

# College Choices, Choice Dilemmas: Black Advantaged Parents' Views of Their Children's College Options

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## ABSTRACT

Studies investigating college views largely neglect the Black advantaged and specifically the role of parents in the college search process. Drawing on interviews with upper, upper-middle-, and middle-class parents, this paper investigates how Black advantaged parents view their children's college options. In an anti-black and credentialed society, parents contend with the consequences of where their children enroll in college and the names their degrees bear. Black advantaged parents' views of their children's college options reflect a set of dilemmas relative to college choices. As college graduates, parents recognize that degrees from HBCUs are weighed down by racial stigma and institutional anti-blackness. Fears about anti-black perceptions of HBCUs fuel parental concerns about racial discrimination post-graduation. Yet, parents also recognize that as students on historically white campuses their children are at risk of experiences with anti-black racism while enrolled in college. This article describes the challenge of antiblackness as multi-dimensional, impacting parents' attention both to their children's experiences as graduates and as students. This paper offers implications for black parenting, decision-making, and higher education.

**KEYWORDS:** Black middle class; college choice; higher education; anti-blackness; HBCUs.

Being Black and class advantaged in America creates dilemmas for parents and their children. Parents face competing choices to protect children from racism and simultaneously position them to reap class-based advantages (Dow 2019; Lacy 2007; Posey-Maddox et al. 2021). To some extent, class privileges grant Black advantaged parents (i.e., those with at least a bachelor's degree and white-collar jobs) the economic resources to help children get ahead and offer them relative safety from systemic class disadvantages (Lewis-McCoy 2014; Wilson 1987). As members of the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes, Black advantaged parents are afforded not only the financial means to access privileges for their children, but also embody the cultural capital to optimize their children's experiences and ensure they succeed (Calarco 2014).

Yet, racial positionality and systemic anti-blackness also influence Black advantaged parents and their child-rearing behaviors (Cooper 2005; Dumas 2016). Black advantaged parents must equip children with the tools to navigate racism, suggesting that the cultural knowledge that Black advantaged parents engage is both racialized and classed (Carter 2003; Lesane-Brown 2006; Richards 2020). Additionally, Black advantaged parents must evaluate how contact with racialized organizations, such as universities, and the status attached to these institutions, further advantage or disadvantage their

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children (Ray 2019). Through the lens of the college search and application process, this article examines how Black advantaged parents consider the consequences of anti-black racism when contemplating their children's futures. I argue that parents' considerations are multifaceted: although parents face ongoing worries about children being discriminated against, these worries intensify as children approach milestones, such as college. Therefore, parents consider how decisions about college can exacerbate the risk of anti-black racism in multiple domains.

Scholars of race and parenting highlight the critical role of racial positionality and an assessment of risk in decision-making and behaviors (Cooper 2005; Szabo 2022). As non-dominant members of society, parents of color (and their children) rely on cultural knowledge to navigate choices and anticipate their consequences (Carter 2003; Wallace 2019). In the case of educational decision-making, Black parents draw on their previous experiences in organizations—often colored by personal encounters with racism—to inform the decisions they make about their children's schooling (Szabo 2022). Cooper (2005) calls this process a “positioned choice,” wherein parents' social standpoints, rooted in their race, class, and gender, influence their views of colleges. The racialization of organizations such as schools and workplaces further influences parents' choices. An organization's position in the racial hierarchy influences its power, resources, and status (Ray 2019). As a result, connections to and positions within racialized organizations influence individual choices. Black parents' educational decisions, then, are further compounded not only by individual status but also institutional positionality. While research shows how the Black advantaged navigate the dilemmas of choice in their professions and in relation to neighborhoods and early education (Dow 2019; Lacy 2007; Patillo 1999; Posey-Maddox et al. 2021), how these processes manifest in other institutional settings, such as higher education, remain largely understudied. For Black advantaged parents, the college choice is an extension of these processes.

Research on college planning rarely accounts for the ways that race and class together shape choices, particularly among the Black advantaged. Existing studies highlight the role of class resources in college decisions, or how racial status shapes such choices, often with a focus on low-income and first-generation students (Freeman 1999; Lareau and Weininger 2008; McDonough, Antonio, and Trent 1997). Research on middle-class parents' involvement in college planning argues that these parents are active guides, critical sources of information, and key avenues of financial support (Lareau and Weininger 2008). In fact, unlike low-income parents who contemplate whether their children will attend college, middle-class parents raise their children with the expectation of college and thus focus on where they will attend (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010). With the decision to go to college largely settled, middle-class families begin the search process earlier, invest in college preparation, and focus on the characteristics of individual schools (Lareau and Weininger 2008; Mullen 2009; Weis, Cippolone, and Jenkins 2014). Studies in this line of research, however, disproportionately focus on White advantaged parents and fail to consider the ways that racial positionality influences how Black parents navigate these processes.

Further, research on race and the college choice process tends to overlook the role of parents and the tension between class privilege, individual racial positionality, and institutional anti-blackness. Studies of Black parents with high-achieving children show some evidence of parental concerns about college that mirror their worries about K–12 schooling (Chapman, Contreras, and Martinez 2018; Dow 2019; Posey-Maddox et al. 2021). Black parents approaching college decisions articulate fears about racism and discrimination (Chapman et al. 2018). Greater visibility of racism on college campuses has positioned historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as potential havens for Black students (Baker and Britton 2021). Although previous studies on Black middle-class parents position HBCUs largely as non-options for Black advantaged youth, black colleges have seen a renewed interest (Lacy 2007; Weis et al. 2014; Williams, Palmer, and Jones 2021). Yet, HBCUs inherently carry the racial stigma of blackness (Dumas 2016; Lenhardt 2004). Negative stereotypes about blackness, as well as perceptions of Black people as inferior and the “other,” map onto black spaces like schools (Dumas 2016; Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015). Many Black parents share racialized concerns about their children's well-being, but Black advantaged parents also have worries about their children's ability to maintain class standing and they recognize college as an important part of that process, thus raising questions about how race and class influence Black advantaged parents' views about their children's college decisions (Cooper 2005).

In this article, I draw on 35 interviews with Black advantaged parents in Atlanta, Georgia, and Columbus, Ohio, to demonstrate how Black advantaged parents think about their children's college options. Atlanta and Columbus have distinct higher education landscapes and social-cultural histories around race and class, therefore providing unique contexts for exploring Black advantaged parents' views and college-choice perspectives. I focus on Black advantaged parents' beliefs about HBCUs and historically white institutions (HWIs). On the one hand, many parents express hesitations about HBCUs as "black" schools due to concerns regarding racial stigma toward black organizations. Parents discussed how graduating from an HBCU may further disadvantage children as they become adults. On the other hand, Black advantaged parents also anticipate children's potential experiences with anti-black racism while attending HWIs. **At the heart of these considerations are Black advantaged parents' unresolved worries about children's experiences with racism as they enter college and, later, adulthood.**

## BACKGROUND

### Black (Advantaged) Parenting

Parents are tasked with the responsibility of raising children, helping them navigate society, and preparing them for the future. Yet for parents raising Black children in an anti-black society, parenting assumes special importance. **A growing body of literature focuses on how racial positionality—i.e., one's location in the racial hierarchy—shapes Black parenting (Cooper 2005).** Studies have noted the tensions that Black parents face when helping children succeed, particularly in the absence of class resources (Turner 2020). These concerns are especially prominent in the face of growing state-sanctioned racial violence and continued systemic discrimination (Threlfall 2018). Literature on racial socialization, for example, highlights **the labor of equipping Black children with the cultural skills and knowledge to navigate a social world where racism is a persistent force shaping black experiences (Lesane-Brown 2006).** Existing studies, however, show contrasting approaches to racial socialization in ways that intersect with other elements of black family life, such as decisions about and experiences within the contexts of schooling and neighborhoods (Pattillo 1999). While some Black parents endeavor to insulate children from racism by ensuring their connection to black cultural identity and other Black children and families, others focus on preparing them for racial encounters through contact with non-Black people (Lacy 2007).

For Black advantaged parents, socializing children regarding race may collide with their class identity (Dow 2019). Black advantaged parents, like their non-Black counterparts, engage in child-rearing strategies that work to maintain children's class standing and provide them with opportunities to excel (Lareau 2003). Class privileges give Black children greater access to resources and enable them to enjoy some of the advantages that their White counterparts experience (Claytor 2020). Unlike their lower-class counterparts, Black middle-, upper-middle, and upper-class parents have the means to shield children from some systemic elements of racism, such as under-resourced neighborhoods, crime, policing, and poor schooling (Lacy 2007). **Yet, to provide children with quality education and other cultural capital, Black advantaged parents face a series of tradeoffs.**

Because schools with larger Black populations tend to be underfunded and less able to offer academic resources than their majority-White counterparts, Black parents face difficult choices that they may characterize as being between academic rigor and social-cultural belonging (Posey-Maddox et al. 2021). Black parents from advantaged backgrounds often raise children in neighborhoods with fewer Black families and send children to schools with fewer Black peers, leaving them vulnerable to encounters with racism (Lacy 2007). **Black advantaged parents must, like their peers from less-advantaged backgrounds, work to insulate children from the racial ills of society. In fact, because Black advantaged families spend comparatively more time in white spaces, they must frequently grapple with the ways that race shapes their experiences (Anderson 2022).**

Whereas lower-class Black families are to some extent isolated from whiteness, Black advantaged families must draw on other tools to protect themselves from racism (Dow 2019; Wilson 1987). Some of these tools involve leaning into class privilege, which includes participating in distinct Black middle-class spaces such as Jack and Jill, an organization founded by Black mothers to support the development of Black children and connect members to other Black advantaged families (Dow 2019;

Lacy 2007). This study extends literature on the complexities of race and class in relation to black parenting by focusing on Black advantaged parents with children who are approaching college decisions. Specifically, the current study examines how racial positionality shapes Black advantaged parents' views of their children's college options as they prepare to enter adulthood and encounter organizational spaces where racism affects opportunity. Focusing on the college search process extends existing literature on this population, which largely focuses on parents of pre-adolescent children (Dow 2019). This article thus demonstrates how complexities of parenting Black children continue as children age.

### Anti-blackness and Higher Education

Whereas past generations of people from marginalized backgrounds were excluded from higher education and recent Supreme Court rulings prohibit race-conscious admissions, today families of color ostensibly have greater access to a range of colleges, including both HBCUs and HWIs (Allen et al. 2007; Saul 2023). Yet greater access does not mean greater inclusion or an absence of anti-black racism (Jack 2019). Moreover, improved accessibility in higher education does not guarantee equal outcomes. In fact, existing scholarship on HWIs highlights the negative experiences of students of color on predominantly white campuses. Black students on historically white campuses experience racial isolation, violence, and discrimination (Tichavakunda 2021). These experiences have consequences for Black students' sense of belonging and academic performance (Allen 1992). Some research finds that Black students, especially those from middle-class backgrounds or who have developed dominant forms of habitus, navigate white college spaces with greater ease compared to their counterparts (Jack 2019). Yet other scholars argue that class status does not shield Black students from racism on campus or the consequences of institutional racism post-graduation (Tichavakunda 2021).

Tichavakunda (2021), for example, writes about the experiences of Black students at an HWI and identifies how Black students (of all class backgrounds) face racial exclusion and micro-aggressions from non-Black peers. Increased visibility of racial violence on campuses and in society adds additional considerations to college choices (Baker and Britton 2021; Comeaux, Chapman, and Contreras 2020). These realities inform perceptions of HWIs; in response, HBCUs are situated as potential alternatives to HWIs. While HBCUs were originally the only institutions available for the education of Black people, today black colleges continue to offer Black students and other students of color more options to enroll in school (Johnson 2017, 2019). Choices in favor of HBCUs highlight desires for psychological safety given the broader racial climate, racial identity development and pride, and connection to same-race peers and faculty (Clayton et al. 2023; Johnson 2017, 2019). In a context where HWIs present opportunities for anti-black interpersonal interactions, HBCUs are attractive choices.

While literature on anti-black racism and higher education often centers individual-level experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion, anti-blackness is directed not only at Black people, who are viewed as inferior and subjugated within the racial hierarchy, but also refers to spaces associated with blackness (Dumas 2016; Williams et al. 2019). In a society where racialization—the process wherein racial meaning is mapped onto previously race-neutral matters—occurs constantly, anti-blackness also manifests in institutions such as schools (Omi and Winant 2015). HBCUs, as institutions founded to educate Black learners, for example, have been relegated to the bottom of the higher education hierarchy, continue to struggle with funding, and navigate negative narratives and depictions in the media (Allen et al. 2007; Allen, Devost, and Mack 2020; Ray 2019; Williams et al. 2019).

Recently, several public land-grant HBCUs, following colleges in Maryland and Florida, have launched federal lawsuits against their state legislatures, citing their failure to equally fund public black colleges (Douglas-Gabriel 2022; Douglas-Gabriel and Wiggins 2021). North Carolina Agriculture & Technical University, for example, would have received over \$2 billion from the state had they been funded equally as their HWI counterparts (Adams and Tucker 2022). Research on ranking apparatuses also highlights anti-blackness toward HBCUs and consequences for the status of black colleges. HBCUs are often avoided in favor of would-be comparable schools through non-reciprocity (Miller, Lynn, and McCloud 2021). When listing peer institutions, many HWIs fail to identify HBCUs despite their similarities (Miller et al. 2021). In addition to being historically underfunded, scholars argue that perceptions of HBCUs may be further complicated by the fact that HBCUs enroll many first-generation students, low-income students, and students with lower academic performance,

though recent cohorts of students are increasingly diverse (Allen et al. 2007). These factors reinforce perceptions of HBCUs as institutionally inferior and othered relative to HWIs (Miller et al. 2021).

Less is known about how the devaluation of HBCUs also maps onto its members and the ways that individuals understand the implications of connections to HBCUs. Scholars, for example, have investigated whether graduating from an HBCU further disadvantages Black college graduates. This line of research has yielded mixed results, with some studies finding that HBCU graduates experience a premium (Price, Spriggs, and Swinton 2011), and others finding earnings penalties among Black HBCU graduates (Strayhorn 2008). Black graduates of even the most selective HWIs, where returns are ostensibly greater, fail to reap equivalent returns to their degrees, highlighting the potential consequences of racism in multiple forms (Gaddis 2015). Likewise, despite historical and contemporary evidence of anti-blackness in higher education, few studies discuss the implications of knowledge about individual and institutional anti-blackness. Specifically, we know less about how parents, as key college brokers, use these ideas to inform their beliefs about colleges. This article addresses this critical gap.

### Class, Race, and Parental Involvement in College Planning

For some students, college is a step toward upward mobility; for others, it is a mechanism of class reproduction. In either case, the college search process is a complex task deeply intertwined with class background, cultural knowledge, and economic resources. Parents, especially those from well-resourced backgrounds, often shoulder the burden of this process and play an active role in children's college planning (Lareau and Weininger 2008). As key sources of what scholars refer to as "college knowledge," parents help children collect information about options, tour prospective schools, prepare them for standardized tests, and oversee applications (Tornatzky, Cutler, and Lee 2002).

Whereas children from affluent backgrounds tend to rely on their parents for college information, those from less-advantaged backgrounds can lack these resources and may navigate college planning independently or with the support of extended kin and school counselors (King 1996; Lareau and Weininger 2008). Moreover, in an era of rising college costs, financial considerations are essential for students from low-income backgrounds (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000). In fact, some studies center the question of college choice as a matter of whether low-income students, and especially those of color, decide to enroll in school at all (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010).

In contrast with their less-advantaged counterparts, advantaged parents are in a better position to support children's emerging adulthood (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000). Advantaged parents often support their children throughout college and help them to navigate post-graduation pathways (Hamilton 2016). Existing scholarship highlights how Black advantaged parents, like their White counterparts, are motivated by class-based interests and concerns about children's futures (Szabo 2022). Black advantaged parents, like their White counterparts, raise children with the expectation of attending college and have the means to process complex college information (Chapman et al. 2018). Black advantaged parents also tend to worry less about how to pay for college, and thus prioritize the reputations of the schools their children consider, although racial disparities in wealth and income also are salient among this population (Chapman et al. 2018). With greater economic resources and insider knowledge, Black advantaged families ostensibly enjoy a wide range of college options.

Yet unlike their White counterparts who can primarily center institutional attributes such as reputation and prestige, Black parents must also anticipate the racial consequences of children's college decisions (Weis et al. 2014). For Black families approaching college decisions, racial diversity and campus climate are of primary importance (Chapman et al. 2018). Parents of high-achieving Black children are deeply aware of how race and racism shape children's college experiences and understand the consequences of racial positionality post-graduation and in a racialized opportunity structure. Of note is Black parents' messaging about education beyond its material value for Black people, and views of educational attainment as a means to combat racial stereotypes of Black people as unintelligent. At the same time, parents recognize the necessity of a bachelor's degree in the face of racial barriers to financial stability (Chapman et al. 2018).

For Black advantaged parents, colleges raise additional concerns about racialized social reproduction, thus leaving HBCUs somewhat in the balance despite their potential to offer greater emotional and psychological support to children while enrolled (Mobley 2017). In her study of the Black

middle-class, [Lacy \(2004\)](#) found that Black middle-class parents were often open to their children attending HWIs because of the benefits they accrue through connections with affluent peers and experiences in the “real world.” While it is clear that Black advantaged parents recognize the potential benefits of HWIs, less is known about why HBCUs are often framed as less ideal.

Although some research suggests that many Black advantaged families prefer traditionally “elite” HWIs due to their potential economic returns (thus mirroring the preferences of White families—[Weis et al. 2014](#)), recent reports show that approximately half of the students attending HBCUs come from families within the top 60 percent of the income distribution and, further, that HBCUs improve the success and mobility of their graduates ([Hammond, Owens, and Gulko 2021](#)). Popular media narratives about HBCU attendance also support these claims and draw attention to students and families with HBCU legacies, or multi-generations of HBCU graduates ([Funderburg 2022](#)). To an extent, these discourses push back against assumptions about parents’ perspectives of HBCUs. Yet, we know far too little about why some Black advantaged parents are resistant to their children attending black colleges. Scholars highlight concerns about the limited financial aid offered by HBCUs and worries about how HBCU degrees are perceived in society ([Tobolowsky, Outcalt, and McDonough 2005](#); [Weis et al. 2014](#)). Although research points to mixed evidence regarding economic returns, other studies find that graduates of black colleges go on to be more actively involved in political arenas, occupy leadership positions, and enjoy greater psychological benefits, such as higher self-esteem and self-image, compared to their non-HBCU counterparts ([Fryer and Greenstone 2010](#); [Price et al 2011](#)).

This article assesses how Black advantaged parents’ understandings of racism, both on college campuses and in society, shape their views of their children’s college options. Given documented racism on college campuses, as well as racialized perceptions of colleges, Black advantaged parents have multiple layers to contend with when making sense of their children’s college options. Black advantaged parents’ beliefs surrounding higher education thus bring the significance of race and racism (both at the individual and institutional levels) into focus.

## DATA AND METHODS

This article draws on 35 in-depth interviews with Black parents, representing 28 families. The data were collected between June 2019 and March 2020 in Atlanta, Georgia, and Columbus, Ohio. The IRB at Ohio State University approved the research protocol. All participants gave their informed consent, and adequate steps were taken to protect confidentiality. To be eligible for the study, participants had to self-identify as Black; live within 30 miles of Atlanta or Columbus; have a child in their junior or senior year of high school; and have at least one parent in the home working in a white-collar profession or with at least a bachelor’s degree. During the study period, families were in the stage of identifying a “college set” to which children would apply and eventually choose from ([Cabrera and La Nasa 2000](#)).

Consistent with previous studies, I approximate social class using a combination of educational attainment and occupation ([Hill 2022](#); [Marsh et al. 2007](#)). The class and family literatures highlight the benefits of having a college-educated parent for children’s developmental and college pathways ([Cabrera and La Nasa 2000](#); [Calarco 2014](#); [Lareau 2003](#)). Given that this study focuses on higher education, I use education and occupation to approximate these measures and proxy college planning resources. Throughout, I use the term “advantaged” to encompass various categories within the Black middle class (e.g., lower-middle, middle-middle, and upper-middle) as well as members of the Black upper class ([Lacy 2007](#)). The designation of “advantaged” is intended to decenter differences in earnings among the Black middle-class population, which vary substantially, and instead to account for the shared advantages among Black parents with at least a bachelor’s degree ([Lacy 2007](#)). The distinction of Black advantaged also acknowledges the non-economic cultural and class resources families have at their disposal, relative to their less-privileged counterparts.

### The Case

I selected Atlanta and Columbus as sites because of their distinct geographical locations, racial and class histories, and higher education landscapes. Taken together, they offer a large range of college-going options for Black advantaged families to consider.

Atlanta is located in the South, home to many private and public colleges and universities, and holds the largest concentration of HBCUs, including two top-ranked HBCUs, Spelman and Morehouse Colleges. Other nationally-ranked institutions in the area include Agnes Scott College, Emory University, and Georgia Tech. Nearby Georgia State is one of the most diverse HWIs, with Black students comprising 41 percent of the student population. Georgia incentivizes going to college through state-funded grants, including the HOPE scholarship, which provides generous financial support for high-achieving students who attend in-state schools ([Georgia Student Financial Commission 2022](#)). Atlanta also has a distinct socio-cultural history and connections to Black political leadership and the elite ([McMillan Cottom 2017](#)). Many Black political leaders have connections to Atlanta and the city's HBCUs. Famous civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, attended Morehouse College; Stacey Abrams, the 2018 and 2022 Democratic nominee for Georgia governor, is a graduate of Spelman College. Demographically, Black people represent 33.6 percent of the population, and 53.4 percent of the total population has at least a bachelor's degree ([U.S. Census Bureau 2021](#)). In 2020, the median household income in the Atlanta area was about \$71,193 ([Data USA 2020a](#)).

Columbus is located in the Midwest and has an equally diverse socio-cultural and higher education landscape. Columbus is home to the nationally-ranked, selective, flagship institution, Ohio State University. Several other public and private colleges are located near Columbus, including liberal arts colleges such as Denison University, Kenyon College, and Oberlin College, as well as regional universities including Miami University of Ohio and the University of Cincinnati. Ohio has two HBCUs—one private university, Wilberforce, and one land-grant institution, Central State University. Ohio has various initiatives to promote college-going; for example, all students who graduated from an Ohio high school are eligible for in-state tuition, even if they leave the state and return ([Ohio Department of Higher Education 2022](#)). Demographically, about 15 percent of the population are Black. The average household income in Columbus, Ohio is about \$58,116 ([Data USA 2020b](#)). Overall, 36 percent of the population have a bachelor's degree or higher ([U.S. Census Bureau 2021](#)).

Although I originally planned to draw comparisons between each of these sites, given relatively few interviews with parents in Atlanta, and the salience of racial positionality and class interests in shaping Black parental views, geographic differences are not included in this analysis. I address this further in the limitations section.

### Sample Recruitment

I distributed my recruitment flyer to professional black organizations, groups, and community members, including: black Greek letter organizations; parenting organizations; college and university alumni chapters, graduate students, staff, professors, and administrators and extended friend and family networks. I also distributed flyers at local community organizations and events including businesses, churches, and college fairs. Finally, I posted the flyer on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter via my personal accounts. These recruitment sites were vital for connecting with Black parents, because they serve as spaces for establishing and maintaining Black middle-class identity ([Dow 2019](#); [Lacy 2007](#)). In addition to these efforts, I recruited participants via snowball sampling and personal networks. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to refer me to other parents who met the study criteria.

### Sample Characteristics

[Table 1](#) shows select participant demographics. All but two parents identified as Black American (see limitations). Most parents and their children lived in Columbus (25 interviews), with fewer living in Atlanta (10). Most interviews (23) were conducted solely with mothers. Although research shows that Black fathers from advantaged backgrounds play at least an equal if not even a more significant role in their children's college planning, mothers have been shown to be critical in supporting children's college planning and more generally are key actors in the racial socialization and child-rearing process ([Brown 2022](#); [Greene 1990](#)).

While the current study focuses on Black advantaged parents' perceptions of their children's college options, parents themselves construct and rely on their social positionality as Black in America to inform their perceptions of their own (as well as their children's) options in life ([Cooper 2005](#)). As such,

Table 1. Select Demographics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Class	Location	Educational Attainment	Occupation <sup>1</sup>	Focal Child Gender	Focal Child School Type	Focal Child Classification
Ava (H)	Upper Middle	Atlanta	PhD	Psychologist	Female	Private	Senior
Carolyn (H)	Upper Middle	Atlanta	MA	Entrepreneur	Male	Public	Junior
Denise and Carl	Upper Middle	Atlanta	MA/MA	Paralegal/Recruiter	Male	Public	Senior
Faye	Middle	Atlanta	Some College	Litigation Support Specialist	Female	Public	Junior
Sarah and Reginald	Middle	Atlanta	BA/BA	Registered Nurse/Security Account Manager	Female	Public	Senior
Shayla	Middle	Atlanta	BA	Paralegal	Female	Private	Senior
Sheryl (H)	Middle	Atlanta	BA	Product Manager	Male	Public	Senior
Tracy (H)	Upper Middle	Atlanta	MBA	Marketing Professional	Female	Private	Senior
Angela and Kenneth (H)	Upper	Columbus	JD/BS	Attorney/Accountant	Female	Public	Junior
Annette and Edwin	Upper	Columbus	MS/JD	Engineer and Pastor/Lawyer	Male	Public	Junior
Beverly and Donald*	Middle	Columbus	BA/BA	Network Operator/BX Auditor	Female	Public	Junior
Debra (H)	Upper	Columbus	MBA	Corporate Executive	Male	Public	Senior
Gloria	Upper Middle	Columbus	MBA	Change Management Specialist	Female	Public	Senior
Gwendolyn	Upper Middle	Columbus	PhD	Professor	Male	Public	Senior
Ivory	Upper Middle	Columbus	MS	Registered Nurse and Nursing Program Manager	Female	Public	Junior
Jackie and Raymond	Middle	Columbus	BA/HIS Diploma	Product Director/Process Management	Male	Public	Senior
James	Middle	Columbus	BS	Information Technology Manager	Male	Public	Junior
Judy and Steve*	Upper	Columbus	JD/MBA	Attorney/CFO	Male	Private	Senior
Julia	Upper Middle	Columbus	MA	K-12 Educator and Administrator	Male	Public	Senior
Lora	Upper Middle	Columbus	MA	Consultant	Male	Public	Senior
Marcia	Middle	Columbus	BA	Project Manager	Male	Public	Junior
Renee (H)	Upper Middle	Columbus	MSW	Social Worker	Female	Private	Junior
Tanya and Keith*	Middle	Columbus	BA/Some College	Non-profit Director/Insurance Agent	Female	Public	Senior

Table 1. Continued

Pseudonym	Class	Location	Educational Attainment	Occupation <sup>1</sup>	Focal Child Gender	Focal Child School Type	Focal Child Classification
Theresa and John	Middle	Columbus	BA/HS Diploma	Human Resource Representative/ Transportation Driver	Male	Public	Junior
Tina (H) and Miguel*	Upper	Columbus	BS/BS	Corporate Executive/Project Manager and Engineer	Female	Public	Senior
Tisha (H)	Upper	Columbus	MS	Retired School Psychologist	Female	Private	Senior
Melanie	Upper Middle	Columbus	MA	Human Resource Manager	Female	Public	Senior
Shelia and Richard	Upper Middle	Columbus	MA/BA	K-12 Educator/K-12 Educator	Male	Public	Senior

(H) Parent (or spouse) attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU)

\* Interviews conducted with both parents. All other interviews with both parents were conducted separately.

<sup>1</sup> The occupational categories reflected here reflect data from a pre-interview demographic and background information survey and are self-reported by participants

I asked participants to reflect on their parenting leading up to the college planning process, as well as their own educational and professional histories.

Participants came from a variety of class and educational backgrounds. The sample includes Black advantaged parents who were first-generation advantaged and first-generation college students, and those whose children would be third- or fourth-generation college students. Accordingly, some parents had a long family history of college-going and much experience with higher education decision-making. Research shows that college-educated parents are more hands-on with college planning compared to those without college backgrounds (Hamilton 2016). Most parents attended HWIs as undergraduates, with 9 parents (or their spouse) attending HBCUs (indicated by an (H) in Table 1).

Twenty parents held a master's degree or higher, including PhDs and advanced degrees in business, law, and engineering. Parents had various occupations including college educators, K–12 school administrators, attorneys, psychologists, human resource professionals, and product managers. Almost all, with the exclusion of one parent, were in a white-collar, professional, or managerial occupation (this participant, however, had a high-earning blue-collar job and was married to someone in a white-collar position). Although I did not collect data about participants' income, parents enrolled their children in schools in areas where homes valued upwards of \$190,000–\$400,000 and annual incomes averaged \$145,000 (Niche 2023a; Niche 2023b). Parents who sent children to private schools paid tuition in the range of \$30,000+. With few exceptions, parents were raising children in predominantly white suburban neighborhoods and sent their children to suburban public schools. Consistent with previous literature on school choices among middle-class families, parents discussed selecting neighborhoods with schools that would offer children a challenging college-preparatory curriculum (Shapiro and Johnson 2003). Twenty-two (out of 28) families enrolled their children in public suburban high schools. Although school racial compositions varied, most schools were predominantly white, and some children attended schools with fewer than 10 percent Black students (Niche 2023a; Niche 2023b). Most focal children were in their senior year of high school (18), and boys and girls were equally represented (14 each).

### Data Collection

Interviews lasted 1–3 hours, were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. When there were two parents in the home, parents were interviewed separately to capture individual trajectories, experiences, and views of their children's college options (with the exception of four interviews that were conducted with both parents—see Table 1). I conducted interviews in various locations including participants' offices, my office, coffee shops, restaurants, public libraries, and colleges, and, occasionally, in participants' homes and via videoconferencing. I asked parents about the focal child's educational trajectory; racialized and gendered experiences in schools and other social spaces; about parenting styles and household resources; high school and college-related resources; parental experiences with and thoughts about college; college plans; and concerns about children being away at college. To protect respondents' confidentiality, I replaced names with pseudonyms and anonymized details of their personal lives.

### Positionality

As a Black college-educated woman from a middle-class family, I thought deeply about how my status might impact the theoretical sampling decisions, data collection, and interpretation. In many ways, my status was beneficial to the data collection process. Given my positionality, I was like many of my participants and their children. As an HBCU graduate who attended an HWI for graduate school, I embodied the potential pathways that participants were contemplating for their children. There were instances when my identity as an HBCU graduate was disclosed prior to an interview. For example, when I interviewed two parents separately, a parent may have shared my HBCU graduate status or mentioned my graduate school affiliation to their spouse prior to our interview.

Many participants asked about my educational trajectory and thoughts about college. For the most part, however, these discussions occurred outside of the interviews. Given the literature on social desirability (e.g., Grimm 2010), we might expect that my status as an HBCU graduate would deter parents from being critical of black colleges, but the results presented in this paper suggest otherwise. Ten of the parents (or their spouses) also attended HBCUs and many had family members or

friends who attended black colleges. Despite their connections to black institutions, however, and given parents' concerns about anti-black racism, most parents evaluated HBCUs with a similar level of scrutiny, as I will discuss.

I thus view my personal connections to the subject matter as strengths of the research as they provided me with shared cultural knowledge and credibility as a member of the Black middle class. Insider knowledge helped inform the recruitment process, establish rapport with participants, and create an environment in which participants shared details of their lives more easily (Bhopal 2010). I often asked participants to be explicit when describing their experiences so as not to assume the meaning of their comments (Bhopal 2010). When participants spoke about race and racialized experiences, some participants used coded language. For example, some parents used "them" and "us" to delineate between White and Black people. I responded to colloquial phrases and verbiage with questions of clarification to encourage participants to explain what they meant in greater detail.

### Data Analysis

I approached this research from a critical race grounded methodology. Consistent with the original elements of grounded theory, critical race-grounded methodology allows for theory generation that derives from the data themselves (Charmaz 2014). Additionally, critical race-grounded methodology allows for an "analysis that builds on the knowledge of Communities of Color to reveal the ways race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression interact to mediate the experiences and realities of those affected" (Malagon, Huber, and Velez 2009:264). This approach enabled me to situate parents' (and their children's) micro-level experiences within broader structural factors of race and racism. Using this framework, I drew on relevant cultural intuition to make sense of parents' narratives.

During data analysis, I open-coded interviews line-by-line. Codes for each interview were organized in a spreadsheet for easy comparison. Line-by-line coding allowed for close analysis of the data related to observations, behaviors, and experiences found in everyday life (Charmaz 2014). During the first phase of data analysis, I identified initial codes that emerged in each interview (e.g., "concerns about college," "perceptions of HBCUs"). After developing the initial list of codes, I revisited the data and codes to identify overarching categories and collapse and combine codes across and among cases. I then revisited each transcript to apply themes to the data and develop key conclusions (Charmaz 2014). The data represented here reflect final themes about parents' meaning-making and interpretation of the consequences of college choices for their children as adults and in the face of racial discrimination. The analysis specifically focuses on parental views of where their children might go to college, concerns about the implications of attending an HWI, and the complexities of graduating with a degree from an HBCU.

## FINDINGS

The key findings in this section are organized as follows. I first demonstrate that parents' assessments of opportunity in an anti-black and unequal world informs their understanding of their children's lives as adults. Given parents' racial (and class) positionality, and understanding of institutional anti-blackness, Black advantaged parents recognize that their children are susceptible to interpersonal racism and discrimination, as well as unequal opportunities, relative to their White counterparts. Then I show how these realizations map onto parents' understandings of the risks associated with HBCUs and HWIs. Because colleges are racialized, parents' views of their children's college options highlight fears about their children's encounters with racism as college students *and* as graduates. Some parents considered the additional burden of institutional anti-blackness and worried that choosing an HBCU could hinder children's job prospects. I also discuss how Black advantaged parents grapple with concerns about children's collegiate experiences while attending HWIs. As Black students navigating HWI campuses, parents worry their children will encounter racism and isolation. Overall, I show that parents' anticipations of anti-black racism shape their views of their children's college options.

### Parental Views of Opportunity in Anti-black World

Given parents' racial positionality and class status, they situated their children's futures in the broader context of anti-blackness and a society wherein racial discrimination shapes attainment and mobility.

As members of the Black advantaged class, parents are acutely aware of how racism within the broader society shapes achievement (Wingfield and Chavez 2020). Parents worried about children's ability to provide and sustain a life for themselves post-graduation and especially grappled with the fact that as Black persons living in America, life is already unequal. Research on employment discrimination supports parents' perspectives, as even Black college graduates who attend selective colleges may struggle to achieve equal employment outcomes (Gaddis 2015). Parents expected the road ahead for Black children approaching college and adulthood to be challenging.

Debra, for example, thought Black children were born at a disadvantage. Debra lived in the predominantly white suburbs of Columbus with her husband (a lawyer) and their sons. She was a graduate of a top research university and was pursuing a career in consulting after a long career as a fashion executive. Despite their family's class advantages, Debra expressed the fear that because her children were Black, racism would interfere with their opportunities in the future. As she put it, "I still think our kids have to be twice as good to get the opportunities that they get. I still think that White kids can do a little less." Recognizing the realities of racism, Debra and other parents saw the pathways to achievement as being inherently unequal in ways that favored White people. To explain, Faye, a mother of three in Atlanta put it this way:

I think we're [Black people] held to a higher standard.... And even with degrees, they [White people] have advantage in a lot of the places. Bla—we have to work harder... But a lot of times, White people are just handed stuff, and we have to work for it.

Raymond also shared Faye's understanding of the consequences of anti-blackness. These considerations forced parents to focus on the college degree as a protective mechanism against racism but also led many to question the limitations of educational attainment in an anti-black society. As one of the few parents in the study without a bachelor's degree, Raymond reflected on the significance of a college degree, especially in a credentialed labor force. Although he was able to advance in his blue-collar job, Raymond thought having a college degree allowed individuals to be more competitive, especially when they were Black. This reflection echoes research on low-income families and the importance Black parents place on their children getting a college degree as a means of overcoming economic disadvantage (Comeaux et al. 2020). Yet, Raymond was also aware of the continued challenges facing Black people, even the college-educated, and surmised that ultimately, a degree might not be enough to compete against the strengths of anti-black racism. Thinking back on conversations with his son, Raymond commented:

I've always explained to him [my son] that you can be as smart as you want to be, but if it's you going up against a Caucasian person and you both are equal that they're most likely going to pick the Caucasian person. You have to go above and beyond...

Here we see that Black advantaged parents contemplate their children's ability to navigate racism as they begin their adult lives, as well as the strengths and limitations of college degrees. Parental concerns about their children's ability to succeed despite racial barriers came from a place of personally knowing the challenges that Black people face. While Black parents of all class backgrounds tend to be aware of the consequences of racism on children's experiences, Black advantaged parents focused on ways to minimize the risk (Chapman et al. 2018). Parents' racial positionality and class location forced them to think about how Black college graduates are evaluated. Black advantaged parents' perceptions of HBCUs and HWIs particularly illuminated this concern.

### The HBCU Dilemma

Parents' views of their children's college options amplified concerns about the prevalence of racism in their children's lives. Black advantaged parents' views of HBCUs evince a well-established consideration among parents raising Black children—that is, institutional affiliations shape future experiences. Because parents recognized that children were already facing the risk of racial discrimination as adults, they worried that graduating from the wrong college could further exclude their children. As a result, HBCUs were a particularly complex option. On the one hand, parents feared that degrees from

HBCUs could doubly marginalize their children as college graduates. Black colleges carried potentially negative racial stigmas. In an anti-black world, then, a degree from an HBCU would be a racialized credential and could potentially expose Black college graduates to additional elements of racial discrimination—the kind targeted at institutions (Ray 2019). At the same time, HBCUs could offer a potential respite, albeit a temporary one, from anti-black racism during college. Research on HBCU attendance highlights black schools as critical systems of support for students' racial development, familial connections and community, and emotional safety from racial violence typically found at HWIs (Johnson 2017; Mobley 2017). Therefore, when considering HBCUs as college options, parents were faced with knowledge of how HBCUs are marginalized as institutions, but also how attending a black college could support their children's emotional well-being during their college years.

Gwendolyn, for example, reflected on the position of HBCUs and how perceptions of blackness as “less than” applies to institutions as well. To explain, she says, “[e]verything black is inferior... [o]r subordinate.” Importantly, most parents did not hold personal views of HBCUs as inferior, but rather recognized that the larger society might not view them positively or as equivalent to HWIs. Some parents even recognized that there were visible and selective HBCUs that could be strong options for their children. Recent popular sources have highlighted the pride and legacy of HBCU attendance over generations, with particular emphasis on selective HBCUs. Institutions like Hampton University and Morehouse and Spelman Colleges have been highlighted in discourse around higher education (Funderburg 2022). Yet, the reality of not being able to control anti-black perceptions of black colleges remained a serious consideration. Carl, for instance, a parent in Atlanta, spoke to perceptions of HBCUs. Carl's son was planning to apply to a few HBCUs, one of which was highly-ranked. However, Carl also recognized the uncertainty of society's perceptions of degrees from HBCUs:

I feel that people do not perceive HBCUs as... [equivalent to other institutions]. They wouldn't look at... Tuskegee to be as good as... Georgia Tech.... People automatically assume historically black colleges are not as good [or] as prestigious. That's just their perception.... People don't really know what [an] HBCU is... unless you've been in certain arenas to know what an HBCU is all about.

Even though Carl's son was looking forward to applying to a black college, Carl also contended with the fact that others and potentially employers could receive damning messages about black colleges (or no messages at all). While some of the worry over HBCU attendance was about society recognizing HBCUs and their value, some parents struggled with the association between black institutions and stereotypes about Black people.

In my sample, parents who attended black colleges often had children who were considering black colleges (Johnson 2019; Tobolowsky et. al 2005). Some parents, or their spouses,(9) had attended HBCUs and many had friends or relatives who attended black schools. These parents were more outwardly supportive of their children considering black colleges, although they recognized their experiences as graduates could be difficult. Kenneth, for example, a graduate of an HBCU and an attorney who lived in Columbus with his wife and two daughters, articulated this point: “if she were to go to an HBCU... to transition back into... the world will bite.... It's [HBCU attendance] a blessing and a curse.” Continuing, he explains,

[At an HBCU] you could matriculate... not that it's carefree... but a lot of the crap that you might [have to experience you might] not have to... [at a school] where you're in the minority... [As a student at an HBCU] your sole focus can be about academics... you don't have to worry about the silliness that you'll encounter... in the workplace... but... you don't have to deal with things that you will see every day. And it may come as a shock and/or surprise when you have these things constantly in your face.

Parents with weaker ties to HBCUs were even more skeptical. In Theresa's case, the stigma around HBCUs was difficult to ignore. Theresa, a married mother of two boys in Columbus, explained this point and why she was hesitant for her child to consider HBCUs. Although Theresa knew a few graduates of HBCUs, she felt strongly that her child *not* attend one. She says:

I want to make sure that [the] perception from society, and from human resources... that they're not looking like "Oh no, he's not you know going to put in the work" or "We're not going to hire him because this is where he graduated from..." I just don't [know] and that is a fear and a concern.

Theresa's comments speak to the cultural narratives about blackness that also could collude with public views of HBCUs and their value. Deep down, parents struggled with anti-black messages about HBCUs (and their Black students). As institutions serving Black students, parents worried that perceptions of HBCUs, by the world and possibly employers, would be informed by the stigma of blackness and views of Black people as inferior. From her perspective as a human resource professional, Theresa adds:

I do feel like there is a double standard when it comes to HBC[U] schools, because I think the [job] selection process is not going to be made from all people who are familiar with the schools enough... without saying "Oh, I don't know about that school..." or without identifying [the job candidates'] race immediately by seeing the name of their school.

She goes on to explain what might happen when HBCU graduates seek employment:

[T]here's a screening process, and if you have the wrong person screening [laughs], that can definitely be—that can deter you from even getting a call. When you put your school on there, and your school clearly identifies as being [an] HBCU, that clearly in my opinion identifies your race.... That could make or break your opportunity against another qualified applicant.

These quotes demonstrate Theresa's concerns about the school her child will graduate from and specifically her uncertainty about HBCUs. Theresa's and other parents' evaluations of HBCUs are intertwined with public anti-black perceptions and the supposed inferiority of HBCUs. As Theresa's comment suggests, parents are left to make sense of HBCUs in the hierarchy of higher education, one that is simultaneously informed by a critique of the quality of black institutions, their (in)visibility in mainstream society, and racial stigma associated with blackness.

As organizations racialized as black, HBCUs are marked, and as a parent, Theresa, and other parents like her, did not want one additional barrier between their children and their success after graduation. Julia, a K–12 school administrator in Columbus, had similar fears about how employers would evaluate HBCU graduates. Much like Theresa, Julia faced uncertainties about her son carrying a degree from an HBCU into the workplace:

I know people that graduated from HBCUs, and sometimes that can be a little intimidating to employers. It's the fear for, "Oh, are they going to be extra black?" Like, "Oh my goodness, like they went to Morehouse, or they went to Howard, are they going to be... What is that and where is that?" Even if they don't know, and he [the employer] starts inquiring about it, then they're like, "Are they going to start a revolution?"

Clearly, this quote positions HBCUs as a complex option for Black advantaged parents. Julia's comments challenge what it means to be employable as a Black person and articulate parents' fears about whether degrees from HBCUs further exacerbate racism because of their association with blackness. Scholars have shown how Black people, especially those in professional settings, must manage their behaviors and emotions for fear of consequences and that doing so is actually preferred by White co-workers (Durr and Wingfield 2011; McCluney et al. 2021). Parents had fears about whether graduating from HBCUs would signal stereotypical traits associated with blackness. Black graduates' ideals, values, and behaviors could be called into question given their affiliation with HBCUs. Julia's comments reflect fears that graduates of HBCUs might be perceived as disruptive, and suggest that evaluations of Black college graduates may be tied up with those of black institutions. Consequentially, Black advantaged parents are forced to consider to what extent their children may face racial discrimination in adulthood by attending HBCUs.

### Historically White Institutions and Anti-black Racism on Campus

Although many parents worried that choosing HBCUs would negatively influence their children's experiences with anti-blackness as college graduates, their views about higher education institutions were further complicated by worries about student experiences with racism on historically white campuses. Parents worried that their children would not be supported or treated fairly on historically white campuses. They also worried that their children would have trouble fitting in with peers.

Reginald, for instance, spoke about how he assumed White students would always be favored over Black students at HWIs. Reginald himself had attended a predominantly white high school and university. He wanted his daughter to attend an HBCU. When thinking about how his daughter would fare should she decide to attend an HWI instead, he explained, “[the culture of the institution might be] ‘I could care less if you succeed or not... because I’m getting paid anyway, and you... paid your money.’” He goes on to suggest that White professors might be more supportive of White students than Black students. Reginald continued:

[I]f you’re [a White person] on that borderline [of a passing grade and a failing grade] and it comes down to them [White students] and you [a Black student], “I’m a [as a White professor] slide them [and their grade] a little bit.” [Whereas for Black students] even if you’re a little bit less, it could happen [that they do not help you].

While Reginald’s comments speak to the favoritism extended to White students by White professors, his views about HWIs also highlight uncertainties about whether his daughter would receive the same opportunities as her White peers and whether she would have professors who look like her. For these reasons, Reginald was hesitant about his daughter attending an HWI and encouraged her to attend a black college. He was not alone. In fact, Renee, a mother of two, had similar concerns about how White professors might treat her daughter who was considering attending a community college before transferring to a 4-year institution. Renee recognized that attending a historically white school, even one with a diverse student body (like many community colleges have—[Malcolm 2012](#)), could have its pitfalls. As she put it:

Even though I know there’re a lot of African American students at [community college], I do have concerns of... the unconscious bias that she may come in contact with from professors, the little microaggressions that build up over time that she may experience.

Other parents shared Renee’s worries about racism at HWIs and in the classroom specifically. Keith, a father of three girls, had reservations about his eldest daughter attending a historically white school. Speaking to his hesitations, he says:

I don’t want her to be judged according to her [skin] color if she’s sitting in a classroom amongst... Caucasians, to be honest... I don’t want [pauses] that to even be a struggle. Not that she won’t succeed in doing well [at a historically white school].

Ava also recognized the potential of unequal treatment of Black students relative to White students at HWIs. Thinking about how her daughter might navigate a well-known public HWI in Georgia, she says,

We identify with the people who look like us.... Whenever we’re doing something, we [as Black people] root for the black team on *Family Feud* because it’s the black family, not because they’re any better than the other team. So I think that it would be more difficult... [for her at a non-HBCU].

Although Ava shies away from explicitly claiming her daughter could be discriminated against or excluded at an HWI, she admits that prioritizing people who look like us over those who do not is what we all do. With fewer Black professors and professors of color, parents also feared their children would be at risk of being overlooked. As a result, and much like Reginald, she considered whether attending

an HWI would increase her daughter's chances of facing some of these experiences. Ava's apprehensions about HWIs are supported by research on Black students' experiences on historically white campuses. Tichavakunda (2021) finds that Black students experience invisibility on such campuses and in classes where there are fewer students of color. While research suggests that students from advantaged backgrounds are better equipped with the cultural capital to navigate HWIs, Black students are not always able to reap the same benefits of their skills (Jack 2019).

Overall, some parents worried that children must work overtime to be supported at HWIs. Annette explains this point in her comments about sending her child to an HWI. She says, "We had talked to him about [a public state university] for a long time... [but there] it's like, 'You're going to have to make it happen for yourself.'" Parents like Annette worried that at HWIs, Black students would get lost without a community. Julia shared this concern. When asked how she felt about her son attending an HWI, she commented, "My thing is, if he does decide to go [to a historically white school]... I need him to find us [other Black people], and either join a fraternity, a club... I wouldn't want him to lose who he is in college." According to Julia, attending an HWI could have consequences for her son's social experiences and racial identity. Julia's comments positioned social isolation as a significant effect of attending an HWI.

Generally, parents contended with the fact that success in college might be more difficult for Black students at white schools. Many struggled with accepting that HWIs could mean that, as Denise (a mother in Atlanta) stated, their children would have to "fight harder... to be noticed." Parents' perspectives of racism on historically white campuses, as one that either by pure disproportion or by favoritism, rewarded whiteness, reify the dilemma of the college search process. Moreover, while ultimately parents like Denise felt that their children would "be okay" regardless of where they attended school, they recognized that as college students and graduates anti-black racism could influence their children's lives. From their perspectives, anti-blackness was always present in the black experience. However, participants expressed that there was really no perfect choice: either children's experiences with institutional anti-black racism would be further compounded by degrees from HBCUs, or their college experiences would be isolating uphill battles at HWIs.

## DISCUSSION

Using in-depth interviews with Black upper-, upper-middle, and middle-class parents, this article contributes to existing scholarship by investigating Black advantaged parents' views of their children's college options. This article extends previous research on Black parenting, behaviors, and decision-making and draws attention to how worries about children's well-being persists as their children age (Chapman et al. 2018; Freeman 1999; Weis et al. 2014). Just as Black advantaged parents have fears about racism in secondary schools and when children are young, Black advantaged parents' racial and class positionality also inform their understanding of children's experiences with racism in college and during the transition to adulthood. I show that parents approach college choices recognizing the risk of racial discrimination and anti-blackness that follows. As professionals themselves, Black advantaged parents are aware of the consequences of racial status for everyday experiences as well as advancement.

In the eyes of Black advantaged parents, children are susceptible to anti-black racism at the individual and institutional level as students at HWIs or as HBCU college graduates. Because colleges are racialized, parents worry about children's experiences with racism while in college and also have fears about their encounters with racism as college graduates. Essentially, Black parental views of HBCUs and HWIs show that Black higher educational decision-making is a potential choice between racism now, as their children enter college, or racism later, as they enter the workforce—what Cox (2016) calls a non-choice. Whereas their counterparts from lower-SES backgrounds view college degrees as useful tools to resist racial discrimination in employment and something that cannot be taken away, Black advantaged parents worry about whether having a degree from the wrong school could put their children at greater risk through anti-blackness at the institutional level. At the same time, Black advantaged parents, like their less-advantaged counterparts, must also consider how children will be treated as students at HWIs, a factor distinguishing them from White advantaged parents who can

primarily focus on selecting schools that enhance and reproduce class privileges. Whereas White advantaged parents and their children can largely enjoy the freedoms and rewards of making college choices, Black advantaged families face and anticipate a set of choice dilemmas, none of which elude anti-blackness.

This article also contributes to previous research on HBCUs by recognizing them as organizations racialized as black, stigmatized, and impacted by a society that views blackness as inferior. By highlighting how fears about institutional anti-blackness inform parents' views of HBCUs, I show why families may hesitate to consider black colleges. Although research and public discourse generally point to increased interest in HBCUs, I show that some Black advantaged parents have reservations about how degrees from HBCUs are perceived after students graduate (Johnson 2017; Williams et al. 2021). This finding is perhaps surprising given that many HBCUs have had record-breaking applications in recent years (Miranda 2022). Building on the work of Lacy (2007) who argued that Black middle-class parents view black colleges as nonrepresentative of the real world, I provide additional nuance to Black advantaged parents' concerns about black colleges and share insight into what may be negatively shaping Black parents' views of HBCUs.

These findings likewise have compelling implications with regard to institutional anti-blackness. Given Black advantaged parents' concerns about children graduating from an HBCU, future research could examine how HBCU graduates navigate society post-graduation in institutions like the workplace and in relation to social and economic outcomes beyond wages. Studies, for example, should consider how employers evaluate HBCU graduates, interpret degrees from HBCUs compared to HWIs, and how messaging about HBCUs influences employment outcomes. Previous studies investigating the role of institutional affiliations in employment reveal the consequences for access to elite jobs (Rivera 2015); perhaps similar mechanisms are at play for HBCU graduates.

Finally, this article demonstrates the continued risk of racism at the individual level on historically white campuses and its effects on Black advantaged parents' views of their children's college choices. Parents' views of HWIs present these institutions as potentially hostile and unwelcoming for Black students. Comeaux and colleagues (2020) find that worries about the racial climate on historically white campuses cause Black parents and their children to consider institutions with greater diversity and more explicit commitments to racial equity. I similarly find that Black advantaged parents hold concerns about whether their children would be treated fairly by professors or if they would be overlooked on predominantly white campuses. These concerns mirror previous scholarship on educational decision-making in K–12 schools and demonstrate parents' evaluations of the risks and benefits of choices well into their children's adult years (Posey-Maddox et al. 2021). Much research has highlighted the experiences of Black students attending HWIs. This article adds to this literature by showing how parents anticipate this reality. Given parents' critical role in college planning among this population, HWIs should pay more attention to the concerns of Black advantaged parents regarding racism on campus.

### Limitations

Several limitations are worth noting. First, this study draws on interviews with parents in Atlanta and Columbus. Given the small sample size of parents in Atlanta (10 out of 35 interviews), I am unable to draw strong conclusions about the role of space, place, and local economies or culture or to generalize my findings to all Black advantaged parents (Malagon et al. 2009). Research elsewhere investigates the role of proximity to colleges as a factor in decisions to enroll (Turley 2009). While only speculative, similar patterns about proximity to and visibility of HBCUs (especially those categorized as more selective) may also be at play here. The prominence of HBCUs and the relationship between notable Black figures and HBCUs in Atlanta could have implications for how parents in this area think about the consequences of black college attendance. In contrast, and in the absence of well-known and prestigious HBCUs in Ohio and the Midwest more generally, parents may have been doubly cautious about what it would mean for their child to attend a black college. Yet, these considerations reinforce the argument that parents have concerns about where their children attend college because of their perceptions of their children's experiences as students and post-graduation. The findings offer insight into the perspectives of Black advantaged parents in ways that add nuance to previous understandings

of this group and suggest that parents are concerned not only about children's experiences with racism on college campuses but also after they graduate. Future research should consider how geography and place shape such perceptions.

Second, as shown in [Table 1](#), the study includes few parents at the very highest ranks of the socio-economic ladder. I generally found that upper-class parents were skeptical of the research process and were more difficult to recruit for participation. This was especially true in Atlanta, where the Black elite have a longstanding multi-generational presence ([McMillan Cottom 2017](#)). Similarly, while I include several interviews with fathers in the study (11 interviews), mothers' participation was far greater. Although some studies take the role of fathers into consideration, the overrepresentation of mothers in this study is consistent with other research on mothers' involvement ([Brown 2022](#); [Dow 2019](#); [Lareau and Weininger 2008](#)).

Third, I relied heavily on personal and extended social networks to recruit participants for this project. I had previously met only one of the participants, yet my recruitment strategies reflect my connections to HBCUs and local Black communities. I also relied on snowball sampling wherein participants referred their friends, family, and colleagues to consider joining the study. Parents and families are often connected because they share similar ideas, perspectives, and experiences, which could have biased the results presented here.

Finally, most of the parents in my study self-identified as Black Americans. Apart from two parents, the data do not speak to the complexities of ethnicity or nationality within Black communities. [Clerge \(2019\)](#) studies how ethnicity disparately shapes the experiences of the Black middle-class, and other scholarship examines the influence of ethnicity on educational outcomes such as college-going ([Bennett and Lutz 2009](#); [Griffin et al. 2012](#); [Griffin et al. 2016](#); [Massey et al 2007](#)). Additional layers of identity and status may inform Black parents' views of higher education. Despite these limitations, the findings represented here contribute to our understanding of Black advantaged parents, their views about college options, and their interpretation of the implications of attending HBCUs and HWIs.

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