 **Eve**

947 They are on it! It is refreshing to have the conversations. I mean, I had to sharpen my
948 tools because I didn't really have to talk about planning and goal setting with the other
949 population. Although, I love working with that population because they were needy in a
950 different way. Like they needed a mom. They needed someone to talk to. Planning? A
951 goal? I'm just trying to get through this day! So our conversations were a lot different.
952 Here the conversations are richer, and I appreciate that. I felt like the other population
953 was a little oppressed and depressed. And the schools are three miles from one another.
954 And you wanted me to talk about that. The place where the school sits is slightly hoodish,
955 but the students are not. They're the opposite because they're bussed in because they're
956 science and tech students.

957

958 **Rob Graham**

959 So they come from around the county, not necessarily walking to school or whatever.

960

961 **Eve**

962 Correct.

963

964 **Rob Graham**

965 So this is a little bit of the cream. And the comprehensive students, those are like the
966 neighborhood kids.

967

968 **Eve**

969 Yes.

970

971 **Rob Graham**

972 Thank you. That interesting. *Again, not sure people envision this picture of your work.*
973 *Your planning for the day often begins in the middle of the night, when you begin listing*
974 *your tasks out of an anxiety about being caught unaware by your leadership. This anxiety*
975 *is maybe less for you than your junior colleagues because you've created professional*
976 *boundaries that are leveraged by your experience and know-how. An aspect of your*
977 *individual experience is the task of undoing some of the uninformed practices and*
978 *procedures directed by your novice assistant principal toward the counseling team. You*
979 *have parent meetings with teachers at nine in the morning, so that teachers can be in the*
980 *classroom by 9:20. These meetings are often unfruitful because parents and teachers*
981 *fixate on grades rather than things they can't access on their own using the teachers'*
982 *digital gradebooks. You'd prefer to be discussing strategy, solutions, diagnoses, and*
983 *support in these meetings. When students have issues that need the school team to come*
984 *together for remedy, teachers must first follow a series of steps to make sure the issues*
985 *can't be solved through best practices. When it comes down to it though, the job is*
986 *largely paperwork that keeps you from meeting with students as much as you'd like or*
987 *feel the students need. The students are excellent, and your conversations with them are*
988 *more future-focused than in your past, when a lot of them were simply students trying to*
989 *make it through the day because of complex out of school realities. Your current students*
990 *are generally more academically sound because they've been bussed in from around the*
991 *county for the science and tech program. The smaller portion of your student population*
992 *is actual neighborhood kids who are not in that special program.*

993

994 **Eve**

995 Un hun.

996

997 **Rob Graham**

998 I ran into an old colleague who's a new counselor in Arlington, and she mentioned the
999 same thing about the paperwork! How much of your experience do you think is specific
1000 to Prince George's, or do you think this is a profession-wide situation? With the
1001 paperwork and just your experiences in general?

1002

1003 **Eve**

1004 Well, I can talk to that because I've my own kids were in Charles County and Fairfax
1005 County.

1006 Talking to Fairfax County counselors and even Prince William County as a parent and a
1007 counselor, we do a lot more paperwork. I feel like Prince George's County,
1008 predominately Black, we focus on pomp and circumstance. It's all about how we want to
1009 look, and we're very reactive. I'm sure all counties have some reactive component
1010 because there's certain things that you can't predict, but I know that Fairfax County,
1011 Prince William County, Charles County are more proactive about certain situations. I
1012 don't even know how to describe it without like, just bashing Prince George's County.

1013

1014 **Rob Graham**

1015 Why do you think there's this distinction? Why does PG County take this approach to

1016

1017 **Eve**

1018 We're gonna get into a whole different level of conversation right now. I feel like Black
1019 people aim low.

1020

1021 **Rob Graham**

1022 Mmm.

1023

1024 **Eve**

1025 I absolutely feel that. I remember when I first moved to this area around 1997? I'm a stay
1026 at home mom listening to the news, and the governor was questioned because Prince
1027 George's County didn't get the same amount of money that Montgomery County got for
1028 public schools. And he simply said, they didn't ask for it. Bam! There it is right there!
1029 They didn't ask for it. Montgomery County asked for this amount of money. We gave
1030 them this amount of money. Prince George's County asked for this amount of money, and
1031 that's what we gave them. In PG County, people tend to grow up in PG County, graduate
1032 high school in PG County, go to college in PG County, and then work in PG County. You
1033 don't have any other experience other than PG County, and we already know that PG
1034 County is an anomaly. No other county exists like that in the United States of America.

1035

1036 **Rob Graham**

1037 Yeah, it's true on all kinds of levels. There's an extensive concentration of Black wealth.

1038 There's also a concentration of

1039

1040 **Eve**

1041 Education. They're highly educated.

1042

1043 **Rob Graham**

1044 Highly educated but at the same time the schools have this... The stats are just crazy,
1045 crazy, alarming.

1046

1047 **Eve**

1048 Un hun. I'm telling you, it's cyclical. All we're doing is recycling the same thought
1049 pattern, the same thought paradigm. There's not enough diversity in, not just the people,
1050 but the thinking. The patterns are all the same. I want to get a big fat house, drive a big
1051 fat car, maybe can't even afford it. I'm going to put this facade on. That's what I feel like.
1052 That's been my experience, not even what I feel. I lived it, and I see it.

1053

1054 **Rob Graham**

1055 Why do you think the folks are aiming low?

1056

1057 **Eve**

1058 They don't know any better. They got their good government jobs. They don't live in
1059 Southeast DC anymore. You know, they feel like they're on the come up
1060
1061 **Rob Graham**
1062 So can't see the context that they're in.
1063
1064 **Eve**
1065 No, not at all.
1066
1067 **Rob Graham**
1068 So this is a community, not only district issue. I was gonna say this is a district leadership
1069 thing, but it sounds like it's a combination of community and district leadership not
1070 knowing that they can raise their educational expectations.
1071
1072 **Eve**
1073 Right. I'm going to say something that's gonna blow your mind, Rob. I'm not gonna say
1074 any names, but one of our top leaders in the county, their child goes to my school. They
1075 are in a particular program that had only three options to meet this program requirement.
1076 Well, now there's a fourth option, and it's a watered down option.
1077
1078 **Rob Graham**
1079 In order to get that person's kid through?
1080
1081 **Eve**
1082 Yep.
1083
1084 **Rob Graham**
1085 So lowered the standard even lower?
1086
1087 **Eve**
1088 Yep.
1089
1090 **Rob Graham**
1091 I thought you were gonna say raised it, by the way.
1092
1093 **Eve**
1094 I was shocked and aghast when I heard this because I really had hope that this particular
1095 leader would be
1096
1097 **Rob Graham**
1098 a change agent.
1099
1100 **Eve**

1101 Yep. And when I found that out, I was actually deflated. And I just feel like I'm not sure
1102 if it's education as a whole or just the particular county that I work in, but I am not
1103 planning to return next school year to the county. No way. I have to know if this exists in
1104 other places, and I do not hear that. People leave, and they love it. In fact, I'm at the
1105 school that I'm at now because that particular person couldn't deal with the leader of the
1106 team in the counseling department. She went to another county in Maryland, and she
1107 absolutely loves it. Doesn't have to attend half the meetings that we do. Doesn't have to
1108 do all the paper work that we do. Yeah, there's a component of paperwork, but not
1109 overwhelming. I mean, it's overwhelming the amount of paperwork that we do.

1110

1111 **Rob Graham**

1112 College preparation. What do you do? I'm getting a sense of what your workload is like,
1113 and what you're asked to do. What, what do you say you do in terms of, or does your
1114 school do in terms of preparing students for college? I really want to know about you and
1115 your team.

1116

1117 **Eve**

1118 Well, I can only speak about myself. Prince George's County invested in this program
1119 called Naviance. Naviance has been in existence for a very long time. My kids had it
1120 when they were growing up, but I think it's kind of obsolete now. But they, they finally
1121 invested in it. So this is pretty much our second year. The first year, three years ago was a
1122 pilot program, and the school I'm working at was one of the pilots. So we have this
1123 program called Naviance, and we have to promote it as counselors. We have to teach the
1124 students how to use it. You see the issue with that?

1125

1126 **Rob Graham**

1127 Mmm? I mean, it's another thing that keeps you away from doing

1128

1129 **Eve**

1130 Well, I don't have classes every day.

1131

1132 **Rob Graham**

1133 So, student contact also. You're not reaching all the students.

1134

1135 **Eve**

1136 Well, and we're monitored. Like, hey, we looked at your class, and this is how many kids
1137 did such and such. But I will say this last year, even though I was at the school that I was
1138 at, I got recognized in the county because I had the most juniors do whatever activity it
1139 was that they wanted. So it's a scope and sequence for every grade level, and I was able
1140 to get my juniors to do it. I plan on exceeding that because these kids are already wanting
1141 to know how they can be active in their post-secondary planning. So we do guidance
1142 lessons. Quarterly we go into the classrooms. I have it set up on Mondays. We'll be in
1143 their second and third periods, I believe, in two classes, where I'm going to introduce this

1144 platform. It's a web-based platform where students can do interest inventories, and from
1145 the results, it will produce categories of career planning choices that you may want to go
1146 into. You can investigate the careers and the colleges that offer majors for this, then
1147 compare throughout the United States the salary range.

1148

1149 **Rob Graham**

1150 I actually do something like that with my students at Mason, the freshmen. So they're still
1151 exploring, by the way, when they're freshmen, they're still looking around and still
1152 figuring things out.

1153

1154 **Eve**

1155 Of course

1156

1157 **Rob Graham**

1158 Okay, so you do the Naviance thing, and you do the guidance visits.

1159

1160 **Eve**

1161 We do the Naviance thing, and that is going to be how I push them to explore colleges
1162 from now on because we're being monitored. I need make sure they do all of these things,
1163 and I give them deadlines. I show them how to do it. Then I go, and I read reports. I team
1164 up with the English teachers because everyone has English. I go to the English 11 classes,
1165 and we put some weight on it, make this a graded assessment, so that they have an
1166 incentive to do it.

1167

1168 **Rob Graham**

1169 Un hun.

1170

1171 **Eve**

1172 Every quarter, we build on an activity related to your post-secondary goal. This is from
1173 ninth grade on up. So we follow our students until they graduate, and then we start it all
1174 over again. It's a progression thing, and we walk through it. We do meetings with the
1175 families. We're going to have this thing in April where we bring the parents in to talk
1176 called it Junior Options Night. We're going to have people from FAFSA there, show you
1177 how to request your transcript, and show you how to request a letter of recommendation
1178 through Naviance.

1179

1180 **Rob Graham**

1181 Un hun, un hun

1182

1183 **Eve**

1184 It's all building, and then like I said, the quarterly guidance lessons, the parent programs
1185 that we host, and then we team up with the county. We have a college and career office in
1186 the county that does stuff pretty much quarterly. They do a college application night, and

1187 it includes a how to write a personal statement and how to write essays to apply to
1188 colleges. They do the FAFSA piece all the time. If you go through the cycle, you'll begin
1189 to understand. People want it now though. I get a lot of parent requests to meet
1190 individually, but I just don't have that time. I tell them to log into Naviance, and explore
1191 that option because you could search scholarships, colleges, careers. You have to go and
1192 sign up yourself to take the SAT on your own. That is something outside. I tell the
1193 parents that there are three parts to this component. I give you information. You explore
1194 the information. I talk to the child about the information. You guys then have to do the
1195 rest. We don't have time for one on ones.

1196

1197 **Rob Graham**

1198 Success in college. Do you guys do any work to maybe prepare them for what's going to
1199 happen once they get there?

1200

1201 **Eve**

1202 Un hun. (confirming pitch)

1203

1204 **Rob Graham**

1205 Can you tell me a little bit about that? And also, I can't leave this conversation without
1206 hearing if you do anything specific for my population of interest, Black males. Do you
1207 tailor anything to them?

1208

1209 **Eve**

1210 Absolutely not. I have a high expectation for my students, and I expect them to meet it,
1211 but I don't just say, reach this, see if you can get there. I show you how to get there, step
1212 by step. So, I don't do anything specific with Black males.

1213

1214 **Rob Graham**

1215 Um, any kind of preparation for success once they get on the other side, do you do any
1216 sort of tracking?

1217

1218 **Eve**

1219 No, we're not allowed to track. We're not even allowed to use that word, tracking.

1220

1221 **Rob Graham**

1222 Okay. (chuckles) Tracking's a loaded word for all kinds of reasons!

1223

1224 **Eve**

1225 So I don't but I let students naturally follow me.

1226 **Rob Graham**

1227 So most of your work is getting the access, like getting them in there. Is there anything
1228 you would want to know if you had an opportunity to hear from some of the students that

1229 you worked with that are now in college? Like, is there anything about their experiences
1230 you'd want to know?

1231

1232 **Eve**

1233 I mean we talk about that. And you know, I always ask them, what can we do better? And
1234 of course, it's like make things more fun, and they really wanted to be more engaged in
1235 the classroom.

1236

1237 **Rob Graham**

1238 Mmm!

1239

1240 **Eve**

1241 Not necessarily something from me, but to be more engaged in the classroom.

1242

1243 **Rob Graham**

1244 That's interesting. *You believe that the paperwork and the things that cause you to be a*
1245 *glorified secretary are not necessarily industry-wide, after doing some research in*
1246 *neighboring counties as both parent and counselor. You'd like to experience work in*
1247 *other districts to confirm your suspicions that Prince George's County has its own*
1248 *administrative workload issue. You attribute some of the school district's issues to a*
1249 *county-wide characteristic of aiming low, a symptom related to a recycling of ideas and*
1250 *mindsets that could benefit from thought and experience diversity. In terms of college*
1251 *preparation, you only feel comfortable talking about what you do. This includes*
1252 *introducing students to college and career tool, Naviance. You also do college*
1253 *programming events, classroom visits and team up with English teachers to incentivize*
1254 *meeting post-secondary planning goals. You don't do anything specific to Black males,*
1255 *but you do have high expectations for all of your students and guide them towards*
1256 *meeting them. You are not allowed to track former students, but when you do speak with*
1257 *them informally about what they wished they'd had, they mention more fun and engaging*
1258 *classroom experiences. I could keep going; I'm learning a lot from this conversation, but*
1259 I'll stop.

1260

1261 **Connecting Personal and Professional/Educational**

1262

1263 **Rob Graham**

1264 Thank you again for being here. You've been a pioneer for my study. You're my furthest
1265 along person.

1266

1267 **Eve**

1268 I did have a question though. So, why just counselors in the school?

1269 **Rob Graham**

1270 Good question. Counselors are understudied as it pertains to college preparation. Let's
1271 think about the concept of cultural capital and the college going process. One way to look

1272 at it is that certain families have cultural capital which smooths the process of going to
1273 college.
1274
1275 **Eve**
1276 Un hun
1277
1278 **Rob Graham**
1279 Maybe they have generations that have been to college, so they know the process. So that
1280 in 2019 if they have a student that's going, the family has college knowledge. It's not like
1281 a new sort of thing, right? The literature shows that poor folks, Black folks, and you
1282 know those two descriptors frequently overlap, are often first generation, don't have as
1283 many people in their social circles with college knowledge.
1284
1285 **Eve**
1286 Un hun
1287
1288 **Rob Graham**
1289 Counselors have the potential to play this role of supplying that cultural capital in a way
1290 that other folks might not be able to. It's possible that counselors are the only people that
1291 students are coming in contact with that have the time and the knowledge to assist
1292 students with the college going process. Because counselors are under-studied, I'm
1293 having these conversations. I wanted to clear up what counselors are doing in schools,
1294 how they've been trained, and their attitudes and backgrounds, so we can figure out how
1295 counselors can be supported. We can have a clearer idea about expectations. And again,
1296 your work is a mystery. Right?
1297
1298 **Eve**
1299 Un hun
1300
1301 **Rob Graham**
1302 You've been clearing up some of that mystery for me, but before we talked, I didn't know.
1303 Things like having this heavy administrative load, the makeup of your teams. If you
1304 survey people on the street, and you ask them what counselors do, you'll get 20 answers
1305 if you talk to 20 different people. But also, if you talk to 20 counselors, depending on
1306 their contexts, the makeup of the schools, the school locations, the leadership, I think
1307 you'll also get 20 different answers. So this is about really understanding, and then
1308 supporting, elevating your work.
1309
1310 **Eve**
1311 Okay. And the only reason I asked the question is because I have a coworker who is a
1312 student advocate.
1313
1314 **Rob Graham**

1315 Mmm!

1316

1317 **Eve**

1318 He gets to spend a lot more time with students than we do. He gets to spend more time
1319 programming than we do. We do programming, but he does stuff during the day with the
1320 kids that we don't really get a chance to do because of our heavy admin load. I was just
1321 thinking, wow, he would be a really good contributor. He doesn't have the role of
1322 counselor, but if you're trying to just focus on going to college, we rely on him to help us
1323 with certain students. Like hey, he needs some direction, you know; we gotta get you on
1324 the right path first before we can even talk about post-secondary goals. We gotta get you
1325 engaged in this school building right here before we talk about what you're going to do,
1326 you know, after, after high school.

1327

1328 **Rob Graham**

1329 Is this advocate there just a couple of times a week?

1330

1331 **Eve**

1332 No, he's there every day.

1333

1334 **Rob Graham**

1335 So what's his sort of written role? What's he there to do?

1336

1337 **Eve**

1338 I don't know what his written role is because this is the first time I've worked at a school
1339 with that position, but I know we consider him a resource. I feel like he works really well
1340 with males. I don't know if he knows that or if he recognizes that, but he does. So when I
1341 have a student that's kind of wayward in their situation, I have him talk to them, male to
1342 male. It can be Black males or whomever. I have some Hispanic students that he helps
1343 too because there are certain things that we can't identify with because I'm female, you're
1344 a male.

1345

1346 **Rob Graham**

1347 Is he certificated?

1348

1349 **Eve**

1350 I'm not sure. I don't know anything about this position because I've never heard of it.

1351

1352 **Rob Graham**

1353 You don't know anything except that it's a good thing he's there.

1354 **Eve**

1355 Yeah. He's a great resource to have because he doesn't have a caseload. I have a caseload
1356 of 350 students. I'm not gonna be able to service 350 students. Let's be clear about that.
1357 So you mentioned earlier about having the time and the knowledge to meet with the

1358 students. We don't really have the time. Interestingly, I just did classroom visits, because
1359 we do them quarterly. So quarter one was about to end. Go into the classroom and do my
1360 lesson on our web-based platform called Naviance that helps students research their way
1361 to college. So that was my first lesson. Now that's it. I'm sending the students emails, like,
1362 hey, make sure you do this in Naviance, make sure you do that, but we're not spending a
1363 lot of time together with it. They may can come by on their lunch break, and we'll talk
1364 more in depth about it, but that's like 20, 30 minutes. You see what I mean?

1365

1366 **Rob Graham**

1367 Un hun

1368

1369 **Eve**

1370 So I mean we set up programs like the one you're going to come to in April (Rob laughs)
1371 to help them, but it's just not as much time as people would think. Certain school systems
1372 like Fairfax County, they have a designated college and career person.

1373

1374 **Rob Graham**

1375 Yes

1376

1377 **Eve**

1378 Charles County does as well. Just think about that. Why do they have that piece?

1379

1380 **Rob Graham**

1381 Because it's necessary.

1382

1383 **Eve**

1384 It's necessary

1385

1386 **Rob Graham**

1387 And they have the resources.

1388

1389 **Eve**

1390 And they have resources.

1391

1392 **Rob Graham**

1393 That combination. And the advocacy in the district, and the voice.

1394

1395 **Eve**

1396 Right. That's just a piece of what I do, but people don't understand. I deal with students
1397 with mental illness. That means I can come in on any given day, have a plan, and because
1398 that student is having a breakdown, I have to address them today. After dealing with a
1399 student who has a mental illness, I'm drained and taxed, I just wanna sit in my office and
1400 read emails all day.

1401
1402 **Rob Graham**
1403 And recoup. Okay. Are there any questions you have or curiosities about your students or
1404 African American male students' first-year experiences at universities?
1405
1406 **Eve**
1407 I've never wondered that; I just wonder in general for students. Not the about current ones
1408 that I work with, but the previous ones because it's night and day for the student
1409 population that I service now.
1410
1411 **Rob Graham**
1412 Oh, when you say previous, you mean at your other school?
1413
1414 **Eve**
1415 Yeah. My longest time was there. I was there for six years, and those students just
1416 struggle in general in life. So, to have some go college bound, I do wonder how they're
1417 doing. You know, are they being successful? But that's across the board. And the ones
1418 that connect with me afterwards, I already knew would be able to adapt to that life. I
1419 wonder about the ones that we struggled to get there.
1420
1421 **Rob Graham**
1422 So there's some concern about supporting students, getting them all set up to get to
1423 college because it sounds like the access piece is the biggest piece of your
1424
1425 **Eve**
1426 At that school
1427
1428 **Rob Graham**
1429 Okay, right.
1430
1431 **Eve**
1432 I had a conversation with an African American male yesterday, and it was so refreshing.
1433 He's all upset because he has this teacher that most of my students have for English, and
1434 he has the AP course. His issue is he's going to get a D first quarter, and he can't get
1435 beyond that. I'm tickled by that because
1436
1437 **Rob Graham**
1438 It's a good sign.
1439 **Eve**
1440 It's a great sign, and he thinks that's how people or admissions counselors are going to
1441 measure his success. I've said in my lessons over the past two weeks, your grades do not
1442 define you. I'm not saying don't care, but trust and believe you're going to be okay. His
1443 GPA is a 3.6 by the way. The great thing is, they're never going to see this D from the

1444 first quarter because they're only going to see your final grades. So that means now, and
1445 he said, I gotta crack her code, meaning the teacher. I was like, exactly.

1446

1447 **Rob Graham**

1448 That's exactly right! Cracking the code is exactly what we're asking these students to do
1449 when they get to college. So again if you're family has a lot of that cultural capital, or a
1450 lot of people went to college, or you have the resources to hire people to come into your
1451 life to expose your kids to certain experiences, then you're cracking less of a code or the
1452 code is pretty cracked. We're asking these kids to get to campus, and then crack the code
1453 while not going under. You know what I mean?

1454

1455 **Eve**

1456 Right. But back to that conversation I had with him. I said, your first year in, I need you
1457 to contact me, because I need to know how this D stands in your life one year into
1458 college.

1459

1460 **Rob Graham**

1461 Un hun. Tell me about this April event that I'm coming to.

1462

1463 **Eve**

1464 They call it Junior Options Night. It's just different workshops on things related to the
1465 college process. Also, we'll have a representative from the military there. We'll have a
1466 representative from the Department of Ed there to talk FASFA, scholarship searching,
1467 and Naviance. I was going to ask you what you wanted to do. I would like to have
1468 someone there talking about the college application process, the difference between a
1469 personal essay, a personal statement and then their essay. I've talked to admissions
1470 counselors, and they're looking at the whole student.

1471

1472 **Rob Graham**

1473 You know there are things I naturally want to do. I naturally want to tell them how to be
1474 successful in that first semester, because I think that's the make it or break it. That's the
1475 highest risk and the place of most confusion. I like to get them to a point where they feel
1476 comfortable, and then they can just use their natural powers and energy to get them
1477 through. But you know the first semester is not about brains. It's not even about how
1478 determined you are. It's something else.

1479

1480 **Eve**

1481 You think it's about management?

1482

1482 **Rob Graham**

1483 It's time management, expectation management. So, I really like to key in on that first
1484 semester experience. I'm happy to do this, and I think that this is part of the spirit of my
1485 project. I'm not just taking. Um, did you master's program give you what you need to be
1486 successful on the job?

1487
1488 **Eve**
1489 So when you're in school counseling, it's really about theory, counseling theory, things
1490 like that. We had one class, specifically for school counseling, and I can't remember the
1491 name, but that might have been it, school counseling. The professor that taught the class
1492 used to be a counselor. When we asked, why don't you do it anymore? She was like,
1493 because you do nothing related to what you're learning about right now.
1494
1495 **Rob Graham**
1496 Damn it.
1497
1498 **Eve**
1499 It's paper pushing, so she went into private practice. Yep. So we do a lot of prep work on
1500 really the counseling piece, the therapeutic aspect. We spent a lot of time with that, and
1501 learning all about the dynamics of like grief, diagnosing assessments, but I feel like we
1502 don't become an expert at any one particular thing. So, I loved my master's program. I
1503 loved my master's program.
1504
1505 **Rob Graham**
1506 Where was it, Hopkins?
1507
1508 **Eve**
1509 I went to Trinity, and loved it. But did it prepare me? Not really. I literally feel like a
1510 glorified secretary.
1511
1512 **Rob Graham**
1513 So, if you were doing what we probably agree is more legit counseling, then you'd be
1514 prepared, but the fact that actually your actual duties are more administrative, means
1515 there's a sort of disconnect. You don't get a chance to use your powers in other words.
1516
1517 **Eve**
1518 Right, as often as I would like. I do get a chance, but guess what. Sometimes when I do
1519 get that chance, it almost feels like an inconvenience to me. I'm like, damn, I gotta meet
1520 this frickin deadline. Why do you have to have a breakdown right now, Rob! You know
1521 what I mean?
1522
1523 **Rob Graham**
1524 Un hun.
1525 **Eve**
1526 And it's kind of like, I feel awful that I feel that way, but the county doesn't care because I
1527 still have this deadline to meet.
1528
1529 **Rob Graham**

1530 Un hun, un hun. So you're glad you have the student advocate in your school because he
1531 can assist with supporting students, particularly the Black and Brown male students,
1532 without the burden of a caseload or even accountability markers that the counselors
1533 have. He has the time to do programming in the daytime, while you have a 350 student
1534 workload that doesn't allow for much individual contact or daytime programming. In
1535 order for you to hold programs like Junior Options Night you have to do it after hours,
1536 unpaid, and pay for expenses out of your pocket, which is unfortunate. You believe that a
1537 dedicated college counselor, like neighboring districts have, could make things more
1538 manageable, but where is the appetite and where are the resources from above? Your
1539 master's program was meaningful for you, but being theory heavy and therapy heavy, it
1540 didn't necessarily prepare you for the realities of the job. You know, I've been thinking
1541 about how things might go if somebody like Deloitte came through, looked your
1542 administrative practices, and had a goal of eliminating 50% of the administrative stuff,
1543 allowing for more student to counselor contact.

1544

1545 **Eve**

1546 Well here's the thing. Where's the other counselor located?

1547

1548 **Rob Graham**

1549 New York.

1550

1551 **Eve**

1552 Okay. At what, secondary level, high school?

1553

1554 **Rob Graham**

1555 She's high school. She's got the college role you were talking about. She's like one of the
1556 Fairfax or Arlington college counselors.

1557

1558 **Eve**

1559 Right, and that makes sense, Rob. Doesn't that make sense? I can't do all of that.

1560

1561 **Rob Graham**

1562 And in fact, how about this! She's got the college counselor role, and even in that
1563 particular role, she's focused on the access and feels like she still doesn't have enough
1564 time to even talk about the experience once they get to campus. So even in having the
1565 specialization that you need, she thinks there needs to be a second level focused on
1566 actually getting the students ready to be there. So even in her comparative luxury, there's
1567 still another level that she's imagining. And she's busy as hell, working essentially six
1568 days a week to just do her job.

1569

1570 **Eve**

1571 Right. And a lot of the programming that we do, like the event in April, that's after hours.
1572 You don't get paid for that, literally. And the amount of time that it's going to take putting
1573 an event like that together for over 300 students and their families
1574 **Rob Graham**
1575 It's time consuming.
1576
1577 **Eve**
1578 It is time consuming.
1579
1580 **Rob Graham**
1581 And resource consuming.
1582
1583 **Eve**
1584 Resources that I have to find on my own. But remember, Johnny might come in and need
1585 me while I'm prepping for this event. What do I do with Johnny when tonight is the night
1586 of the event? Before I give up on this profession, I've got to get into a different county.
1587 My goal next year is to get somewhere into Fairfax County, because I need to know if it's
1588 just the county that I work for that doesn't know what to do with counselors? The
1589 counselors I talk to in Fairfax County paint a different picture for me.
1590
1591 **Rob Graham**
1592 Un hun
1593
1594 **Eve**
1595 Like, I have plenty of time to meet with students.
1596
1597 **Rob Graham**
1598 Well, I had a casual 45-minute conversation with one of my old colleagues who's a
1599 counselor in Arlington, and she sounds like you.
1600
1601 **Eve**
1602 Really.
1603
1604 **Rob Graham**
1605 She's like, administrative paperwork dominates her job. So, just saying, people might
1606 need some comparison to understand what their situation is. She might think she has a ton
1607 of administrative work, and you might, and were you to chat, you might get some clarity.
1608
1609 **Eve**
1610 Well interesting because I hear that, when PG County people explore other counties, the
1611 other counties jump on them, and I'm like really, why? Because
1612
1613 **Rob Graham**

1614 I know exactly what you're going to say, but keep going.

1615

1616 **Eve**

1617 It's a couple. One of them is a great thing. The county does a great job of providing
1618 trainings for us, or professional development that we can select from. Also, they know
1619 how we're worked, and they're like, oh yeah, we want that, like, that's what we need. You
1620 know what I mean? What did you think I was going to say?

1621

1622 **Rob Graham**

1623 That. That they knew that you were used to a certain level of work, so if you came to
1624 their school, not only would you be able to do the work, but you might even find that you
1625 have a positive attitude about your new context because despite it being a ton of work, it's
1626 less work than what you've been doing.

1627

1628 **Eve**

1629 Right, and maybe even a different type of work. For one, we have this very archaic
1630 system that we use, so a lot of our time is to make sure that we're actually graduating
1631 students, because our computer doesn't do it. We are the only county in the state of
1632 Maryland that doesn't have that technology. Even Baltimore City has it, where the
1633 computer can tell me if Rob is eligible to graduate. I have to tell the computer. So we
1634 manually have to do that work. Do you know how painstaking that is? So at the
1635 beginning of the year, we have to go through every student to make sure that they are
1636 scheduled correctly, manually! We don't just run a report, we have to look at that.

1637

1638 **Rob Graham**

1639 That's a waste of your time.

1640

1641 **Eve**

1642 Could you imagine, looking at a transcript?

1643

1644 **Rob Graham**

1645 I can imagine because in my advising job my first couple years at Mason, that was
1646 exactly our situation. We were doing it with freshmen international students, but it was
1647 the same, and we were in Excel. There's so much human error, and it's so fatiguing. I
1648 considered myself a really good advisor, inter-personal, you know; that's my thing.
1649 Chatting up students, making them feel comfy. But, again, it got to a point. I was like,
1650 darn it, I have to have this conversation. It's interrupting my spreadsheet.

1651

1652 **Eve**

1653 Right! (both laughing) Right.

1654

1655 **Rob Graham**

1656 So that's when you know the game is literally twisted. When the student becomes a
1657 burden because it's taking you away from doing some paperwork, the game is literally
1658 and figuratively twisted.

1659

1660 **Eve**

1661 I don't even know how to answer some of these questions because you're like, do you
1662 think about? I barely have time to do that because I gotta get this paperwork, I gotta get
1663 my spreadsheet done.

1664

1665 **Rob Graham**

1666 There's value even in you not being able to answer the question. Maybe you don't know
1667 this. Maybe this is part of your journey of looking around and figuring out what other
1668 people are doing. What do you need to do to better position students to be successful
1669 once they get to the university? What do you need at work?

1670

1671 **Eve**

1672 What we just said, take away the spreadsheets. Give me more time with the student. How
1673 do I have a goal for students to meet, and I don't see them regularly? I see them four
1674 times a year in their classroom. 30 minutes, maybe 40, 45 to an hour. I need more of that.
1675 I need more time with them, right? I feel like counselors' role should be more
1676 programming but during the day, not after hours. After hour activities. Okay, I get it. We
1677 should have them, but then we should also be compensated for them. Can we talk about
1678 that?

1679

1680 **Eve**

1681 Like, I'm volunteering.

1682

1683 **Rob Graham**

1684 I don't want to get up in your business at all, but you do other work too.

1685

1686 **Eve**

1687 I'm a part time counselor at an alternative school, evening high school. So that
1688 population, it is my pleasure to work with them because they're there for the most part
1689 with a goal in mind, and that's to get their high school diploma, and they have real
1690 obstacles that have prevented them from being successful in the day school setting.

1691

1692 **Rob Graham**

1693 Is it part of PG schools?

1694

1695 **Eve**

1696 Un hun, it is.

1697

1698 **Rob Graham**

1699 You got a lot on your plate.
1700
1701 **Eve**
1702 So think about that, and trying to build a program at night.
1703
1704 **Rob Graham**
1705 I know, I know, I know. And not having all the money you need, not having the time you
1706 need.
1707
1708 **Eve**
1709 Money? Oh, there's no budget. We don't have a budget. The counseling department at this
1710 school doesn't have a budget, and I can't understand why. So anything that I provide is
1711 coming out of my pocket. So, back to the question. Just give it to me one more time.
1712
1713 **Rob Graham**
1714 My question was, what do you need?
1715
1716 **Eve**
1717 I need more time with the students. I need, I need resources. I need a budget.
1718
1719 **Rob Graham**
1720 So, you mentioned talking to your students, maybe, you know, four times a year. Now
1721 let's just chat this up. Once they matriculate, and they get to the college campus, they're
1722 maybe talking to an advisor once or twice a year. So not so
1723
1724 **Eve**
1725 But think about it at the college level, Rob. I thought about this when I went to a tour of
1726 Bowie, and they're breaking it down. There is an academic advisor. There is a mental
1727 health clinic or whatever they call it. So, those departments are divided, We're all of that
1728 in one. There's a career center.
1729
1730 **Rob Graham**
1731 Yeah, you guys are all that. You guys are one stop shop.
1732
1733 **Eve**
1734 How can we be effective?
1735
1736 **Rob Graham**
1737 My point was, not only do they not get enough of y'all, but once they get to college,
1738 they're still not getting the contact. You can imagine this kid from PG without a lot of
1739 familial knowledge of the college process not having enough time to spend with you.
1740 Right? Being admitted to a university, and then getting to the university and not having
1741 anybody. Resources may be there, but if you don't

1742
1743 **Eve**
1744 know how to access it,
1745
1746 **Rob Graham**
1747 then it's as if they're not there. So, we're talking about students getting to the campus, and
1748 by the time they figure it out, it's possible that they're in some kind of deep academic hole
1749 and deep monetary hole. The literature says, I'm always referring to the body of literature,
1750 that people with more money and White people don't rely on counselors, the same way.
1751 In fact, Black students think of counselors as having a more important role, they place the
1752 importance of the role of counselors higher than White students do. So they know, they
1753 have a sense
1754
1755 **Eve**
1756 But do you know, White people...I'm not gonna say White people. I think people that
1757 have money, they hire
1758
1759 **Rob Graham**
1760 Yes, yes, yes, yes!
1761
1762 **Eve**
1763 a personal counselor.
1764
1765 **Rob Graham**
1766 Yeah, I know. I have a buddy, who's one of those. It costs like \$5500, and they do
1767 everything. They help you with the app, they help you with matching. They help you with
1768 the financial aid if by some strange reason you need financial aid even though you've got
1769 \$5500 to pay for your individual college counselor. So again it speaks to the fact that
1770 folks either have the familial knowledge or they can pay for the knowledge that they don't
1771 have.

Appendix F

Conversations with Rakim

Personal Background Narrative- Who Are You?

1 **Rob Graham**

2 So, this is a narrative inquiry study that's a little bit different than most qualitative
3 studies. Most people think about qualitative studies like maybe I'd be interviewing you,
4 but this is designed to be more of a conversation; I'll learn about you, but you'll also learn
5 about me. We'll learn each other's stories. I'll just jump in here and ask you a general
6 question, and you can answer it however you want to answer it. Who are you as a person?

7
8 **Rakim**

9 I view myself as an individual that is passionate about life, with a focus on youth.
10 Definitely my own two daughters, but I guess we'll probably tap into that a little bit later
11 in the conversation with my introduction to the Nation of Gods and Earths, 5% Nation. I
12 don't know if you ever heard of that.

13
14 **Rob Graham**

15 Mmm! You know, believe it or not, my wife's been telling me a lot about it, and I've been
16 hearing it in hip-hop and didn't know what I was hearing. She kind of helped me connect
17 things, and she's pointed out some lyrics. She's like, yo, what they're talking about is 5%
18 stuff right here. And then, full disclosure, I've been watching the Wu Tang series on
19 Hulu, and they show a little bit of background. I haven't really done my homework, but
20 I've got a little bit of a sense of what it means.

21
22 **Rakim**

23 The brotha that brought about that nation, he came to be known as Allah. He was a brotha
24 from Danville Virginia, but he moved to New York, and he became a father to a lot of
25 young Black males that didn't have a father. He was in the Nation of Islam and, he came
26 up through the ranks with Malcolm X, but he had a different understanding of who God
27 was. The Black Muslims were more religious with it, and he understood that the Black
28 man was indeed God. That's what he felt those Black youth needed to be taught in order
29 to be self-sufficient, to be survivors in a Caucasian dominated environment that did not
30 support them being positive and feeling good about themselves. Forward to me; that was

31 just music to my ears. It was perfect timing for me because I was about to graduate from
32 Bowie State University, still trying to figure out what I wanted do. I was a criminal
33 justice major, but I got myself into some trouble, and I had always planned to deepen my
34 understanding of the 5% Nation anyway. That being said, a close friend of mine had
35 gotten incarcerated. I took his younger brother under my wing and looked out for him. He
36 had a lot of friends in the community as well, so I let them come with me just like Allah
37 did. So, I'm mirroring his behavior. That's who I am as a person. I was raised around
38 men, I was raised by men, I was raised by coaches. I grew up in Prince George's County,
39 Maryland. We had a unique street, a unique block back in the day. You and your friends
40 would be outside. Parents would be outside to the wee hours of the morning, but there
41 were a lot of men who were a great influence on me. So everything just felt natural for
42 me when I got into The Nation of Gods and Earths. That's how I came into the counseling
43 thing, I started teaching. I'm a competitive individual, but, you know, I love teaching. I
44 love life.

45

46 **Rob Graham**

47 That's exactly what I was looking for. Who introduced you?

48

49 **Rakim**

50 A group of brothas that I used to hang with from Fort Washington Maryland. They were
51 into it, and I was like, man, this sounds good. So we would have ciphers in the backyard,
52 standing in a circle and building on the science about what life is about, you know, who
53 they are and how we need to carry ourselves.

54

55 **Rob Graham**

56 That's right, that's right. So is this a way of life that conflicts with religion, or is it
57 something you pair with religion, or does it like replace religion?

58

59 **Rakim**

60 I would say if anything it replaces religion. The Five Percenters will tell you all day long
61 we're not a religion, we don't do religion. It's a way of life as a culture as they would say.
62 They believe that religion is more of a crutch. They don't believe that there's an afterlife.
63 They believe there's an afterlife in the sense that your spirit lives on, but they don't
64 believe that there's some type of supernatural being that controls your ways and actions.

65

66 **Rob Graham**

67 Got it. Well let me tell you a little bit about me real quick. So this is a study in which I'm
68 looking to improve the lives of brothas, the educational experiences of brothas. I come
69 from Pasadena, California. I don't know if you're familiar with Pasadena. It's essentially
70 a suburb of LA. I had a typical upbringing. Mom, Dad, two sisters. Growing up, dad was
71 a police officer. He integrated the Pasadena police force, and he was really a Pan-
72 Africanist, spent a lot of his time when I was growing up back and forth between LA and
73 Nigeria, looking to support Nigeria's independence and uplift them in terms of like food

74 production and self-reliance. He had a real connection to Africa and was trying to give
75 that to me, but I was a fool and bit on all the media and all the narratives, so I wasn't
76 interested in going to Africa. You know I look back now and that's one of my bigger
77 mistakes. Dad was from Little Rock, Arkansas, military guy and then a police officer.
78 Mom, Chicago, a little bit wilder. Pro Black but not like Pan-Africanist, more like, hey I
79 grew up in Chicago, we had to look out for ourselves in our Black communities. So,
80 supporting African Americans. I was about 16 when dad passed away, so I've had the
81 influence of women in my life. You touched on it a little bit, but maybe tell me a little bit
82 about growing up, what your home life was like growing up, what your family looked
83 like, and how that contributed to your present state. You mentioned some of the
84 influences, but maybe you can get a little bit deeper into your younger self and give me a
85 sense of your development.

86

87 **Rakim**

88 Right, so like I said I grew up in a suburban community, and I had both parents.

89

90 **Rob Graham**

91 Was this Fort Washington?

92

93 **Rakim**

94 No, this is actually Hillcrest Heights, Maryland. We moved to Fort Washington my high
95 school years. Some people say Temple Hills, MD. I don't know if that's more familiar.

96

97 **Rob Graham**

98 Yeah.

99

100 **Rakim**

101 So yeah, grew up and had both my parents. Good people, real good people. Mother was
102 one of 12. My father was the only child of his father, which is kind of huge for me given
103 a story he told me about meeting him one time when he was called into the house. His
104 mother was like hey, this is your father. My father said, oh, okay. Went back outside and
105 played and never saw him again.

106

107 **Rob Graham**

108 Wow.

109

110 **Rakim**

111 It's funny, no more than three years ago I let it be known to him that I really appreciate
112 him hanging around and being there for me. Just in case he had any doubt that I did not
113 appreciate him hanging and doing all he could because he's an alcoholic. He still drinks
114 to this day, but he's always respectful, and whenever I needed him, he was there for me.

115

116 **Rob Graham**

117 That's right.

118

119 **Rakim**

120 He's just a really good guy. Post office. Dad's city, and my mom's country. St Mary's
121 County, farmers, grew tobacco, stuff like that. I would say between the two, in terms of
122 level of influence on my brother and me, it was just the two of us, my mother had the
123 greater influence on us. That influence on us was to be hustlers, to get money at a very
124 early age. I was never really into sports. I played sports when I went out playing football
125 and stuff with my friends, but my mom was like, don't forget that you need to get money.
126 So I remember, probably like fourth or fifth grade, having a paper route and turning that
127 route from like a 50 house paper route to like 100 house. So that was more so the focus
128 with her. It was always about what you gon' be, what you're going to do. You know this
129 is a good conversation because answering your question for me helps me realize that
130 everything that she taught us, what my mom gave me is like Black privilege; the tools,
131 the know-how, all the tricks to the trade. I pass that down to the youngsters that I come in
132 contact with. What are you going to do when you graduate high school? I'm always
133 asking, what's your plan? I think this scholarship will be good for you. That's what drives
134 me.

135

136 **Rob Graham**

137 Right.

138

139 **Rakim**

140 Some people don't get that at home, so I try to create that in the schoolhouse. Where you
141 going? You know you going to college, right? Everybody can go. You can go begin that
142 conversation now. So a lot of who I am as a professional school counselor comes from
143 her. Hey, make sure you major in something where you have a job at the end. She just
144 used to give us that all the time. It was just about making money, getting money. I don't
145 ever really remember asking them for a whole lot coming up, and they'll tell you like,
146 well, he didn't because that's how he was raised. I paid for my senior class trips, car
147 maintenance, insurance, all of those things. Like I said before, just coming up in a
148 community where there was a lot of Black males; a firefighter across the street from me,
149 a metro mechanic a police officer, my best friend's father was a firefighter and my father
150 was a mailman. They just had that influence on us.

151

152 **Rob Graham**

153 Can you tell me about your brother?

154

155 **Rakim**

156 Oh yeah. He's about five years older than me. You know, we're not super tight, but we
157 love each other, and we don't argue or fight like we did when we were younger.
158 Sometimes when stuff hits the fan, he will call me. And family events, I will go over to
159 his house if he has something. He's a workaholic. He just works, works, works, works,

160 works. That's something that him and I discussed recently. I'm like, man you working
161 too much, that overnight shift man, maybe you need to switch. Kids are growing up. We
162 really not that close, but you know we do love each other.

163

164 **Rob Graham**

165 *All of this is excellent. I appreciate your candor. You are a loving, competitive brotha*
166 *that is passionate about life and being a resource for our youth. You were raised in the*
167 *middle-class suburb of Hillcrest Heights in Prince George's County, MD on a block that*
168 *featured many positive Black male role models. You had both a mom who was country*
169 *and a dad who was city in the home growing up. Mom instilled a focus on hustling for the*
170 *money you need early, and dad provided an example of standing by your family*
171 *regardless of whatever hardships you encounter, a fact that is powerful given his*
172 *estrangement from his own father. Much of your worldview has root in your connection*
173 *to The Nation of Gods and Earths, which most people know as the 5% Nation. The focus*
174 *on shepherding Black youth and self-actualization complemented the values you got from*
175 *your parents, and it has shown up in your commitment to being an awesome dad to your*
176 *daughters, a resource to the youth you've come in contact with, and a meaningful*
177 *teacher/counselor. Talk about some other important relationships in your life that have*
178 *been meaningful, shaped you. Some people who have had a real effect on your*
179 *worldview.*

180

181 **Rakim**

182 You know I got some real good friends. The first I think about is my best man, someone
183 I've been friends with since high school. This conversation you and I are having, we talk
184 like this a lot.

185

186 **Rob Graham**

187 Mmm!

188

189 **Rakim**

190 We talk about life, talk about struggles, mostly women because you know how we do.

191

192 **Rob Graham**

193 Right

194

195 **Rakim**

196 About, you know, the struggle of our people and how that affects your relationship with
197 women. I got another close friend I met at Bowie State University. Those guys man,
198 when I'm going through it, I can lean on them. I know we can talk, and I get their
199 perspective on things, and then you know take it back and try it out; the same thing I
200 think I am for them as well. I'm just grateful that I got those brothas man because they
201 always look at growth and development. That's what we're all about. We travel a lot, and

202 wherever we go, our first night we have like this ritual where we go to this restaurant, and
203 we all sit down, and we just talk about how things are going.

204

205 **Rob Graham**

206 Yes. I forgot to ask you my number one question. I hope I haven't tainted it, but why did
207 you agree to help me?

208

209 **Rakim**

210 Eve asked me, and I told her yeah. We kind of played around, and I said, what am I
211 getting out of this? She said it was a brotha, and I said okay. I didn't really know what it
212 was about, but if I can look out for her in any way, shape, or form I will because I know
213 she would do it for me.

214

215 **Rob Graham**

216 That's right. Forgive me if I'm asking you questions that maybe are a little bit redundant,
217 but what about some values that guide your actions, help you make decisions or just, you
218 know, shape your world?

219

220 **Rakim**

221 So the thing that I think we got to think about is the backdrop that I'm not necessarily 5%
222 anymore, and actually they don't even like to be called 5% anymore. They like to be
223 called Nation of Gods and Earths because they felt like the 5% connotation had a
224 negative outlook on it, like a gang instead of a family of civilized individuals. And so, as
225 I got older, I broke bread with other people, kind of like, how Malcolm X in the nation
226 and made his pilgrimage. And then he said, I broke bread with people who were opposite
227 skin color as me with blue eyes, you know, all that sort of stuff. I kind of see myself like
228 that because I travel a lot, and I love people. I wasn't confined to just being in ciphers in
229 Northwest Washington DC. I got to know others, breaking bread with White folks,
230 having good conversations. Like, these people are struggling too! I just started to become
231 what I tell people I am now, eclectic. I will go to a church, I will go to a mosque. I will go
232 anywhere because first of all knowledge is infinite, and I can extract from all kinds of
233 things and implement that in my life. I just don't like to be one avenue, so I pull from a
234 lot of different things with my values. I got some stuff from Sun Tzu with the Art of War.
235 The movie The Godfather, is my favorite movie. A lot of the way I carry things, I got
236 from that movie. You know, a man that doesn't spend time with his family can never be a
237 real man. Keep your friends close, enemies closer. I mean, all that sort of stuff. I mean I
238 can't really give you like one particular thing because a lot of things go into the way I
239 carry myself. A lot of stuff from the Nation of Gods and Earths as well. Looking at
240 myself and conducting myself as a god. I still see myself as that individual who's a loving
241 person who nourishes the youth, nourishes anybody. A giving person, a loving person.

242

243 **Rob Graham**

244 Yeah. Okay. That's good stuff, and by the way I don't judge about finding values in
245 movies. You said The Godfather needs to be a rite of passage. I feel that same way about
246 the first three Star Wars movies, so you know, it is what it is.

247

248 **Rakim**

249 Man, let me touch on this if you don't mind.

250

251 **Rob Graham**

252 Un hun

253

254 **Rakim**

255 Talking about somebody who had influence, it wasn't until I heard this brotha at Bowie
256 State University that I got excited about knowledge of self and sharing that knowledge.
257 He would come to our afternoon study halls, and just get going. I'm like this brotha is
258 powerful man! He started breaking stuff down and talking about Africa. Y'all think
259 everybody in Africa is like monkeys! This is where you come from, your people. I was
260 just like, wow. Awesome. Let me just touch on the education. When I started teaching as
261 a young, strong Black male, I was a teacher before I was a counselor, that first class that I
262 had, they ran that teacher out the building. I wasn't an education major; it just came
263 naturally to me, but just interacting with those youth that couldn't sit still, had ADHD or
264 whatever, I was like, that's me! I don't think that I couldn't get the work, it was just the
265 way they would teach it back then. They didn't have individualized or differentiated
266 instruction. I got pulled into a reading group every once in a while, but other than that, it
267 was just lecture most of the time. Write notes, go home, study for the test.

268

269 **Rob Graham**

270 Right.

271

272 **Rakim**

273 My transition was exciting for me, and I loved it; feeling like I got something for myself
274 that I feel good about.

275

276 **Rob Graham**

277 You keep using this word transition. Can you speak to this transition? It sounds like an
278 awakening of sorts.

279

280 **Rakim**

281 When I graduated in criminal justice, I wanted to be an FBI agent, I wanted to be this cop
282 like Tubbs and Crockett with the women. But then the brothas of the 5% Nation started
283 talking about educating the babies and the students and the knowledge of yourself and
284 just asking me all these questions. That transition I think was very important. I think it
285 actually saved my life to a certain extent. To be honest I ate differently back then. You

286 wouldn't think so now, but I became a vegetarian. I was into martial arts. That was a good
287 time in my life, working out all the time with Muslim brothas, martial arts tournaments.
288

289 **Rob Graham**

290 So a bit of a personal spiritual awakening, an individual renaissance of sorts?
291

292 **Rakim**

293 Exactly, exactly. Yeah, so that's why.
294

295 **Rob Graham**

296 Ok, ok, ok. Is there anything you think that's key to knowing who you are? Something
297 that's important for people to know about you as they as they enter a relationship with
298 you.
299

300 **Rakim**

301 So, yeah. I'm a competitive individual. Love hard. Yeah, that's all I could think of right
302 now.
303

304 **Rob Graham**

305 And that translates to, you know, I want to be as absolutely respectful as possible. Tell
306 me a little bit about your experience as a dad.
307

308 **Rakim**

309 Oh man, I love my girls. So, when I met my wife, she already had my daughter, and we
310 changed her name together. But the first time I went over there, I hadn't really interacted
311 with her, and she started calling me Dad. So that's a whole nother conversation, but I'm
312 dealing with a woman who really probably wanted that male figure around for her and for
313 her child. At that point in time I was ready, you know like, hey, we're gonna do this. Let's
314 do it. Hey, I'll take that responsibility because you got to figure, I'm 5% anyway; that's
315 what we do.
316

317 **Rob Graham**

318 That's right.
319

320 **Rakim**

321 Together we had our own, my second daughter, and I definitely embraced that situation,
322 you know my first seed, talking to her in the stomach. We do a three-way chat at least
323 two or three times a week. They know me and their mother don't really get along. I just
324 tolerate her because I have to because she is their mother, and I don't want to see nothing
325 bad happen to her. Me and the girls get along really, really well. You know I try to take
326 them on daddy-daughter vacations. It's really important to me that we spend time
327 together. They're the reason for the season.
328

329 **Rob Graham**

330 That's right, that's a beautiful thing. I forgot to ask you, I'm 44. How old are you?

331

332 **Rakim**

333 45. I'll be 46 next month.

334

335 **Rob Graham**

336 So we're peers, we share our worldview and all that good stuff. I don't want to wear you
337 out. I think that was good. *You agreed to help me out of respect for your friendship with*
338 *Eve, who recruited you on my behalf. I'll certainly support her any way I can moving*
339 *forward. In addition to your parents, brother, and children, you have other relationships*
340 *that you appreciate. You've got your best friend who you've known since high school,*
341 *and the reflective activity we're involved in here is similar to the kind of conversations*
342 *you guys have all the time. You also have a group of brothas that you hang and travel*
343 *with that you process the world with and that you are grateful for. Now you've created*
344 *some distance in your life from The Nation of Gods and Earths and religions, and have*
345 *become spiritually and philosophically eclectic. Having traveled and broken bread with*
346 *folks of many stripes, you draw knowledge of self and the world from everything from*
347 *churches, mosques, and even films like the Godfather and the philosophy of Sun Tzu.*
348 *Primarily, you are in the dad business.* I have a general sense of who you are, and I'll
349 keep picking up clues as we have these other conversations. I appreciate you.

350

351

352 **Professional Experience Narrative**

353 **Rob Graham**

354 Alright. I think I just dive in if that's ok with you.

355

356 **Rakim**

357 Yep.

358

359 **Rob Graham**

360 Okay. So today I'm interested in hearing about your professional life, work experience,
361 and maybe a little bit of training, about that. So how did you get into school counseling?

362

363 **Rakim**

364 Like I mentioned before, being introduced to the Nation of Gods and Earths gave me a
365 kind of a path. This is something that I think that I could enjoy, teaching and counseling
366 youth. And so from there, it started off with the teaching. Actually, I started off
367 counseling in group homes, bachelor degree level counseling work. I started off at Boys
368 Town of Washington. I would call it a low level counselor, just someone who made sure
369 that the youth ate, you know, maintained order, stuff like that. We would give them
370 points if they displayed certain behaviors throughout the day, take them on trips to
371 cultural events and stuff like that. But that wasn't making quite enough money. I went to

372 Bowie State's homecoming, met with a friend of mine, and she said that she was
373 teaching. I said, you know what, I've been thinking about that. I changed my name; my
374 name means teacher. I think I could enjoy that. She said, we have a first grade position
375 open in my school; come on in and meet my principal. I came down and met the
376 principal, and we had a conversation. I just felt like from that point forward everything
377 just flowed. She actually brought me on like three months later to teach a first grade
378 class. As soon as I walked in, it just felt natural, like this is me. This is my career, my
379 destiny. Taught DC Public Schools for a number of years and then wanted something
380 different. So that's when I went to pursue my masters in counseling. I got a job in Prince
381 George's County Public Schools doing elementary again. I did that for about three four
382 years, moved on to high school, and that's where I've been ever since.

383

384 **Rob Graham**

385 Is high school your preferred spot?

386

387 **Rakim**

388 You know to be honest with you, I think I could do all three. You can put me anywhere.
389 Now I'm thinking maybe in a few years I could go down to middle since I've done
390 elementary. At the time I wanted to coach football; that's why I said I wanted to make the
391 transition from elementary to high. So when I got up there, got a chance to coach with
392 one of the best coaches in this area. I'm actually going to see him tonight. You gotta
393 figure when I was in a group home, I dealt with high schoolers anyway. I felt like the
394 fruit of my labor would have been more recognized at the high school level and maybe in
395 the elementary, but the plan was to plant the seeds down there. But at the high school
396 man, I'm the one crying at the graduations and stuff like that, all the work that we put in
397 with these youths. I've pretty much worked in the elementary school in the same
398 community, and I've worked in two high schools, so I got a chance to see some of my
399 students from elementary come on up to me, and just to see that growth man, it's been a
400 joy to be able to work with those kids.

401

402 **Rob Graham**

403 Wow, that's a great perspective. I'm developing a sense that your students are lucky to
404 have you. *You got into counseling by way of working as a bachelor's degree level*
405 *counselor in a group home, with The Nation of Gods and Earths behind your mindset and*
406 *commitment to working with youth. Your actual entre into public schools came sort of*
407 *serendipitously via a conversation with a former classmate at Bowie State's homecoming.*
408 *A conversation about teaching led to a conversation with her principal, which set you on*
409 *your course. Walking into the classroom where you taught for the first time felt natural to*
410 *you, like the fulfilling of your destiny.* Tell me about the school where you work. Tell me
411 about the neighborhood that's surrounding the school, you know the context. Tell me
412 about the space, the leadership that sort of stuff.

413

414 **Rakim**

415 Right, so we just recently got into a transitioning from one principal to another. I work at
416 a high school in Temple Hills, MD. Temple Hills is a community that I would say is of
417 middle, maybe low-middle class families. We have a lot of students in our school who
418 come from single parent households. A lot of our youth are being raised by mom, which
419 was surprising to me. We broke it down at the beginning of the year, but a lot of single
420 parent households, a lot of families with students who would be first time college
421 students if they make that choice. We have a decent Hispanic population. Maybe about
422 20% of our population is Hispanic Salvadoran. Some Colombia and Peru maybe, but
423 mostly El Salvador. That's the makeup of that population. So we have a new principal,
424 and he's young. He comes from middle school, so he knows a lot of the students because
425 we get a share from the school that he was previously at. He's young and energetic, and
426 he's still learning. I like his leadership style, but I don't know if you want me to get into
427 that.

428

429 **Rob Graham**

430 Sure. Yep, sure.

431

432 **Rakim**

433 Yeah, kind of like his leadership style. He's young, so he's more laid back, doesn't sweat
434 you a lot. He's like, do your job man, and everything will be okay. I don't really know
435 how he deals with the teachers, but I get the impression that he knows curriculum and
436 instruction. He does hold them accountable. As far as counselors are concerned, we pretty
437 much run the ship back there. I mean we're okay. If anything needs to be done through
438 us, he will come to us. He's comfortable asking us what needs to be done. I am the chair
439 of the department this year, didn't want it. It got bestowed upon me because Eve left. He's
440 removed a lot of the students that we're providing behavioral problems. Things have been
441 more relaxed than they had been in previous years under the old administration. She was
442 more laissez faire. She was passionate; she loved the kids and everything, but it just
443 wasn't enough of that discipline that needed to be in place, and a lot of teachers that she
444 brought into the building weren't very strong. I will say the kids feel probably a little safer
445 now, and he is getting some teachers that know curriculum and instruction. What else can
446 I say about students? I just feel like a lot of them don't have a plan, and that's what I try to
447 focus on. I sit down with them. What are your career aspirations? I can't help you if you
448 don't tell me what it is that you're trying to do.

449

450 **Rob Graham**

451 Right.

452

453 **Rakim**

454 I just break down that your career should be something that you are passionate about,
455 something that you enjoy, something that you love. Let's start there. I can't give you all
456 that I would like to give you in terms of your schedule, but whatever we have in the
457 building, I can support that. I give them a look into my mind as to who I am, how I want

458 to interact with them, and how I'm going to get them possibly to the goals and the dreams
459 that they aspire to.

460

461 **Rob Graham**

462 *Okay, so you work at a high school in Temple Hills, MD that is around 20%*
463 *Hispanic/Latinx in a district that is largely Black. The population features many students*
464 *that are being raised in single parent households. You've got a new principal that is*
465 *developing in his role. You feel hopeful about things under his leadership given his*
466 *respectful leadership style, curriculum and instruction acumen, disciplinary approach to*
467 *students, and purposeful hiring of new, potentially effective teachers. This hope is*
468 *necessary in part because you feel like many of your students don't have plans for their*
469 *futures. Do you feel like you guys offer sufficient AP courses or the more college prep*
470 *type stuff like IB? Do you feel like you have sufficient stuff like that for students who are*
471 *definitely college bound and a little bit clearer about what they want to do?*

472

473 **Rakim**

474 So we have an IB program now, but that program is about to go away. Whoever the high
475 rep is said that not enough students are coming through. In terms of AP and those level
476 courses, that's all nice and well, but I'm starting to think that the kids we have are just so
477 low academically. Like we had an ROTC program, and that's no longer in the building
478 because one of the counselors said nobody signed up for it. So, let's just go back to the
479 coursework that you just asked me about. I'm starting to think that our kids are extremely
480 low. So when they look at the numbers they say hey, we only got this many kids that will
481 even qualify. You know, even our IB, they talk a lot about them being extremely low, not
482 being able to write passages, clear passages, well thought out ideas and so forth, I mean
483 grammar areas, like simple stuff. With that being said, I don't necessarily know if we are
484 at the point right now where we can even have those courses and have enough students to
485 be able to sell them. We got to kind of build that up. I hope things change with the
486 principal bringing in new teachers. I hear from the students a lot, and they know what
487 good instruction means. They know when they go into a classroom and the kids are all
488 over the place and the teachers are talking about nothing. I think the kids react
489 accordingly. You go into the classroom of one of our strong teachers, and students know
490 what to expect from her. They don't come in her classroom late. They come in her
491 classroom with a book bag, they get in there before the bell, sit down, and they get to
492 work. They love her. We do have a lot of kids that have been taking dual enrollment.

493

494 **Rob Graham**

495 So that's taking classes at like PG County Community College?

496

497 **Rakim**

498 Exactly right. That's what I believe is going to be the new direction of those AP classes.
499 Kids that have graduated tell me, I wish I would have had dual enrollment when I was
500 there.

501 **Rob Graham**

502 Okay. What are your responsibilities at work?

503

504 **Rakim**

505 To prepare the students to be college and career ready. Of course, making sure that they
506 have the appropriate credits to graduate. I'm making sure that they have the core classes
507 that are needed, the community service hours, all the testing, making sure they have
508 everything to graduate. That's what this thing is if you ask me. I feel like my task is to tap
509 into the student, and figure out what their destiny is, so you're sort of personalizing your
510 job description. For me it's not about just graduating students. You can tell the difference
511 between somebody that just does their job and says, hey, I want to make sure you got the
512 credits to graduate, that's all I'm supposed to. And then you have somebody that says, I'm
513 supposed to do that but at the same time, I want to help this person get to where they're
514 trying to go. I think that's the more meaningful part of the work.

515

516 **Rob Graham**

517 If you think that other piece is the most important work, why do you think that's not your
518 job description?

519

520 **Rakim**

521 What do you mean?

522

523 **Rob Graham**

524 You're saying that really you need to be thinking about those students' individual
525 destinies and goals. That's the most important part, but that is not necessarily part of the
526 job description.

527

528 **Rakim**

529 The higher ups constantly pound us about making sure that the students get the correct
530 credits, making sure that they graduate with like everything. If not, then we're on the five
531 o'clock news.

532

533 **Rob Graham**

534 Right. I mean, it happens every year.

535

536 **Rakim**

537 And I understand that. I'm not saying that's not important. I know that to get them across
538 the stage, we got to do that part. But for me, it's not just about getting them across the
539 stage; it's also getting them across the street stage with a plan, with direction. You know
540 you'll ask them, what are you going to do? I don't know. That tells me that somebody is
541 not putting in work with you, sitting down with you saying hey, this is what's going on.
542 Have you done an interest inventory with Naviance? Have you sat down with your

543 parents and talked about how you want to play for college and so forth? That's what I
544 think separates what I call an effective counselor from an outstanding one.

545

546 **Rob Graham**

547 What's your day to day look like? What does the space look like?

548

549 **Rakim**

550 So, come in during the day. Do my emails, respond back to parents, telephone calls. I
551 usually get students independent of what I got going on. I usually try to funnel my
552 students to my office for open hours during their lunch time. I take our kids down in the
553 morning time to do senior contracts. Before you come into the building you have the
554 front office, and if you keep walking to the back, you have the counseling suite. We
555 actually just changed things around back there. Students used to be able to walk back
556 there and just walk up on a counselor, but after I got there they provided a secretary for
557 us in the second year, so she's kind of a buffer between us and the students. We have that
558 door shut off now, so they have to have a pass that they come before lunch. I usually take
559 my lunch at one o'clock, till about 1: 30. At 3 I'm kind of tightening up my desk, getting
560 cleaned up, just kind of wrapping up for the day.

561

562 **Rob Graham**

563 How's your team organized?

564

565 **Rakim**

566 So, I think we all get along, for the most part.

567

568 **Rob Graham**

569 You sound like you were a little bit reluctant about that leadership role. Why the
570 reluctance?

571

572 **Rakim**

573 It's a good question. It was kind of selfish to a certain extent. I kind of just want to be
574 focused on my class. I have a good administrator that I work with. We kind of love our
575 class, and that's what I focus on. When you become a chair, it's like they pull you into
576 these meetings about curriculum and instruction, nothing related to counseling. It's like I
577 gotta sit up in meetings when something needs to be signed off on or something needs to
578 be taken care of immediately. So I think for most people, it's like they don't want the
579 added responsibility, they don't feel like the money is worth it, they just don't want the
580 aggravation. Our caseloads are enough.

581

582 **Rob Graham**

583 Where are you guys in relationship to the industry suggested student to counselor ratio?

584

585 **Rakim**

586 We were right there. I think we're asked to be at 250. Last time I looked we were at
587 around 220 or something. We got low enrollment, so we are right there. The ninth grade
588 counselor may have more; she may have 300.
589

590 **Rob Graham**

591 To me the number's a little bit arbitrary. Do you feel like that's a good workable number,
592 allowing you to sort of meet your goals?
593

594 **Rakim**

595 I think so. I've had 250 before, and I think that was quite manageable. I got 200 now. I
596 mean, yeah, compared to some of the numbers I've heard other people tell me. We go
597 north of the county, you get a lot of big numbers, some 400 to 1.
598

599 **Rob Graham**

600 So, if you got 400 students, you're just doing computer work. You don't have time to talk.
601

602 **Rakim**

603 Right. I would imagine yeah because in a public high school you know you're chasing
604 kids, trying to figure out where they're at. There is a lot of paperwork if they're not
605 coming. Where are they? What have you done to reach out to them? And so forth. and
606 then by the time you finish that, you got to do some more paperwork. Report cards just
607 came out. It's always the gathering of data, and it's always putting interventions in place.
608 Then you got to monitor those interventions and so forth. So a lot of that stuff is very
609 time consuming. I learned that when I did my internship through Trinity University. That
610 professor wanted us to do a lot of counseling, and all of us that were in high schools,
611 were like, Sir, that's not the reality. I mean they had us doing credit checks, credit
612 evaluations, meeting with students and doing schedules. You know schedules take up
613 about a whole month. Once you get in September, you're not done with schedules until
614 October 15th.
615

616 **Rob Graham**

617 If you had it your way, you would be doing the counseling piece, and that other stuff
618 would be handled through some other channel?
619

620 **Rakim**

621 I would keep probably the coursework. I think that's part of what we do in high school,
622 part of the college and career ready conversation. So I would keep the scheduling. The
623 504 stuff I should be aware of, but I think somebody else can handle that.
624

625 **Rob Graham**

626 What's 504, just to be clear?
627
628

629 **Rakim**

630 That's the disability act.

631

632 **Rob Graham**

633 Oh, you mean like IEP?

634

635 **Rakim**

636 No, it's different. The 504 is a plan that prohibits discrimination against someone who
637 may have a disability, and that disability has to significantly impact the child's learning.
638 I'll give you an example, ADHD. That's probably the number one reason students in
639 Prince George's County have 504 plans. What happens is the counselor would have a
640 meeting with all parties involved, and we sit down, and we talk about interventions that
641 would lend support to the students. My daughter actually has one. It can be extra time for
642 testing, preferential seating, all those sorts of things. That's all put into a plan, all the
643 teachers have to sign off on it, and if they don't, then it is actually a legal federal
644 document where people can be held accountable.

645

646 **Rob Graham**

647 Okay. I got a sense, but what sort of intentional stuff do you do to prepare your students
648 for college?

649

650 **Rakim**

651 Yeah, so it starts with the course requests. They are actually one of the first things that I
652 do when I come in. When I have students come in, I give them what's called an individual
653 learning plan, ILP. I keep a binder for every student that I have. Who they are, where
654 they want to go, how they're doing, likes, dislikes and all of that. I tell them, remember
655 you all filled out the ILP for me. That's the beginning of the conversation for me, that's
656 where it all starts.

657

658 **Rob Graham**

659 And when do you have this is a conversation? At the beginning of the school year 11th
660 grade, or is this happening before then, or?

661

662 **Rakim**

663 That's the first thing. I take all that and put them in a binder, so when a student comes
664 down, I can refer back to their file. From those documents, I'm able to do career days, I'm
665 able to do college tours. Every year I do a college tour, so ninth grade. I found that most
666 of the students wanted to go to Bowie and Maryland, so we went there and Morgan State.
667 From that, I did my career days and the college tours, and that's how when I get emails, I
668 find out about special programs, ie. the police explorers program. I think that's the
669 meaningful part of the work. What irks the hell out of me is some people are just doing a
670 job, just making sure that they have the credits. Talking about the intentional things that I
671 do, those are some. I just tried to do a trip to Norfolk and ODU with my students, so they

672 can go in and at least hear the language of what these college admissions are asking. I
673 also send home a weekly newsletter. I think I'm the only counselor that does that.

674

675 **Rob Graham**

676 Wow, I just think that's impressive.

677

678 **Rakim**

679 It actually is. I call it the PSC, Public School Counseling. I send one out to my parents
680 every week, just giving them updates of what's going on, but then also I ask the
681 questions. Have you sat down and talked about how you're gonna pay for college? Is
682 your child registered with College Board? Do you know what your child's plan means?
683 You know stuff like that. I'm always feeding the parents and students. So, those are some
684 of the intentional things that I do as well. I tell them we should be having fun next year.
685 we're grinding this year, we're putting in this work, we're taking the SAT in March.
686 Twelfth grade you're filling out scholarships, we're having fun, everybody knows where
687 they're going. I'm excited about that. They're excited about that. Families are excited. I
688 know we got everything that we need to do out of the way. We're walking across the
689 stage.

690

691 **Rob Graham**

692 Boom. You make it sound easy! Or logical or reasonable. That plan thing that you do
693 where you give them that questionnaire, and then you keep referring back to it. Is that
694 your idea, your creation?

695

696 **Rakim**

697 That was in elementary. The county came out with a thing where all students had to do an
698 ILP. So, you know, people complained about it. I don't have time for that. So, they cut it
699 back to where they only had to do it like first grade, eighth grade, and tenth grade.
700 Eventually I just didn't hear about it anymore, but I kept it.

701

702 **Rob Graham**

703 It sounds great. I mean it sounds reasonable and intuitive if you're gonna counsel
704 students, and you need to know what they're working with and where they trying to go.
705 That just seems like an intuitive step to me. Okay. Do you feel like your master's program
706 prepared you, equipped you to do what you need to do?

707

708 **Rakim**

709 Yes and no. Yes, because there was one professor that worked the hell out of you. She
710 gave me so much, but she also set a tone. If you can handle that, you can handle the
711 voluminous work that you're going to have especially as a high school counselor. There's
712 a lot of paperwork, so that's why I would say yes. I got prepared in that aspect where I
713 can handle a lot of the paperwork, because it can be frustrating for some. A lot of people
714 come to high school, and they get the hell out of it, and they go back down. On the other

715 hand, there was a lot of counseling. That's why I say no because I'm not doing that much
716 counseling. School Counseling techniques, those courses that we took; I would love to be
717 able to activate some of that stuff, but I just don't really get the time. I could probably
718 force it in there to do a group like two years ago with my Hispanic or Latino population,
719 trying to help them with their transition to post high school. It's nice to speak to other
720 counselors or other jurisdictions. They can do more counseling. I think we'll get there,
721 especially with a lot more focus nowadays on mental health and disasters going on. I
722 think that people are paying more attention, so hopefully we'll get where counselors can
723 spend more time dealing with those types of things, doing groups and doing individuals.
724

725 **Rob Graham**

726 *Okay, so I'm learning a lot here. Your school has an IB program that is going away and*
727 *an underdeveloped AP situation, but that is not completely problematic to you because*
728 *you feel the student population is not where it needs to be academically in order to take*
729 *advantage of those opportunities. You describe your duties as getting students college*
730 *and career ready while in the context of a push to get them graduated. You choose to go*
731 *beyond the basics and into understanding individual student destinies and supporting*
732 *those. This is a personalization of the job description of sorts. You're the leader of the*
733 *counseling department now, though reluctantly as you and the other counselors have full*
734 *"plates" already. You find that the work would be manageable if your school made some*
735 *advancements in terms of time-saving technology like a system that generates student*
736 *records instead of the current practice of creating them by hand. You do a host of college*
737 *preparation things like college trips, career and college nights, and a weekly newsletter*
738 *for families, but at the same time there isn't enough student participation and interest in*
739 *those things, which is a source of frustration for you. Your master's program prepared*
740 *you for the rigorous paperwork load you have to manage, but much of the content didn't*
741 *prepare you for the realities of such time constrained work. Is there anything I should*
742 *know about your experience at work if I'm trying to understand your profession and your*
743 *context you as a counselor? And really, you know my focus is the college preparation*
744 *piece. Is there anything I should know that I haven't really explored?*
745

746 **Rakim**

747 You know, I'm still trying to figure it out with our population. I think I touched on it
748 earlier, but maybe the students just don't feel like they're ready. Academically, you know
749 a lot of students may be scared of the real world. You know, we do college fairs, and
750 they're just not responded to well, they're not taking the SAT, they're not doing a lot of
751 these things. I'm just trying to really still figure that out. So, speaking with you has been
752 kind of helpful. I will say this, I want to go back now and kind of go at this like a
753 scientist.
754

755 **Rob Graham**

756 Man, you read my mind. This sounds like research, a self-study of sorts, like a view into
757 your own context; this is exactly what I was thinking. It's a beautiful research project, it's

758 a beautiful problem. You're in the right position, right mindset to do what sounds like
759 beautiful research.

760

761 **Rakim**

762 Yeah, I gotta figure it out. I have to figure this out because I want to be able to serve that
763 population. We've got all these high schools right next door to each other, but the
764 mindsets are so different. Now I know we got dynamite kids, right. I'm just trying to
765 crack this thing, so I can better serve the students because this frustrating. You know,
766 especially after I just put all this work together for this college tour, and I couldn't get as
767 many as I wanted to go over. In fact, we decided in our counseling department that we're
768 not having a college and career fair this year. Last year when the college reps came, they
769 were like, your kids were not prepared, they didn't know what they wanted to do. Your
770 food was great, but your kids don't know what they want to do. This is pretty much a
771 waste of time. Hopefully the answer is getting some teachers in there that can better equip
772 the students, so they feel more confident, go on with their lives doing what they want to
773 do.

774

775 **Rob Graham**

776 Man, you're gonna have me thinking about that problem, dreaming about that problem. It
777 comes from such a good place, and it's so organic, and it needs to be solved. If you find
778 yourself starting the project, let me know. Maybe I can help you. Maybe we wrap this at
779 this good point. I appreciate you.

780 **Connecting Personal and Professional**

781

782 **Rob Graham**

783 Just to let you know, these conversations have been a little bit life changing for me. I've
784 been thinking about something you said, some advice from one of your mentors or
785 brothas; always think about your role in something.

786

787 **Rakim**

788 Oh, yeah, my friend.

789

790 **Rob Graham**

791 Man, that one resonated with me. I've been having a little bit of a debate with one of my
792 buddies, and it just kind of made me look at my position and rethink my role in it, how I
793 can make it better. The power of these conversations is already there.

794

795 **Rakim**

796 Yeah, me too man. I've been thinking about some of the things. I like stuff like this kind
797 of self-reflection, kind of forces you to look at yourself man, especially for someone who
798 doesn't really have a religion. You know, when I told you I'm more eclectic, some would
799 say, no, you gotta have something that you can pull from spirituality. I say, conversations

800 like this kind of help me keep a balance in my life. You know, self-checking, looking at
801 myself and saying, what's your purpose?

802

803 **Rob Graham**

804 That's right.

805

806 **Rakim**

807 That's why I appreciate these conversations as well.

808

809 **Rob Graham**

810 Yeah, no doubt, gratitude all the way around. I'm gonna jump in here with a little bit of
811 this business then.

812

813 **Rakim**

814 Okay.

815

816 **Rob Graham**

817 Are you able to track your former students after they graduate, particularly the college-
818 bound ones?

819

820 **Rakim**

821 I actually take a page out of a book from one of my former co-workers. She said she
822 doesn't become friends with her students on Facebook or social media until after they
823 graduate. I have some that try, but I wait till after they graduate, and then I become
824 friends with them. *I'm able to keep track of some graduates from the 2017 class because I*
825 *told them to develop a Twitter page for alumni to celebrate their successes and keep in*
826 *touch.* I tell them congratulations to all the positive stuff.

827

828 **Rob Graham**

829 I really want to know if you're able to use like, information from some of your graduates
830 to an end, to inform your work.

831

832 **Rakim**

833 Yeah, that would be awesome.

834

835 **Rob Graham**

836 Right? There's this trend happening in school counseling where folks are really wanting
837 to know what happens to their students after they're gone in order to inform the work, and
838 folks are tracking the numbers. But what's missing is the experiential information.
839 They're not hearing about people's first year on campus, how that's gone, how prepared
840 they felt, whether or not the school was a good match for them, that kind of stuff. So I
841 was just kind of wondering if you were able to, if your school or your district was
842 tracking either the numbers or the experiential data or ?

843 **Rakim**

844 That's something that I will have to talk to our specialists about, seeing how we could put
845 that together. I would definitely love to do something like that. Actually in 2018 I did call
846 all my students back for an alumni day to assist the graduating seniors in the 2018 class
847 with any advice that they may have. Overwhelming turnout! A whole bunch of alumni
848 came up. I mean, we had a lady came that graduated in like the 60's. So they did have
849 some interesting feedback to give to the students. It's something that I could definitely
850 talk to our specialist about. I definitely want to know whether we're making a difference.
851 What can I do better?

852

853 **Rob Graham**

854 I mean, informally, when you said alumni Twitter, you know, I just had to write that
855 down. I mean, that's a brilliant idea, a way to go around some of the ticker tape or some
856 of the red tape. I like this idea of alumni Twitter for some kind of specific purpose.
857 There's some opportunity there. Maybe you've already answered this. What questions do
858 you have about your and other African American brothas first year of college? Anything
859 you really want to know about or something that can help you with some of your decision
860 making?

861

862 **Rakim**

863 Oh, I guess one question will be how, I think you just touched on it, how well did you
864 adjust? You know, being in your first year of college socially. You can break that down
865 so many ways. It was a PWI; how well did you adjust? HBCU? How was your
866 adjustment socially? Academically? Was the work a little bit more rigorous for you? Did
867 you find yourself having to go get assistance by way of the lab? What were some of the
868 things that they highlighted that you were making mistakes with? Those would be some
869 of the questions that I would ask.

870

871 **Rob Graham**

872 And what worked?

873

874 **Rakim**

875 Yeah

876

877 **Rob Graham**

878 What should we have listened to Mr. Rakim about more? Which part of what Mr. Rakim
879 was telling us was right on the money that we didn't key in on.

880

881 **Rakim**

882 Right.

883

884 **Rob Graham**

885 Okay, okay.

886 **Rakim**

887 Yeah, I definitely agree with that. One of the things that one of my students talked about
888 is AP English. A lot of students try to get out, look for an outlet, have their parents come
889 up to me and everything. I say, look, you want to go to college? These courses are
890 supposed to prepare you for that. She came back for my alumni day, and that's one of the
891 things that she spoke about to the seniors that are graduating. She said, I am so glad I
892 stayed in there. She says when I got there it was difficult, but because she stayed in AP
893 English, she was able to handle it. She was able to pull from some of the rigor from that
894 course to handle it.

895

896 **Rob Graham**

897 That's it. The literature says, you need at least one AP class or something with equivalent
898 rigor, you know what I mean? In order to be for real equipped for this next level. You
899 know, that's why IB is important or AP or something.

900

901 **Rakim**

902 Let me just share this with you real quick, something I talked about with my principal
903 today. I think that AP stuff might be kind of phased out a little bit. As dual enrollment
904 continues, I think more students are going to really kind of embrace that; that's just my
905 my opinion. It cuts out the middleman; they can go straight to college credit. Some
906 former students wished they'd have known about dual enrollment

907

908 **Rob Graham**

909 That's great, and dual enrollment can check multiple boxes for our people. Save us some
910 money. Save us some time, and play that role of preparing them for the rigor that's
911 coming. All those boxes checked.

912

913 **Rakim**

914 Yep.

915

916 **Rob Graham**

917 *Some former students wished they'd have known about dual enrollment, which makes*
918 *sense as a solution for preparing certain students for the rigors of college work in the*
919 *midst of an overall population that's not necessarily ready for IB and AP. In terms of*
920 *accessing experiential info from former students, you've gotten feedback via an alumni*
921 *Twitter page, informal interaction with alumni in the community, and a well-attended*
922 *alumni night, but your school and district have yet to formalize anything. You'd welcome*
923 *something more programmatic in that regard in order to inform your work. You would be*
924 *keen to understand how brothas have adjusted to college in social and academic terms.*
925 What do your students need to know about college going? Something maybe they don't
926 see the importance of yet or that you keep trying tell them that's not clicking or
927 registering?

928

929 **Rakim**

930 I think the first thing is that everybody can go. I just went Friday to Montgomery College
931 and heard about a lot of scholarships and things of that nature, the Promise Scholarship,
932 all these grants and stuff. I just think it's incumbent upon the counselor to know these
933 things because, like I said before, we are the ones that should know all this information
934 about scholarships and grants and so forth, and we should be bringing it to our students. I
935 just think the kids need to know, hey, there's opportunity out there for you. Forget what
936 you may have heard, especially our Hispanic/Latino population. I'm taking them on a
937 college tour on Wednesday, 30 or 35 students. Before we get there, I'm going to speak to
938 them all personally, hey, there's opportunity out there for you as well. I think a lot of our
939 students probably view it as a rich man's or rich family's kind of thing. Just off the top of
940 my head right now, I think a lot of that might be a financial thing, where a lot of them are
941 saying, hey, you know, I can't afford that. They need to know about some of the
942 programs and availability of money, especially for unaccompanied youth, for foster care
943 youth. There's opportunities, they just gotta believe and tap into their counselor. One of
944 the things that I always communicate to them is I wasn't a dynamite student. And I say,
945 especially for you young men, it clicked for me when I got to college, and I graduated.
946 You know, I was retained in eighth grade. So I make sure I just give that to them. And for
947 a lot of them, let's start off a little slowly. Especially with males in high school, we're just
948 going through the motions a lot. But when we get closer to the prize, we start to see a
949 little more clearly.

950

951 **Rob Graham**

952 *So, you want your students to understand that everyone can go to college; it's not just for*
953 *dynamite students or rich families. You also believe it is counselors' charge to be aware*
954 *of scholarships, monies, and programs that make college doable and to pass that*
955 *information along to students and families.* Your district leadership and stakeholders in
956 general, what do they need to know about your work and your profession?

957

958 **Rakim**

959 Well the district needs to know and understand that we are overwhelmed, we got a lot on
960 our plate. The district needs to step it up in terms of just some of the little things, the
961 programs that we have in place. Let's just start with technology. When we get a new
962 student within the building, we create a transcript for them. I heard the other districts
963 don't even do that. A student comes in, and there's a computer program that already has
964 everything figured out for you. Some of that stuff needs to be taken away, because a lot
965 of these youth are struggling socially. You got these mass shootings and so forth. We
966 need to spend more time with counseling. I would love to have more time with that, but
967 we're still counting credits. We're still tallying up each class on the back of a card every
968 year. That takes a whole lot of time, and sometimes you make mistakes. We're about to
969 shut down our department soon, taking off like a whole week to just count credits. You
970 know, that's

971

972 **Rob Graham**
 973 That's absurd, actually.
 974
 975 **Rakim**
 976 Especially during this time of year when some of our kids are really going through it.
 977 People need to understand that Christmas, Thanksgiving time when families are together,
 978 this is the most sensitive time for our youth.
 979
 980 **Rob Graham**
 981 Right
 982
 983 **Rakim**
 984 A lot of them have parents that are not home, that are deceased, or what have you. They
 985 are going through it. It's a joyous time for some, but it is an absolutely awful time for a
 986 lot of other people.
 987
 988 **Rob Graham**
 989 I definitely don't want any details or specifics, but do you feel like you're compensated
 990 appropriately?
 991
 992 **Rakim**
 993 I would say yes, and that's only because I worked group home before I got there, so they
 994 gave me all my years from a group home.
 995
 996 **Rob Graham**
 997 Oh!
 998
 999 **Rakim**
 1000 I started off with a very good level, so I got more than probably most people would have.
 1001
 1002 **Rob Graham**
 1003 What are your long term professional goals for yourself?
 1004
 1005 **Rakim**
 1006 I like where I'm at. I really do. I like working with the high school students, I'm good at
 1007 this point. This is my career. Flirting with the idea of maybe doing middle school for a
 1008 few years. They have another position in Prince George's County called PPW's, which is
 1009 pupil personnel worker. They mostly work with the attendance, and they're supposed to
 1010 have been like social workers, but they don't do no dag gon counseling either. Maybe
 1011 doing something like that to get a change of pace. I'm athletic as well, so just thinking
 1012 about maybe becoming an athletic director if the principal will allow me, and then I can
 1013 really work that college and career piece through that. I could really work that position;
 1014 that's the dream position for me right there.

1015 **Rob Graham**
 1016 Okay, there we go. Changing subjects a bit here. My org provides academic advising for
 1017 freshmen brothas, and what I do is either the advising, or I find somebody on campus to
 1018 do it. I'm not trying to toot our own horn at all, but if it weren't for us, they'd probably get
 1019 advising once a year.
 1020
 1021 **Rakim**
 1022 Wow
 1023
 1024 **Rob Graham**
 1025 And that's only for their initial schedules. I just want to throw that out there in case it
 1026 helps you frame or see what's happening on your side differently. You can imagine one
 1027 of your students coming to our campus and not getting any advising,
 1028
 1029 **Rakim**
 1030 Right, yeah
 1031
 1032 **Rob Graham**
 1033 Anyway, I just got to throw that out there, the picture I'm getting is like brothas are not
 1034 getting what they need unless something happens to them and they get some kind of
 1035 random support like through my org or, they just happen to be outgoing, especially
 1036 driven, especially comfortable, or have a personality where they don't mind knocking on
 1037 doors. A lot seems to depend on how the universe aligns.
 1038
 1039 **Rakim**
 1040 Yeah, that's definitely something to think about. I think one route for a lot of us educators
 1041 in high schools working with Black males is the sports. A lot of us love to coach sports,
 1042 and we love to interact and kind of minister through that. I think that's the way we can
 1043 kind of get to them, engage them. The majority of young Black males play sports, and for
 1044 the ones that don't, there's other ways that we can try to engage them. But we could use
 1045 emails to talk to them about academics. Hey, you want to go to school? You want to go to
 1046 college? And you get into your performance on the field and off the field, and stuff like
 1047 that. That's how a lot of coaches and mentors in high schools are able to help out. I have a
 1048 lot of conversations and lot of men talk about their high school coaches. Coach had a big
 1049 influence on my life. I love that man, stuff like that. So that's one of the solutions I would
 1050 say for high school engagement. Did you go talk to your teachers? Did you do this? Did
 1051 you seek help? Where you at with this and that, you know?
 1052
 1053 **Rob Graham**
 1054 Un hun, agreed. You've done a great job being open with me and giving me some insight,
 1055 so I think we can prepare for this sharing circle and this collage. You take care. Thank
 1056 you.
 1057

1058 **Rakim**
1059 Peace.

Appendix G

Conversations with Vertner

Personal Background Narrative- Who Are You?

- 1 **Rob**
2 This is supposed to be a straight up conversation. Just between two men, two brothas.
3
4 **Vertner**
5 Gotcha.
6
7 **Rob**
8 I'm going to ask you a question just to kick it off. Why'd you agree to help me? Why'd
9 you agree to participate? (Vertner laughs) It surprised me!
10
11 **Vertner**
12 I would definitely say your approach. Especially here, people are always approaching you
13 with different stuff. A lot of times they're technique is kind of aggressive, but you said,
14 hey, you got a second to talk? You were really relaxed, told me what you're doing, and it
15 aligned with my personal values. You said the transition from being in high school to
16 college.
17
18 **Rob**
19 Yes
20
21 **Vertner**
22 Being a Black man at a PWI, which is what I am right now, I was like, I had that insight.
23 And I know that this is for your degree, right?
24
25 **Rob**
26 Yes, this is my dissertation research.
27
28 **Vertner**

29 So, I was giving a helping hand because you never know if you were struggling to find a
30 participant and stuff like that. Besides, I injured myself, so I have free time. I'm not at
31 practice right now, so I can just use a day.

32

33 **Rob**

34 Oh, beautiful, beautiful. Well, I appreciate that. *You agreed to help me because you*
35 *appreciated my approach, you felt like you had something to contribute to this research,*
36 *and you were responding to a brotha in need.* Um, let me see here. Who are you as a
37 person? You told me that you're from Hampton, right? Tell me about your family, your
38 upbringing, what brought you here to this point where we're sitting in the same room
39 together.

40

41 **Vertner**

42 Okay

43

44 **Rob**

45 Then, as you, if you get tired or something, I'll jump in and tell you my story a little bit.

46

47 **Vertner**

48 Cool. So yeah, I was originally born in Denver. My family's like a military family.

49

50 **Rob**

51 Mmm!

52

53 **Vertner**

54 But luckily, I guess you could say, my dad, he retired a year after I was born, so I really
55 got a hybrid military family experience. We went from Denver, Colorado to Augusta,
56 Georgia for like, a few months, and then we went to Hampton, Virginia. I've been living
57 there for like, 20 or 19 years. I'm 21 right now, so been there my whole life pretty much.
58 It's been an interesting journey.

59

60 **Rob**

61 Okay. So you've got siblings?

62

63 **Vertner**

64 Yeah, I have two older sisters. They're older, older. So one is like eight years older than
65 me, and one's 11 years older than me. So that age difference kind of played an important
66 role in my upbringing.

67

68 **Rob**

69 When you say it played an important role in your upbringing, what do you mean? I've
70 got two older sisters, so I know what it means for me. My oldest sister, she's nine years
71 older than me, so she was kind of like a second mom, you know, the fun mom?

72 **Vertner**
73 Yeah. (chuckled)
74
75 **Rob**
76 And she was kind of like, I don't want to say the guinea pig, but she was the first to
77 experience a lot of stuff that we experienced. And we as a family, we all learned from it.
78 She's the first to go to a four-year college. She went to Black college, Xavier University
79 in New Orleans. So in my mind, Xavier, New Orleans was the place I was going to; that's
80 what college was. Then, my other sister went to Howard. I visited my other sister, and I
81 was like, wait a minute, I want to transfer to Howard! (both laugh). Howard is a different
82 level than Xavier! So I transferred to Howard, and I essentially went to both colleges that
83 my sisters went to. My oldest sister has her doctorate, and my other one has a master's, so
84 I was like, okay, I guess not only am I gonna go to college, but I'm gonna get some
85 graduate degrees. So in what ways did the fact that you have these older siblings affect
86 you? How were they? What role do they play in your life?
87
88 **Vertner**
89 Definitely I would say the main role, or one respect is observing. It was kind of weird
90 being the younger brother, because you always you think of a stereotypical older brother,
91 you know, protecting his sister. When I was younger, I couldn't really protect them, but
92 now that I'm getting older, I'm falling into that role. But going back to the observing part,
93 I would say it really played a role because it kind of builds into what I'm trying to do as a
94 career in a sense, as a criminal investigator. As an investigator you know, you have to
95 observe a lot and watch people's actions. That's what I did with my sisters without a lot of
96 people knowing. Whether they got in trouble with my parents or they did something
97 good, you know, just seeing how they grew up during those teenage years, what went
98 well with them, what went bad, and then learning from both of them. When it was my
99 turn, I could apply that experience even though we never really were on the same track.
100
101 **Rob**
102 *You watched your sisters' closely as they made their way to adulthood and did your best*
103 *to apply the lessons you learned to your life.*
104
105 **Vertner**
106 Yes. I was always taking notes, and it definitely made me an observer. That is reflected in
107 my social life, from going to parties or hanging out with friends. I'm not always talkative
108 or interactive, which I do, but I'm always, observing 24/7.
109
110 **Rob**
111 That's cool. So, tell me when I'm going to far or whatever.
112
113 **Vertner**
114 I'm alright.

115 **Rob**
116 So family dynamic. Tell me about family life, upbringing, you know, parents. I'd also like
117 to hear how you decided that you wanted to be a criminal investigator because that's not
118 what you hear all the time.
119
120 **Vertner**
121 I have two parents at home, luckily. Regarding my extended family, we had an uncle
122 living in the same city, so we had our older cousins as well. I was basically the youngest
123 and surrounded with family. My mom's side of the family was kind of small, and my
124 dad's side was kind of big, but they were kind of spread out. Focusing on my immediate
125 family, my parents were really close.
126
127 **Rob**
128 Are they older?
129
130 **Vertner**
131 Yes, they're still in their 50s, but now they're on the other side of 50s, getting close to 60,
132 I think. So Yeah.
133
134 **Rob**
135 I'm just trying to pick this up, but it sounds like other than the early moving around and
136 being a lot younger than your siblings, you feel like you had a sort of regular, healthy
137 kind of family situation?
138
139 **Vertner**
140 Yeah, for the most part, pretty regular. I would say two events maybe changed the
141 dynamic. One especially, was a house fire when I was around the first grade? First,
142 second grade. I was younger, so I didn't really feel it as much, but I was observing to see
143 if everyone was happy. It kind of changed the dynamic of the family, but for the better I
144 would say.
145
146 **Rob**
147 How so?
148
149 **Vertner**
150 Because we lived in a motel for maybe like, a year, I would say. The conditions were just
151 alright because my sisters and I stayed in the living room area, and my parents had the
152 room. But the motel had bugs and ants during the summertime. Then we stayed with my
153 aunt and uncle for a little while. So that little period right there built a lot of character
154 within me growing up, but within the family too because you look back and say, this is
155 where we were and where we are now.
156
157 **Rob**

158 So it kind of brought you guys together somewhat?

159

160 **Vertner**

161 Yes. The other thing I was talking about that changed our family dynamic happened
162 around a year ago. My sister got in some money trouble that affected friends and family.
163 People were trying to sue her, and then my dad got involved. When my dad gets
164 involved, it's not a good sign (chuckles).

165

166 **Rob**

167 Uh hun!

168

169 **Vertner**

170 I saw how my family still all comes together at the end of the day. And I still have their
171 back. Whatever happens, it reflects back to you know what happened 10, 15 years ago,
172 the house fire. We've been to rock bottom, so we

173

174 **Rob**

175 can get over anything.

176

177 **Vertner**

178 Yes

179

180 **Rob**

181 Wow, that's interesting. *You come from this tight-knit military adjacent family. You've*
182 *been the youngest kid around your entire life, but you've always had your eye on being a*
183 *responsible man that protects his loved ones. A house fire brought your nuclear family*
184 *together as an unfortunate bonding experience, and the trials you went through around*
185 *the money situation proved that as a group, you all could overcome anything.* So I'll take
186 you back a little bit and tell you a little bit about my background. I'm from Pasadena,
187 California. Two sisters, one nine years older than me, and the other one three years older
188 than me. Grew up with two parents, five people in the family until my parents got
189 divorced when I was like 11. Though not living together after that, they still had each
190 other's backs. In fact, they never really formally got divorced. I had a close knit family
191 and a pretty good childhood. My dad was a cop and a Vietnam veteran from Arkansas.
192 He was straight forward, a man's man. Not a lot of game-playing. My mom grew up in
193 Chicago. She is a little bit more liberal, little bit wilder, different kind of upbringing.
194 They were sort of completely opposite, but they had similar values, you know, taking
195 care of Black folks, doing service. My mom was more interested in African American
196 Black issues. My dad, he passed away when I was a senior in high school, he was more
197 of a Pan-Africanist. Healthy family, everybody educated one way or another, everybody
198 looking out for each other. My sisters still think they're my protectors, and they still do
199 protect. We started out my life with decent money, and then our situation changed. But
200 the family was there, and we worked magic, and I had a good upbringing. So, when you

201 say you want to be a criminal investigator, do you want to work for law enforcement? Or
202 you want to do your own thing? And why? I know you said you did a lot of investigating
203 growing up, but how did you sort of decide that was gonna be your job or your career or
204 whatever?

205

206 **Vertner**

207 My first answer is to the first question. It's more on the police side with the federal
208 government, but I'm always open to state or local. In terms of what drew me to it, I would
209 say to it is kind of multifaceted. I would definitely say TV, movies, and the media had a
210 big influence. Also, my dad was army.

211

212 **Rob**

213 My dad was in the army. Okay! You never know who you're talking to!

214

215 **Vertner**

216 Well, I knew I didn't want to be in the army because the odds of passing away are higher
217 than the police force. As an investigator, there are two different playing fields, and I
218 always had an interest in solving problems and stuff like that. You know, like I said,
219 observing just came naturally to me. From watching Law and Order to the military stuff,
220 to observing and critical thinking. Also, I don't like math, so that knocks out a whole
221 bunch of majors for me.

222

223 **Rob**

224 (laughter from both) I know exactly what you're talking about.

225

226 **Vertner**

227 So that just led me to that path, criminal investigator; it suits me.

228

229 **Rob**

230 So, what do you think of this question that might not be all the way relevant to what we're
231 talking about? My first dream job was to be a police officer. My dad would pull up in his
232 police car, put the siren on, and that kind of stuff, and that was the first job I wanted to
233 do. And then as I got older, you know, that dream kind of faded away. I started looking at
234 myself and society a little bit different. And we need good brothas in law enforcement.
235 We need good brothas in the military. We just need good brothas in all kinds of spots.
236 We've got some problems with law enforcement today. What do you think? How do you
237 put those two things together?

238

239 **Vertner**

240 Yeah.

241

242 **Rob**

243 How do you make sense of those two things? How do you make all of this make sense for
244 yourself?

245

246 **Vertner**

247 Hmm. I would definitely say, it's not easy. I had a couple of days wondering what my
248 fellow brothas are going to think of me when they see me in the uniform. It's definitely
249 hard because whenever somebody asks, you know what I want to do as a career, whether
250 they're Black, White, or Asian, whatever, sometimes I get the look.

251

252 **Rob**

253 Even non-Black people give you a weird look?

254

255 **Vertner**

256 Yeah, they give me a surprised look. Definitely a surprised look from like the White
257 people.

258

259 **Rob**

260 Mmm

261

262 **Vertner**

263 You know, once I say that, their mannerisms or the way they talk to me changes for the
264 better. They think I'm like one of them. In terms of Black folks, I feel okay with their
265 initial confusion because in the end, it's better if I pull them over than someone who isn't
266 concerned about their safety or their rights.

267

268 **Rob**

269 That's interesting. I never considered the responses, so I appreciate it. You mentioned
270 values, and you mentioned maybe some of what this project is about, speaking to some of
271 your values. What would you say are some values that drive you?

272

273 **Vertner**

274 One thing I'm hooking onto now is production. I don't know if this is a value or a
275 concept, but production. I ask myself every day at the end of the day, was I productive
276 today? Have I made you know, a further step to whatever goal I'm trying to accomplish
277 for the week, month, year, or just in life. So, I would say production is definitely a value.

278

279 **Rob**

280 Okay

281

282 **Vertner**

283 Another value I would say is just fairness in treatment. A lot of people, especially today,
284 people are disrespectful for no reason. Our people, White people, any people; they're
285 disrespectful for no reason. As you see around here on campus, what's the reason for it?

286 People don't hold doors anymore? Pick up trash; it's just laying around. I don't blame
287 them though. I was the same way a couple years ago. Now, when I'm in the JC, and
288 somebody leaves their pizza board next to the trash cans, for example, I just put it in the
289 trash. It's just simple acts, you know. Hopefully, my example, me setting that example,
290 will cause a domino effect somewhere else. So, I guess a value in a conclusion would be
291 just helping, helping so somebody else can help.

292

293 **Rob**

294 Uh hun, so civility and just being a good human?

295

296 **Vertner**

297 Yeah

298

299 **Rob**

300 These are some of the behaviors I associate with living in a household with a military
301 guy. Is that some of where your values come from? Are your values coming from your
302 dad or your mom or?

303

304 **Vertner**

305 Yeah, definitely both. My mom is from New Jersey, and she's like the nicest person you'll
306 probably ever meet (Rob chuckles). And I'm not just saying that from bias, but literally.
307 She doesn't cuss, she doesn't swear, she doesn't drink, smoke.

308

309 **Rob**

310 And she's from where?!

311

312 **Vertner**

313 New Jersey.

314

315 **Rob**

316 Okay, okay.

317

318 **Vertner**

319 You look at my dad how you were saying, and kind of like, they're opposites, but he has
320 the same values. My dad doesn't drink that much, but he cusses a lot. He doesn't smoke,
321 but he's like the opposite of her and the same. So, it's kind of like putting those two
322 together. I'll call it the conclusion of both. So, I have my rowdy side, and I have my nice
323 side too.

324

325 **Rob**

326 *Okay. You're interested in being federal law enforcement despite possible push back*
327 *from Black folk in order to have another person out there with sound and fair judgement.*
328 *This career path comes out of a combination of admiration for your dad and his military*

329 *service and a life-long fandom around military and police films and television. You have*
330 *these values that guide your behavior in production and human decency. These and your*
331 *other values come from being raised by your parents who are at once opposites and alike*
332 *in their values.* You talked about your sisters, your parents. Tell me about some other
333 important relationships in your life that sort of make life meaningful or that have been
334 transformative to you, projected you in a certain way, held you down, or taught you some
335 kind of lessons.

336

337 **Vertner**

338 Definitely my coaches, but one particular coach, who introduced me to soccer kind of
339 late, like seventh grade. His name is Mr. Bowdin (Pseudonym). He's from Colombia. He
340 helped me create what makes stand out as a person. Because, you know, he introduced
341 me to soccer, which, you know, Black people really don't play.

342

343 **Rob**

344 Did you play in high school?

345

346 **Vertner**

347 Yeah. High school and in college.

348

349 **Rob**

350 What percentage Black was your high school?

351

352 **Vertner**

353 Oh, it was like 90%.

354

355 **Rob**

356 Okay, so you really stood out!

357

358 **Vertner**

359 Yeah (both laughing).

360

361 **Rob**

362 Cause I already know.

363

364 **Vertner**

365 Yeah. So people play basketball, football. I was on the football team, but still, people
366 know me for soccer. So, I'd say Mr. Bowdin. He introduced me to a lot like, took me to
367 Spain to play soccer over there.

368

369 **Rob**

370 Oh

371

372 **Vertner**
373 Yeah. He's definitely like a figure in my life. You know he taught me how to get dressed,
374 like dress properly, stuff like that. How to do public speaking early on. It's basically
375 skills that, you know, you might not think you need to learn?
376
377 **Rob**
378 Wow, so how did you meet this guy?
379
380 **Vertner**
381 Seventh grade. He was actually a teacher. I had a little girlfriend back then. She played
382 soccer, and we had a club soccer team at school. She introduced me to that, and I came
383 out. And he somehow turned into my teacher in 8th grade. So, we built that relationship
384 inside the class and outside of class, on the field. We just kept our relationship going to
385 this day.
386
387 **Rob**
388 That's a big one. What position do you play?
389
390 **Vertner**
391 Left back.
392
393 **Rob**
394 Okay, okay; I played defense too. (both chuckle) I talk to my boys all the time, and we're
395 always like, we gotta get more brothas playing soccer! How do we do it? I mean, that's,
396 that's our running conversation.
397
398 **Vertner**
399 In high school, people used to see me play soccer. I used to be the kicker on the football
400 team, so they used to ask me, how do you play that? Or how do you do that? I don't know
401 if it's just a stage thing, earlier in life, where people thought soccer to be quote, unquote,
402 gay.
403
404 **Rob**
405 When I was little it was, soccer's White.
406
407 **Vertner**
408 Uh hun. Soccer's White, soccer's gay. One of the two, yeah.
409
410 **Rob**
411 Right. But whatever it was, it wasn't for
412
413 **Vertner**
414 It wasn't for us.

415 **Rob**
416 It wasn't for us. Okay, so any other important relationships in your life that kinda shaped
417 you?
418
419 **Vertner**
420 Yeah, I would say two other people. So one was Mr. Janson (Pseudonym). He was
421 another math teacher. I think the one reason why I said him was he kind of inspired me to
422 do better. I never had a teacher that was, you know, down to Earth. You know, he'd tell
423 you how it is straightforward. I remember one time, it's a running joke with my friends.
424 We were in the bathroom, and he was like, you shake it more than twice, you're playing
425 with yourself. Let's go! (both laughing)
426 You know. We're in seventh grade, and you wouldn't hear this from nobody else.
427
428 **Rob**
429 Right
430
431 **Vertner**
432 But it lets you know he's real. I think a lot of teachers try to put on like a front, which is
433 okay, I guess because, you know, it is a difference between personal and professional, but
434 still, at the end of the day, you gotta walk the walk and talk the talk. And he definitely did
435 that. I still talk to him today, go to the gym sometimes, and I see him in there. Say what's
436 up to him. I know his granddaughter, stuff like that. He's just he's just a good, good dude.
437
438 **Rob**
439 What about at Mason? You form relationships here that you consider pivotal or
440 powerful?
441
442 **Vertner**
443 Yeah. I definitely say two, one person and one group. There's a faculty advisor named
444 Jenni Evans (Pseudonym) who works in Minority Support (Pseudonym).
445
446 **Rob**
447 I know exactly who she is, but I've never met her.
448
449 **Vertner**
450 Yeah, so Jenni, she was there since my freshman year. She used to be the advisor for a
451 Black student organization, and I still go in there til this day. Sometimes I have free time,
452 just need to talk. I just go in there, say what's up, and just start rapping about stuff. She's
453 just like, you know, like a cool friend that's not like your friend, if that makes sense. I
454 wouldn't say she's inspired me, but she's always trying to make me do the right things and
455 keep a healthy mentality. Making sure my grades are good, writing recommendations, all
456 that kind of stuff.
457

458 **Rob**
459 Un hun
460
461 **Vertner**
462 Definitely appreciate her, and she kind of gives that mom figure too, a long way from
463 home.
464
465 **Rob**
466 Anything else I should maybe know about you, or anything you like people to know
467 about you? Anything that's signature to your identity? Before we start getting into the
468 technical stuff, next conversation?
469
470 **Vertner**
471 I'd say maybe two things. I will just piggyback off of, you know off, who the important
472 people are in college. I joined a fraternity my sophomore year.
473
474 **Rob**
475 I saw your fraternity bracelet.
476
477 **Vertner**
478 Yes. That definitely played a big role from that point until now in terms of having a
479 support system. I won't say I don't know where I would be, but I'd rather be right here.
480 The social aspect is important, but the grind aspect is key because I don't think I would be
481 able to get my internship if it wasn't for them. I saw my brothers get jobs, internships,
482 scholarships and felt like I needed to step up.
483
484 **Rob**
485 Cause brothas from your fraternity handle their business!
486
487 **Vertner**
488 Yeah
489
490 **Rob**
491 That's the tradition.
492
493 **Vertner**
494 So I was like I got step my game up now, go out there and go get it. Lo and behold, I got
495 the internship and now it's on to the next stage in the career.
496
497 **Rob**
498 *Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. Okay, okay. Mr. Bowdin, Mr. Janson, Jenni Evans, and*
499 *your fraternity. These are all people and peoples outside of your family that have played*
500 *an important part in supporting your development as a student, future professional, and*

501 *as a man. They are a combination of designed impact and happenstance in how they*
502 *came to be important. The odds were against you meeting and forming a relationship*
503 *with Mr. Bowdin given how unpopular soccer was with Black folks in your high school.*
504 *Mr. Janson was your teacher, so he was hired to make an impact, though his ability to*
505 *make connections with his students sounds special. Jenni Evans was hired by Mason to*
506 *support students through minority support, but had she not advised your campus*
507 *organization, it's probable that you wouldn't have that connection. Your fraternity*
508 *played the exact role I imagine Black fraternities were designed to play, though probably*
509 *unknownst to many at the university. It gave you Black brotherhood, mentorship, and a*
510 *network to lean on.*
511

512

513 **Educational Experience Narrative**

514

515 **Rob**

516 Alright, Brotha, so, here we are, part two. So, last conversation, we talked about who you
517 are as a person. That was interesting, and listening us talk and digging into the transcript,
518 you know, it came alive again. So I got to feel the power twice. Today, I want to kind of
519 switch our mode a little bit, and I suppose get into the heart of really getting towards
520 research questions and all that. Really hearing more about your academic life.

521

522 **Vertner**

523 Got you

524

525 **Rob**

526 And this is storytelling, so your best will be enough. I don't want to shape it in any way.
527 However you tell your story, tell your story. So I know this is kind of a hard question, but
528 tell me the story about high school, your high school experience. I'm trying to get to the
529 college guidance part, but I think I should know something about your school in general,
530 and then we can kind of narrow towards the college preparation that they provided you.
531 So tell me about high school.

532

533 **Vertner**

534 So, I went to Hampton High School in Hampton, Virginia. Historically, it was the first
535 high school in the US with that name. My high school was predominantly Black. My
536 whole life I thought I was going to the one across the town, but then we moved. I ended
537 up going there, and I was first at first a little hesitant because I didn't really know
538 anybody that went there besides like a handful.

539

540 **Rob**

541 So to clarify, you'd come up in a different neighborhood that was supposed to feed you
542 into a different high school, so all of your friends kind of went somewhere else?

543 **Vertner**

544 Un hun. Luckily, my middle school wasn't a zoned middle school, so anybody could go
545 there from across the city. So that's why I knew a few people that went to my high
546 school. So freshman year I got there, and it was different. Basically Hampton High, like
547 where we live at now is basically like in the hood of Hampton, the city. So you know,
548 first day I saw like a lot of things for the first time such as drugs and stuff like that.

549

550 **Rob**

551 Un hun

552

553 **Vertner**

554 A lot of cussing and stuff like that. It progressed as high school went on. So in terms of
555 like the culture of my high school, that's what it was. There were a few White people and
556 a few Asian people, but it's predominantly Black. So I fit right in, or whatever.

557

558 **Rob**

559 Un hun

560

561 **Vertner**

562 So freshman year I really spent just figuring things out, figuring out high school. Figuring
563 out my friend group and stuff like that, including sports. Just kind of like, you know,
564 gaining a feel of everything. Going on to sophomore year, that's when I kind of got in the
565 groove of things. You know, I was the top leader in my band. I was in the marching band
566 sophomore year, freshman and sophomore year.

567

568 **Rob**

569 What do you play?

570

571 **Vertner**

572 I play the tuba. I was in the band, found my leadership spot there, grew my friend group.
573 I'll go more into academics too. When I first got to high school, I enrolled into the
574 International Baccalaureate program. It's basically a rigorous program to help you with
575 your studies and challenge you in a sense. So I thought that was a good program for me.
576 It was challenging definitely, especially I would say, my junior year, sophomore year, but
577 I got through it. But yeah, started out playing varsity soccer, and then

578

579 **Rob**

580 When did you start playing varsity soccer?

581

582 **Vertner**

583 My freshman year. Kept that on going, and was into various clubs, but at the same time I
584 was gathering friends. My friend group got bigger, but I always kept my small circle. So

585 yeah, junior year, it was kind of like a roller coaster year. I would say, um, it's kind of
586 one of those years that built me, you know?

587

588 **Rob**

589 Un hun

590

591 **Vertner**

592 So, the academics I was kind of struggling. Sports, I injured myself in soccer. I left
593 marching band and played football. Football season went pretty good, and then one of my
594 aunts died.

595

596 **Rob**

597 Sorry to hear that.

598

599

600 **Vertner**

601 And then one of my friends that I knew from middle school, she also played soccer, and
602 she passed away from a soccer injury.

603

604 **Rob**

605 What!? What do you mean?

606

607 **Vertner**

608 So she got a concussion, but I guess the examiners or the trainer and her parents didn't
609 execute it the way it should have been executed. So she fell asleep that night, and I guess
610 she woke up not responding because she was brain dead.

611

612 **Rob**

613 Damn

614

615 **Vertner**

616 So yeah, that was a crazy thing throughout the whole city, pretty much. And I had gotten
617 in trouble at home. Junior year was just trashy, but at the end of the day, I respect it, and I
618 wouldn't want it any other way.

619

620 **Rob**

621 *So you went to Hampton High School, a "hood" school in the hood area of Hampton, a*
622 *fact that caught you by surprise given where you'd grown up and where you thought*
623 *you'd attend high school. The school had some unpleasant elements that you were*
624 *exposed to for the first time such as drug activity, and you only had a few friends from*
625 *middle school with you there. You spent your first year or so finding your niche through*
626 *clubs and sports but also experienced hardship with the passing of your aunt and friend.*
627 *Those things, along with academic and home troubles, made for some difficult but*

628 *character building times that would prove valuable eventually.* So when did you start
629 thinking about college, and where you were going, and like being strategic about that
630 kind of stuff? How did that go down?
631

632 **Vertner**

633 So I would say college pretty much started sophomore year, like the glimpse of it. It
634 definitely started, which is kind of the culture at Hampton, as, where am I going to play?
635 So it wasn't necessarily, where do I want to go to college academically? I mean at home it
636 was, but you know, with the coaches and friends and myself, it was always like, where
637 I'm going to play.
638

639 **Rob**

640 Play soccer?
641

642 **Vertner**

643 Un hun. It wasn't until junior year when I switched that mindset to academic, because the
644 injury kinda like really impacted me and my thought process. So I started looking at
645 schools academically, you know. I will say the school actually helped with that too
646 because they have a good grasp on getting people from high school to college. And that
647 was a big thing that junior year too because I was taking my SAT's or ACT's, and that
648 just put it in my mind more. And knowing that my senior year's coming up, and the
649 pressure from at home to start getting on college and stuff.
650

651 **Rob**

652 So you you touched on something. You said your school had a pretty good grasp on
653 getting people from high school to college. Can you tell me about what they had going
654 on?
655

656 **Vertner**

657 Yes, our counselors. So we met with our counselors once every semester, and we usually
658 had someone, a principal I guess, her role was to mainly expose colleges to us.
659

660 **Rob**

661 Un hun
662

663 **Vertner**

664 Colleges came to visit all the time, like during cafeteria hours and stuff like that. They'd
665 pass out flyers, tell us what they expect and all that good stuff. We always had college
666 banners in the hallway. I remember, specifically, we had a Virginia college chart, and it
667 had like the GPA requirements, ACT, SAT score requirements. It was all the Virginia
668 colleges. And I always remember looking at George Mason because that's one of my top
669 schools that I wanted to go to. I'm a bad test taker, so I knew I couldn't get in solely on
670 my SAT and ACT scores, but I had the GPA to kind of help cover those up. So I was

671 always looking at that chart ratio, my GPA match with the college. My guidance
672 counselor really helped kind of fill me up, you know.

673

674 **Rob**

675 It's interesting, people don't think about that stuff being on the wall like working, but it
676 worked for you a little bit. I mean it gave you something to look at and target and made
677 stuff kind of clear. Ok. So tell me about this guidance counselor you're talking about.

678

679 **Vertner**

680 I'm trying to remember, because it was two different ones. One of them was mainly like
681 school sources, and one was mainly for like ACT and SAT prep, in a sense. So I always
682 went to her to get waivers. So somehow I think we'd get three free waivers. Like the
683 whole school got three free waivers for the SAT and ACT.

684

685 **Rob**

686 So you wouldn't have to pay out of pocket? For prep or for the test?

687

688 **Vertner**

689 The test.

690

691 **Rob**

692 Okay, so that's good.

693

694 **Vertner**

695 Yeah. She basically picked my brain about where I wanted to go. Have I visited any
696 colleges yet? Such things like that.

697

698 **Rob**

699 What would you say the focus was on, helping you find a college and sort of getting you
700 there?

701

702 **Vertner**

703 Un hun

704

705 **Rob**

706 Did you have any experiences or conversations that sort of prepared you for the actual
707 college experience after admission and kind of like once you got here?

708

709 **Vertner**

710 Un hun. I would say mainly two people kind of helped me with that aspect, and they were
711 from the social aspect. In terms of preparedness, one of them went to my church, and he
712 played baseball out in like Indiana. He was like a year above me, so when I was a senior
713 high school, he was a freshman in college. During that summer, we talked a lot. I picked

714 his brain, asked him, you know, what was it about? How was it? Stuff like that. I also had
715 a dude who went to my high school; he played in the band with me. He graduated from
716 Mason, and he turned out to be one of my line brothers. I've known him since middle
717 school.

718
719 **Rob**
720 Huh!

721
722 **Vertner**
723 So we were a little distant during middle school and high school, but we're still cool. I
724 asked him a lot of times, hey, how's Mason? What'd you do to get involved? I saw that
725 we have a Black student alliance here and asked him about that. So he was like a good
726 gateway. But at other times, I just kind of navigated through. I wouldn't say by myself,
727 but I used what I knew from those two and other people like my sisters, but there's a
728 difference because they stayed at home.

729
730 **Rob**
731 Un hun

732
733 **Vertner**
734 So I used everything that I could gather up, and tried to navigate my freshman year here.
735 In terms of academics, I would say definitely the IB program helped me in terms time
736 management and stuff like that, you know. Especially with time management because
737 from IB to being in the band, concert band, football, to soccer, to any other little clubs
738 and activities I did, it helped me really dissect my time management. And I will also say
739 my church. We something called YP, young people's division. They're always advocates
740 for us going to college and stuff like that, and my church always made sure we were
741 going to college. We had a high school speech that we got towards graduation in front of
742 the whole church. Basically, they're always supportive. So, yeah.

743
744 **Rob**
745 Un hun. So you said IB prepared you with your time management. Was it something they
746 did, or was it just the fact that it was so rigorous and time involved, and that it forced you
747 to kind of get your time right?

748
749 **Vertner**
750 Yeah, it kind of forced me to get my time right in a sense.

751
752 **Rob**
753 Okay, I'm gonna do something amazing, and I'm going to try to remember my high
754 school. So, my freshman year in high school, I went to a Catholic school. Got there, and
755 it was just crazy. It was crazy. So, maybe Black folks were like 5%. I hate to say it, but
756 that was my real introduction to racism. High school, freshman year, Catholic school,

757 racism. We were just kind of surrounded. It was just a racist atmosphere. It was all boys,
758 so it just forced all the Black dudes to kind of come together, and we just got really,
759 really, really tight. So I got the same boys from 13, and I'm 44. After a while I was like, I
760 don't want to do this anymore. So I wound up transferring my sophomore year to my
761 neighborhood school. This was, I don't even know if the statistics match up or not, but it
762 felt like, 50%, Black, 40% Latino, and then everybody else kind of, Armenians, White
763 folks, Asians kind of making up the rest. But in terms of like culture, dominant culture,
764 those two groups. I only knew a couple of people because I'd been in private school and
765 Catholic school up until ninth grade. So I had a weird time fitting in, and because I
766 switched schools, I wound up just kind of kicking it alone a little bit and watching the
767 world a little bit. I was in honors classes, but given my past experiences with racism, I
768 wanted to be with the Black folks. The Black folks were not in the honors classes for the
769 most part, so I gave up my seat in these classes and went to the classes where students
770 were a lower level than me academically, so that I could be surrounded by Black folks. It
771 was a weird choice, but it just felt more comfortable. I don't remember getting college
772 guidance or anything from the school. I just had my sisters and my cousins. Everybody
773 went to Black colleges. I knew nothing about things like SAT prep, which is unfortunate.
774 I wish I'd have known about things like other schools I could have gone to. I wish I
775 would have had that kind of exposure, but I don't recall meeting with the counselor to talk
776 about college at all.

777

778 **Vertner**

779 Wow

780

781 **Rob**

782 *Let's get back to you for a moment, so I can get this straight. In terms of preparing for*
783 *college, you began that process by thinking about where you'd play college soccer, which*
784 *was part of the culture of your high school. Your mindset shifted toward a broader*
785 *consideration of college after you got injured and the programming around college kind*
786 *of picked up. Your school did a good job of getting you geared up for college by engaging*
787 *you in conversation through staff and faculty, hanging banners in the hallways, providing*
788 *waivers for the SAT and ACT. Outside of high school, preparation for college was*
789 *through community. It was your church. It was your brothas who went to your school*
790 *before, you know, went to school ahead of you. Most of the focus was on choosing a*
791 *school that was a proper match and getting admitted. Did you kind of imagine how*
792 *college was going to be, and then what happened when you got here?*

793 **Vertner**

794 I would say I really had like, no, sort of like, picture of what college was going to be like.
795 I mean I had like some idea in terms of the academic aspect, but in terms of the social life
796 and stuff like that, I had no idea. Mainly because I had never heard of Mason until like a
797 year or two, a before.

798 Also, my sisters commuted back and forth to school, so I didn't really get to see their
799 college social life. I kept an open mind, because I didn't want to be disappointed, and I

800 didn't want to be unappreciative of it. I just stayed in my room or whatever. Orientation
801 was weird for me too. I definitely didn't want to go back. I don't know why I felt like that,
802 but maybe it's because it was my first kind of time being away from home.
803

804 **Rob**

805 Oh, you didn't want to go back home?
806

807 **Vertner**

808 No, I don't want to come back here.
809

810 **Rob**

811 Ahhh!
812

813 **Vertner**

814 I think because I didn't really know campus yet, and I didn't know anybody in my
815 orientation group. I had to stay the night, so I was just like, what is this? (Rob chuckles)
816 Mason was also initially challenging because the majority of the people around me were
817 White, and I was used being around all Black people. It was like culture shock in a sense,
818 but like I said, when I got back home from orientation, you know, I reminded myself to
819 keep an open mind.
820

821 **Rob**

822 Un hun. Tell me what happened freshman year when you started doing the work. Tell me
823 if the advice that you received matched the experience that you had here. What'd you
824 think about the work? What'd you think about the social, social situation here? How was
825 your experience transitioning here?
826

827 **Vertner**

828 I would say that from the first moment, it was kind of weird. I think my dad did it on
829 purpose too. So move-in day, we had an excellent move-in crew. It's a team of students.
830 They move in early, and they get free housing. In return they help freshmen move in. So
831 we pulled the car up to my dorm. Literally, you get out the car, turn back around, your
832 whole car is empty, and your stuff is already upstairs. So it wasn't the freshmen move-in
833 that you think it would be?
834

835 **Rob**

836 Un hun
837

838 **Vertner**

839 My mom wanted to stay and help me unpack, but my dad was like, nah, let's go; he got it.
840 I think he did it on purpose to help by not holding my hand. So they left, and I was just
841 there, you know, by myself unpacking my stuff. At first, I felt some type of way because
842 my roommate's parents were there, but I think our campus has a real good way of making

843 people feel at home. The RA, as soon as everyone got moved in, had a meeting, and then
844 we went out for programming to help get you comfortable. It wasn't just, okay, freshmen
845 move in. Figure your way out. They helped out for a week long, and that rapport was
846 built.

847
848 **Rob**
849 Nice

850
851 **Vertner**
852 In terms of academics, I would say freshman year, both semesters actually, was very,
853 very good for me. I got like a 3.5, 3.6.

854
855 **Rob**
856 Ummm! How'd you do in high school?

857
858 **Vertner**
859 I did good. I think I ended up with like a 3.8, 3.7. I think my freshman year GPA was
860 really good because I always knew from my guidance counselor from high school to have
861 a good freshman year GPA.

862
863 **Rob**
864 Jesus, that's the gospel, that's the gospel right there!

865
866 **Vertner**
867 That's the best advice that somebody ever gave me. I do tours for Mason now, and that's
868 what I tell the people that are trying to come here. No matter what you do, have a high
869 freshman year GPA. At least try. In terms of classes, they were pretty straightforward.

870
871 **Rob**
872 Have you been the same major the whole time?

873
874 **Vertner**
875 Yeah. I had the same major the whole way. The more challenging part, which is again a
876 fact of freshman orientation, is trying to figure out how to schedule classes. I don't know
877 why that was so hard to me looking back, but it's just a new, new ordeal to me, and I feel
878 like the counselors for Mason, weren't really helpful in that moment. But, you know,
879 there was like a lot of us in that room to try to help, but they weren't really helpful. I
880 figured it out on my own back at home.

881 My second semester made me see the importance of the professor. I heard people talking
882 about, oh this professor's hard, and this professor's hard. So not necessarily the class, but
883 it's all about the professor. So at that point, moving forward, I always researched each
884 professor.

885

886 **Rob**
887 What'd you use, Rate My Professor?
888
889 **Vertner**
890 Rate My Professor, yeah. You can't take all those comments in consideration, but it's
891 turned out pretty good.
892
893 **Rob**
894 I remember going to Xavier. It was a crazy experience. I was living off campus, which is
895 a bad move! No meal plan. No friends. Southern culture was different. Just watching
896 everybody dance and talk. It was like, wow, this is crazy. I didn't know what the work
897 was gonna look like. Basically, I learned about Black college from the tv show, A
898 Different World. Xavier was a lot like that, but I was not ready for the work. I remember
899 first F in college was freshman year statistics. It was hard, Man. I struggled for a year, got
900 my groove. The girls you wanted were in the library, so that was my incentive to get
901 myself together, get my grades right. So I started spending a lot of time in the library, and
902 it started working out. But it was just a year of mistakes. I was sad, homesick, crying.
903 Calling my grandmother. I had zero preparation, but somehow it worked out. Do you feel
904 like you had the information that you needed from your high school in order to be
905 successful? Do you feel like they set you up enough in terms of like college preparation?
906
907 **Vertner**
908 Let's say yeah. They kind of put me in a right mind frame. They gave me the gas in my
909 car.
910
911 **Rob**
912 But you had to drive; you had to drive the darn thing. Is there anything you wish that
913 maybe your high school would have prepared you for, knowledge about a particular
914 subject or what you could expect?
915
916 **Vertner**
917 Yeah, I would definitely say the financial part. More about resources, the ins and out of
918 FASFA, scholarships. Also, maybe more actual program details. To expand upon that,
919 you have your science majors and your math majors. Maybe going through the details,
920 this is what you'll probably learn, these are the curricula, these are the degree
921 requirements from different schools.
922
923 **Rob**
924 That sounds like common sense to me. Why do you think they don't do that? Or didn't do
925 that?
926
927 **Vertner**

928 I would think resources and time because like my school, there's a lot of like people that
929 will drop out. So in terms of like priorities, they might try to get you to finish high school
930 and then, show you college rather than show you the actual ins and outs of the academic
931 ways of college. It's kind of like prioritizing things.

932

933 **Rob**

934 When did you pledge your fraternity here?

935

936 **Vertner**

937 I pledged my sophomore year.

938

939 **Rob**

940 And did that help your academics at all, getting that inside information from your
941 brothas?

942

943 **Vertner**

944 Not necessarily with my academics because that was always top tier priority for me, but it
945 helped me with career tracking.

946

947 **Rob**

948 Un hun. And what role did your parents play in getting you ready for college?

949

950 **Vertner**

951 I would say, I don't wanna use the word pressure, but they stayed on top of me about
952 academics. Academics first, before sports and all that. They asked about my GPA, my
953 grades, checked my grades, and stuff like that. Yeah, it basically just turned into an
954 expectation, you know?

955

956 **Rob**

957 Un hun. Did they go to college?

958

959 **Vertner**

960 So my dad went for like one year, and then he joined the military. Then my mom, got her
961 associates, but she's graduating when I'm graduating now too for her bachelor's.

962

963 **Rob**

964 That's great. My parents had the same exact education. I think my dad got like a year; my
965 mom did a couple years. Where'd your just sisters go?

966

967 **Vertner**

968 They went to schools closer to home, and they commuted .

969

970 **Rob**

971 How do you think your situation would be different if you didn't go through the IB
 972 experience? Or would it be? I don't want to be presumptuous.
 973
 974 **Vertner**
 975 I want to say I'd still be successful. However, it kind of fueled the drive that I have now
 976 with the time management stuff. I had to balance a lot of things, and it grew even more
 977 when I got here, but that was like the foundation. (Now looking at pictures from
 978 Vertner's life to be used in collage) I put this in there because these two people, they're
 979 pretty cool. She lived on my floor, and she was her friend. They kind of had a good role
 980 my freshman year I would say. It helped with me being more diverse, not just sticking to
 981 the Black folks. These are from the shooting range.
 982
 983 **Rob**
 984 You're on your way!
 985
 986 **Vertner**
 987 I like the range; it just a relaxing thing. It helps me practice and stuff. This is when we
 988 won our first step show. This is the Black Excellence Gala at Mason. It just shines a light
 989 on the Black excellence amongst Mason students every year. Then we won our second
 990 step show...He's about to graduate soon, so I'm trying to like mentor him through that.
 991 And this is my oldest sister. That's my mom. That's my little sister right there.
 992
 993 **Rob**
 994 Great. You got some good stuff.
 995
 996 **Vertner**
 997 Yeah, I'm in love with planes, so I go to the air show a lot of times. So I took a picture of
 998 that. If I could fly one, I would.
 999
 1000 **Rob**
 1001 And in your neck of the woods, there's a lot of military presence.
 1002
 1003 **Vertner**
 1004 Yeah, there's an air force base like five minutes from my house, so. That's my best friend
 1005 again. We went to see Kendrick...Top Golf. Can't really golf, but I'm good at
 1006 that...That's the J Cole concert.
 1007
 1008 **Rob**
 1009 Okay. Who's better, Kendrick or J Cole? Or are they the same? Different but the same?
 1010
 1011 **Vertner**

1012 I'd say different but the same, yeah. This us with a White sorority that we're pretty close
1013 with. We had a little program with them last year. And that's like my little sister, I would
1014 say.

1015

1016 **Rob**

1017 Un hun

1018

1019 **Vertner**

1020 This is all back home friends. This is last year. They didn't know they were about to do
1021 this cause they all got a little beef between each other. But I told everybody to meet me
1022 up at dinner.

1023

1024 **Rob**

1025 Oh, you set em up?!

1026

1027 **Vertner**

1028 Un hun. Um, this was Germany. I went there to study abroad last winter. This, uh,
1029 Austria. This is Miami spring break. That's my older sister. And that's my dad and me.

1030

1031 **Rob**

1032 Ah! Awesome. You've had a good experience. It's nice to hear because I don't want to
1033 make assumptions about anything. You made some good decisions. You had a little more
1034 discipline, and time management seems like the key. I mean, when I talk to freshmen
1035 brothers, I'm like, time management's the difference maker. You can be smart. Doesn't
1036 even matter. If your time management is not right, it's not gon' crack. *All of this is*
1037 *remarkable to me given the fact that you didn't know what to expect from the college*
1038 *experience. Your parents didn't have the experience, your sisters were commuters, so*
1039 *family knowledge around college was different. Your dad decided it best that you just*
1040 *dive in without too much coddling, but you were caught off guard a bit by the sudden*
1041 *separation at move-in time. The first moments at Mason were a bit of a shock to you*
1042 *because the demographics were very different than those at your high school. The*
1043 *orientation team did a solid job of making you comfortable. You experienced similar*
1044 *academic success your first year of college, thanks in part to advice from your guidance*
1045 *counselor in high school who stressed the importance of a high freshman year GPA. You*
1046 *do wish your high school would have expanded conversation around paying for college*
1047 *and the curricula associated with different programs. All in all, you've had a rich*
1048 *experience being active on campus, building relationships across races, and studying*
1049 *abroad. Let's respect your time. I appreciate it.*

1050

1051 **Connecting Personal and Professional/Educational Through Collage**

1052

1053 **Rob**

1054 So this is a little bit of experimentation, but I'd like you to use your pictures to tell the
1055 story of how your personal life, your educational life, and your educational experiences
1056 are all connected.

1057

1058 **Vertner**

1059 Got you

1060

1061 **Rob**

1062 And then, you know, as you're making decisions, just kind of talk it out, you know in a
1063 way that you're not used to, you know, the kinda conversations you might have in your
1064 head. As you're working, I'll be asking you questions because I still have some stuff that
1065 I'd like to get your perspective on.

1066

1067 **Vertner**

1068 So I'll probably start this off...

1069

1070 **Rob**

1071 Is that Baby You right there?! (looking at pictures being pasted into collage)

1072

1073 **Vertner**

1074 Yeah, that's Baby Me (both laugh). Yeah, so I'll probably start off with like family in the
1075 middle.

1076

1077 **Rob**

1078 Okay. (Vertner working on collage while Rob watches and chimes in) And that's Sis right
1079 there?

1080

1081 **Vertner**

1082 That's my mom.

1083

1084 **Rob**

1085 Isn't that wonderful?! It's funny, when I was like, yo, your parents older? You were like,
1086 yeah they're in their 50s. I'm like hmmm! I'm almost in my 50s! (both laugh). (Looks to
1087 collage) So the idea is to have sort of family at the nucleus and then friends and then...I
1088 see it. (acknowledging Vertner's moves and choices). So your fraternity has a chapter
1089 meeting tonight?

1090

1091 **Vertner**

1092 Kinda. So we have this official meeting when we're about to bring in some new people.
1093 So it's kind of like, where we like vote before we proceed and stuff like that.

1094

1095 **Rob**

1096 Un hun. Are you in leadership?

1097 **Vertner**
1098 Yeah. I'm basically the intake coordinator.
1099
1100 **Rob**
1101 Okay. And what year do you need to be to pledge?
1102
1103 **Vertner**
1104 Um, so you have to be at least a second year freshman. We don't really have a specific
1105 year, per se. I prefer to have people come in young, because from there, you can kind of
1106 build, you know? If you're like a senior coming in, your time and effort here on campus
1107 are going to be short-lived.
1108
1109 **Rob**
1110 Un hun. Okay, as you're moving stuff around, I'll shoot you a couple of these other
1111 topics. I wound up feeling like there were some things I didn't understand from you. Is
1112 there anything you think freshman brothas should know about the first year? It could be
1113 related to advice you were given in high school and what you did with that advice, or
1114 advice not given in high school. Like, they didn't tell you this, but this is how it's going
1115 down.
1116
1117 **Vertner**
1118 Yeah! I would say number one would be to make sure like you start with a strong GPA.
1119
1120 **Rob**
1121 Un hun
1122
1123 **Vertner**
1124 You know, I'd rather you bust your butt now, than bust your butt when you try to
1125 graduate cause it's gonna be harder. You're taking intro level classes, so why not try to
1126 strive for that 4.0? Your GPA can easily drop, but it takes 10 times as much effort to raise
1127 it back up.
1128
1129 **Rob**
1130 Un hun
1131
1132 **Vertner**
1133 Yeah, that'd be my number one advice.
1134
1135
1136 **Rob**
1137 So, strong beginning. I remember you saying that a little bit before. Now that's good
1138 advice. Em...How do they do that?
1139

1140 **Vertner**
1141 I want to say it's kinda like you just get the feel for it, but it's almost like a personal thing,
1142 you know. You got accepted to college for a reason, so you should already know you're
1143 capable of doing good. So I think it's mainly just like a mental thing, like the professors
1144 give you all you need to succeed.
1145
1146 **Rob**
1147 Un hun
1148
1149 **Vertner**
1150 You just need to use your resources. I was never the person to study, but when I got to
1151 college, I started studying a little bit cause I knew I needed extra help. I asked people that
1152 I knew and they lived on my floor. You see somebody in class, ask them, hey you want to
1153 study for this test? People are willing to go through it with you because they going
1154 through the same thing. You know what I mean? People aren't gonna say, no I don't want
1155 to study with you, or no, I'm not trying to help you with the homework or nothing like
1156 that, cause
1157
1158 **Rob**
1159 Cause then they're just knuckleheads.
1160
1161 **Vertner**
1162 Yeah.
1163
1164 **Rob**
1165 Okay. Maybe this is redundant. If you were talking to high school seniors, would the
1166 message be different?
1167
1168 **Vertner**
1169 Nah. It's funny you say that cause we just talked to some high schoolers; they're like
1170 juniors and seniors on a college tour. We talked to them on Sunday, and they asked us for
1171 advice. They asked about application advice. I just told em to be yourself, you know,
1172 because no matter what you do in life, if you aren't yourself, then are you going to be
1173 really successful? Now if you are yourself, and you do things that aren't necessarily good,
1174 that's when you check yourself.
1175
1176 **Rob**
1177 Un hun
1178
1179 **Vertner**
1180 So I started off with family (looking back to his collage). Then I got friends over to the
1181 right top side, kinda shifted down. Then I kind of get into my activities. You still see
1182 people, but you'll see people doing stuff that I do.

1183 **Rob**
1184 Okay, family at the core.
1185
1186 **Vertner**
1187 Un hun
1188
1189 **Rob**
1190 Your people-peoples up here to the top right, friends who are like family or whatever,
1191 just meaningful friendships. And then around here we gon get some activity situations
1192 happening. (Pause to take in collage) Oh, okay. The more I hear about you, the more it
1193 seems like this thing you're doing with me and for me, and for this research, just seems
1194 like it's part of who you are a little bit. Like this is
1195
1196 **Vertner**
1197 Yeah, kinda
1198
1199 **Rob**
1200 It doesn't seem that abnormal for you!
1201
1202 **Vertner**
1203 Nah, I like you know, sharing things about me, and kinda just like shedding light, I guess,
1204
1205 **Rob**
1206 Un hun!
1207
1208 **Vertner**
1209 and vice versa. You know I like hearing people's stories. How people got to where they
1210 are, stuff like that. I think it's important, you know not only to like, share it, to also hear it
1211 because...
1212
1213 **Rob**
1214 You got any questions for me?
1215
1216 **Vertner**
1217 Yeah, I actually do.
1218
1219 **Rob**
1220 Okay
1221
1222 **Vertner**
1223 So, what made you choose this research? I didn't really ask that question in a sense. You
1224 know?
1225

1226 **Rob**
1227 Okay. Well, I knew I wanted to help brothas. I had done educational research on us,
1228 essentially, and it just seemed like we needed some help.
1229
1230 **Vertner**
1231 Un hun
1232
1233 **Rob**
1234 At every level. I mean I could have gone all the way from pre-K to like PhD level. It's a
1235 struggle in terms of our educational journeys and our life journeys really. But this is kind
1236 of like my lane. Professionally I've been working with freshmen transitioning to
1237 university, but my students have been international students. I used to be an academic
1238 advisor, teach University 100, and then taught the version of University 100 we have for
1239 international students. So I was like, how can I help? I looked at my expertise, which was
1240 the freshman transition experience. And then I started hearing about Obama's program
1241 called My Brother's Keeper. And then DC has this program called Empowering Males of
1242 Color, so I kind of looked at their models of support. And I just kinda picked this lane. I
1243 felt like I had a voice. I could relate to students. I've had every kind of educational
1244 experience there is. You know, I flunked out of college before, I flunked out of Howard.
1245 And then got myself back in it.
1246
1247 **Vertner**
1248 Un hun
1249
1250 **Rob**
1251 I had it rough. I went to Xavier; I didn't know anything. So I know what it feels like to be
1252 out of your lane, out of your context, and struggle and just kind of make it. And I've had a
1253 lot of help. Like I should be, I darn sure shouldn't be working on my PhD. Life has given
1254 me a lot of chances. I've had a lot of support, so I need to be that support. I could have
1255 been given up on, but people did not give up on me. So that's kind of it. I just was trying
1256 to find my way I could help brothas through research in a way that related to my life.
1257
1258 **Vertner**
1259 Un hun
1260
1261 **Rob**
1262 So that's, that's kinda it. If Mason had more resources for Black males, like a real solid
1263 Black male program, I might not be knowing any of this stuff, but there's a little bit of a
1264 gap.
1265
1266 **Vertner**
1267 So what program are you kinda looking for?
1268

1269 **Rob**
1270 So there's a Black male initiative on a lot of campuses. I think there's some brothas, some
1271 people doing some stuff here, but it's not all the way. I have my own Black male
1272 initiative, and I think there's probably like four of them floating around campus, but
1273 there's not a centralized one.
1274
1275 **Vertner**
1276 Yeah, and that's the truth because we have this Black male initiative thing we do, like at
1277 the end of every year in the spring semester, but it's only one time a year. It's supposed to
1278 be like a safe spot, or like a hub where Black men are supposed to, you know, let go of
1279 their guard. You know what I mean? Sometimes being a Black man you put on like this
1280 shield when you leave the house or whatever.
1281
1282 **Rob**
1283 Un hun
1284
1285 **Vertner**
1286 It's kind of hard because when I see problems, I'm always wanting to say, okay, maybe I
1287 can help to fix this and stuff like that, just trying to make life here better for like my
1288 people, but then it kinda got draining because then you start to look around, and see it's
1289 only you (both chuckle). It's only like you or two other people, trying to do something
1290 about it. And then when you actually do something about it, and like things like get
1291 going, the results are not what you want to see. Like if I throw an event for Black males,
1292 and only like four or three people show up, what is all this work supposed to be doing,
1293 you know?
1294
1295 **Rob**
1296 Un hun
1297
1298 **Vertner**
1299 And then I came to the realization, I was like, I'm about to graduate, so maybe I should
1300 start enjoying college life again. I was reflecting back on my freshman year, how I
1301 enjoyed college. I was going out to different events, wasn't like focused on like one or
1302 two things. I want to get back to that. That's what I been doing lately just...Back to what I
1303 was about to say, I think Mason, the people here, we're trying, but I don't know what the
1304 problem is. This been going on for like
1305
1306 **Rob**
1307 Years, right?
1308
1309 **Vertner**
1310 Yeah, probably before I even came. I think another part of it is probably just the culture
1311 here at Mason. You gotta remember, Mason's like a commuter school, and like three

1312 fourths of our population commutes. So that's a struggle in itself, where you try to contact
1313 those people that commute. In a commuter's eyes, nine times out of ten they just want to
1314 get to class cause they either got a job or got home obligations and stuff like that.
1315
1316 **Rob**
1317 Un hun
1318
1319 **Vertner**
1320 So I just went skydiving this weekend (looking back to the collage).
1321
1322 **Rob**
1323 Oh, word?!
1324
1325 **Vertner**
1326 I had to put that in! (both chuckling)
1327
1328 **Rob**
1329 Whoa! You're alive!
1330
1331 **Vertner**
1332 Yeah! (laughing)
1333
1334 **Rob**
1335 So that's it, basically trying to make up for what's missing around here. The best way I
1336 can, try to leave a little something.
1337 **Vertner**
1338 That's why I was surprised when you said it. I thought you were gonna say you were
1339 from Minority Support or something like that cause usually that's all you hear from.
1340
1341 **Rob**
1342 Right. Nah, I'm just an independent, you know, one-man show. But you know there's
1343 some good people around this campus that really want to put in some work. I don't know
1344 why things haven't gotten organized differently.
1345
1346 **Vertner**
1347 I guess there aren't enough consistent helping hands. Just like I said, it's the same like 5
1348 to 8 people doing that ground work, and then they graduate.
1349
1350 **Rob**
1351 So you've been super active! And you know when I read research, people who are active
1352 on campus have the best experiences, they do better in terms of GPA, they stay, and they
1353 graduate. Do you see something in that research? You think the research is spot on? You
1354 think that's one of your secrets, the fact that you've been active as hell for four years?

1355 **Vertner**
1356 I would say so (with a hedging tone). You know, it's kinda like an underlining initiative.
1357 I'm active, and academics wise, it kind of teaches that time management part. And it
1358 gives me an obligation to stay because, you know, you build those relationships with
1359 people, and you want to see like an end goal. It was one thing my band teacher from high
1360 school told me, he was like, you should always gauge your success based on how you
1361 leave the place; you should always leave the place better than you found it.
1362
1363 **Rob**
1364 Un!
1365
1366 **Vertner**
1367 That was always in the back of my head. Why not have that mindset?
1368
1369
1370 **Rob**
1371 Okay. Is there anything you think high school counselors should know about the first
1372 year of college for African American dudes? A lot of the focus is on getting them
1373 accepted, but now there's a little bit of research where people are like, wait a minute; we
1374 need to know what's happening when they get there.
1375
1376 **Vertner**
1377 Yeah. I would say definitely look at the dropout rates.
1378
1379 **Rob**
1380 Un hun
1381
1382 **Vertner**
1383 First Year, first year dropout rates. I think that's when it's the highest?
1384
1385 **Rob**
1386 It is.
1387
1388 **Vertner**
1389 When you look at it from high school, you get a lot of pressure. I even see it with my
1390 friends. They'll go to college first year, and then you see them back at home the next
1391 year. I think it's important that we look at that and what's going on. I feel like it's the
1392 pressure, you know you making it to college. The thing is, the pressure kind of lets up
1393 once you're in the first year. You get that sense of independence and take your foot off of
1394 the gas pedal. Some people also think college is a scam because they don't see the
1395 benefit.
1396
1397 **Rob**

1398 So you think that freshman year maybe, maybe brothas need more structure? Like an
 1399 additional year of structure until they understand what kind of system they're in?
 1400
 1401 **Vertner**
 1402 Yeah
 1403
 1404 **Rob**
 1405 That makes sense. Wait, did you play soccer here your freshman year?
 1406
 1407 **Vertner**
 1408 Yeah.
 1409
 1410 **Rob**
 1411 Okay so you walked in with a little structure, had somebody to be accountable to.
 1412
 1413 **Vertner**
 1414 Un hun
 1415
 1416 **Rob**
 1417 Teammates, coaches, school really.
 1418
 1419 **Vertner**
 1420 Yeah, I knew I didn't want to go back home, so I was like, I gotta stay here.
 1421
 1422 **Rob**
 1423 Anything you think Mason should know about the first year of college for African
 1424 American dudes?
 1425
 1426 **Vertner**
 1427 I would say
 1428
 1429 **Rob**
 1430 And let me tell you, whatever you're about to say, they're not hearing it from people like
 1431 you very often, so I think this is an opportunity.
 1432
 1433 **Vertner**
 1434 Yeah, I would say, what Mason kind of preaches is not necessarily how they quote-
 1435 unquote act. So they preach like inclusion, and like diversity and stuff, but when you
 1436 kinda get in the meet and greet of everything, past like orientation and stuff like that, and
 1437 you're in the class, you don't always see that. Whether it is the professors that you see,
 1438 advisors, especially advisors, like different resources. They'll give you one thing, like the
 1439 minority support office, and they'll say, use that as a resource. Now one thing they did do
 1440 good is we have an LLC on campus, living learning community for Black men.

1441 **Rob**
1442 Really?! I gotta write that down! That's what I was waiting on.
1443
1444 **Vertner**
1445 Yeah, so that's just started this year. I think that was a real good step to see. I guess that's
1446 the first step of making sure there's inclusion.
1447
1448 **Rob**
1449 So it sounds like you're saying, okay Mason's supposed to be this diverse, inclusion kind
1450 of place, but where is it in the classroom? Where is it in the advising? It needs to be more
1451 than just one resource and orientation.
1452
1453 **Vertner**
1454 Like it looks diverse, but where's the inclusion. Because diversity and inclusion are two
1455 different things.
1456
1457 **Rob**
1458 Un hun
1459
1460 **Vertner**
1461 I know that it's kind of a natural thing, people tend to talk to the people who they can
1462 relate to, but making those opportunities you know, allowing those opportunities to be
1463 open, you know like creating those opportunities to, you know, across social...
1464
1465 **Rob**
1466 Creating! That's the thing. Some stuff is natural, you know, you find people you feel
1467 comfortable around, but faculty, there's nothing natural about faculty that's not diverse.
1468
1469 **Vertner**
1470 Yeah
1471
1472 **Rob**
1473 There's nothing natural about that; that's choice. There's nothing natural about advising
1474 not being diverse. That's university choice. That's beyond choice; that's policy.
1475
1476 **Vertner**
1477 Yeah
1478
1479 **Rob**
1480 There's a policy that's allowing that stuff to happen.
1481
1482 **Vertner**

1483 Un hun. Cause I know different departments, if they want to have a more like diverse unit
1484 or whatever, they hire, you know, Latino or Black or White.
1485
1486 **Rob**
1487 Un hun
1488
1489 **Vertner**
1490 I'm pretty sure there's plenty of professors out here that need a job that wouldn't mind
1491 coming to Mason.
1492
1493 **Rob**
1494 Yeah, there's no shortage of talent that can do the job. Okay, that's kind of interesting.
1495 You think the sistas have an easier experience or a different experience?
1496
1497 **Vertner**
1498 To be honest, I'd probably say they have a harder experience. I can't speak too much
1499 about that, but they are Black, and they are women. So it's kind of like they have those
1500 two disadvantages. I see colleges like a small society.
1501
1502 **Rob**
1503 Un hun. So what we got here (looking back to collage)? Tell me what I'm looking at here.
1504
1505 **Vertner**
1506 Yeah, so going clockwise, think you know the center foundation is family mainly.
1507 **Rob**
1508 Okay. So, Mom. And that's just, you at the crib, alive. (both chuckling)
1509
1510 **Vertner**
1511 Yeah, third day out probably. And that's my dad and me. And my two sisters. That's my
1512 mom again. And I call her my church friend/sister. Known her for 15 plus years. And this
1513 is my little cousin. Then outside, I have childhood, kind of growing up friends. So it's like
1514 back in middle school, my boy I was talking about. You know I was talking about that IB
1515 class that I used to take? So we stuck together like through the whole four years pretty
1516 much. This is me in middle school.
1517
1518 **Rob**
1519 Is there any connection between these early relationships and your experiences with
1520 college?
1521
1522 **Vertner**
1523 Yeah I would definitely say my first year here, they were kind of like my go to people to
1524 talk to when I was like kinda homesick, or I just wanted to like to talk to my boys at

1525 home. I told you about how different it was up here, so I needed that like that, home
1526 feeling again. Yeah those people are still here today.
1527
1528 **Rob**
1529 Did they go to college?
1530
1531 **Vertner**
1532 Um, all of them did besides him.
1533
1534 **Rob**
1535 Except for my brotha right here? (referring to person in collage)
1536
1537 **Vertner**
1538 Yeah, but we're always talking about college around him, so it's in the back of his mind;
1539 it's just a matter of like, yeah, I'm going.
1540
1541 **Rob**
1542 So he might, he might
1543
1544 **Vertner**
1545 Yeah, eventually
1546
1547 **Rob**
1548 Okay. So, I gotta tell you, it looks to me like you've got a pretty good life.
1549
1550 **Vertner**
1551 Yeah. (chuckles)
1552
1553
1554 **Rob**
1555 You're an energetic dude, adventuresome, social. I don't think you think you're that
1556 social, but from the outside looking in, it appears to me like you have a rather healthy
1557 social life (laughs while delivering end of statement).
1558
1559 **Vertner**
1560 Yeah, but I have days where I gotta be by myself. I need those like days or hours where I
1561 just
1562
1563 **Rob**
1564 Restore.
1565
1566 **Vertner**
1567 Yeah.

1568 **Rob**
1569 If somebody asked me to characterize your experience, I might say, this is a brotha who's
1570 an example of how to be successful. I don't think there's anything about your background,
1571 you just you just hopped on and just rode!
1572
1573 **Vertner**
1574 Yeah!
1575
1576 **Rob**
1577 You just rode out! I think there's some success there, and I don't want to get talking about
1578 the research too much, but a lot of choices, your decisions, and your road matches what
1579 I've heard about brothas who have been able to be successful in college, which is the
1580 staying active, calling home when you need some support, having a connection to your
1581 home, um, supportive family and all that. The super activity, the IB, the fraternity.
1582
1583 **Vertner**
1584 Yeah! Yeah
1585
1586 **Rob**
1587 It sounds to me like that's really important; that stood out to me. I've been thinking about
1588 that since you talked to me about that. What year were you when you pledged?
1589
1590 **Vertner**
1591 I was a first-year sophomore.
1592
1593 **Rob**
1594 So that was good timing for you, right?
1595
1596 **Vertner**
1597 Un hun
1598
1599 **Rob**
1600 Because then you had that support.
1601
1602 **Vertner**
1603 Yeah
1604
1605 **Rob**
1606 That was key; that was a key time.
1607
1608 **Vertner**
1609 Definitely
1610

1611 **Rob**
 1612 I think you've had people you've been accountable to, so you didn't want to disappoint
 1613 people.
 1614
 1615 **Vertner**
 1616 Yeah, definitely
 1617
 1618 **Rob**
 1619 And you had people who were invested in you, so I just think it's interesting. Not a sad
 1620 story at all, good story, solid story. I think you should be happy. You should feel proud of
 1621 yourself, and you're a nice guy and you do service on top of all that! So I think this is a
 1622 worthy story. I think people should hear your story, and they should hear what you have
 1623 to say about college and preparing for college, and I think you have a valid, strong voice.
 1624 I think the university should listen to you because I bet they want more people to have
 1625 your kind of experience. The fact that there's not a lot of support, not a lot of Black
 1626 faculty, for some brothas that means they don't make it.
 1627
 1628 **Vertner**
 1629 At all, yeah.
 1630
 1631 **Rob**
 1632 We feel good?
 1633
 1634 **Vertner**
 1635 Yeah, I was gonna bring up one point. So I was thinking. This is a conversation from
 1636 when I was in leadership in my organization, and we were trying to bring all the Black
 1637 people out. It's kind of like we only reach out to the Black people who are characterized
 1638 as Black, so the ones who like play basketball or are in a frat or the cool guys or the
 1639 gangstas. What about the Black people who like do like anime and stuff like that or just
 1640 like to read books or like, who aren't like necessarily social but kind of still want do
 1641 stuff? What about the other side of the coin when it comes to reaching out to Black men?
 1642 It's a thing I have been thinking about. They still probably need or want, you know that
 1643 support.
 1644
 1645 **Rob**
 1646 They do! I know they do, and I know they exist because I've interviewed them. I've had
 1647 some of them in my program, and I've had some anime folks, you know the whole thing,
 1648 and they definitely need the support. They're looking for things like a Black male
 1649 initiative. So you're exactly right. But they might not have the type of social skills so that
 1650 they naturally, easily fit into the campus scene. That's a great population to partner with
 1651 in research.

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Biography

Robert L. Graham graduated from John Muir High School, Pasadena, California, in 1992. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Howard University in 2001. He received his Master of Arts in English from California State Polytechnic University at Pomona in 2012.