The Siloing of Success:

Colorado College's Approach to Increasing Outreach, Access, and Student Support On-Campus

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Sociology

Colorado College

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

On my honor I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis project explores topics related to college access, outreach, (in)equity, and student success in American higher education reform. Specifically, the study focuses on Colorado College and the work currently ongoing at the College to make the school more accessible to a diverse array of high school graduates given its inherent exclusivity based on the small student body size and historical inaccessibility to individuals who are non-white and non-wealthy. The study is grounded in the College's public pledge in the 2019 Antiracism Commitment to becoming more accessible, diverse, and antiracist. The study examines how present employees of the College—both on the faculty as well as on the staff—approach their work on-campus which is critical to the future fulfillment of these goals. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, the researcher explored topics related to the exclusivity of higher education, the difference between college access and student success, how success is defined and which students are most likely to be successful, and how the organization and structure of Colorado College's departments and divisions impedes antiracism, access, outreach, and student success initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has long been proposed as a tool for increasing social integration and a mechanism through which historically underrepresented and disenfranchised populations may achieve upward mobility in America (Stevens et al. 2008). Undergraduates have much to gain from participation in higher education including not only opportunities for social, emotional, and personal development, but also, skills and experiences that will likely dictate their future professional paths. It is, therefore, incredibly disconcerting that as the nation's population becomes more and more racially and ethnically diverse, higher education remains a system in which society's most privileged come out on top. Unfortunately, Colorado College, a small, selective, and private liberal arts school is no exception to the ways institutions in a stratified higher education system reproduce life outcomes related to race and class. Despite making significant strides in recent years to increase the compositional diversity of CC's student body, the College still has significant steps to take before it can begin to call itself diverse, antiracist, or accessible.

In a report for the Pell Institute "Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students" Engle et al. (2008:3) assert:

> For far too many low-income, first-generation students, the newly-opened door to American higher education has been a revolving one. The unavoidable fact is that while college access has increased for this population, the opportunity to successfully earn a college degree, especially the bachelor's degree, has not.

It is on this issue—of access versus success—that my research project focuses. I ground my sociological study in the widely acknowledged truth that our system as it exists presently has failed to make the pursuit of higher education equitable for the general population, particularly for high school graduates who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), first-generation, or low-income. College retention and degree attainment gaps remain large, and for students from

historically underrepresented backgrounds who do matriculate through U.S. colleges and universities, the experience on-campus is often one which is challenging and isolating (Aries 2023; Ayala et al. 2019; Binder et al. 2019; Gable 2021; Jack 2016). Although all students technically have the opportunity to apply to college (i.e. access), their levels of success (i.e. degree completion, social integration, personal happiness, student engagement, resource acquisition, etc.) remain varied. It is imperative to reference here the recent Supreme Court Decision, which in June of 2023 overruled affirmative action and thus, has the potential to further disenfranchise and exclude BIPOC students from pursuing higher education.

Inequity in higher education is an issue which has also been acknowledged at Colorado College by students, faculty, and staff and also increasingly in official communications from the administration. Specifically, following a series of incidents including racist, hateful, and transphobic rhetoric, in November of 2019 the College released a document entitled "Our Plan to Become an Antiracist Institution." The plan states that "as we strive to offer the finest education, we must acknowledge racism exists here, engage in difficult discussions, and proactively do the hard work of actively opposing racism and setting a more inclusive and equitable course for CC" (Colorado College 2019). The symbolic power of such an acknowledgement should not be underestimated; however, the extent to which these words will be a catalyst for action and meaningful outcomes is a question that remains unanswered for many students, staff, and faculty members. When, and exactly how, will these symbolic and cultural shifts also become systematic and structural ones?

Taking into account this context and the particularities of Colorado College, my research project asks the following questions: For whom is higher education accessible? What is the difference between college access and college success? What is Colorado College doing to

increase accessibility for both prospective and current students? How is student success approached on-campus and is it approached through a lens of equity? And lastly, are access and outreach initiatives for high schoolers being prioritized among the College's administration? For the purposes of my research, the term accessibility refers primarily to a student's socioeconomic, racial, and familial background and its impact on their chances of enrollment and successful matriculation through higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is organized thematically into the following categories: historical context and an overview of the problem of accessibility, researched outreach strategies and interventions being employed to make higher education more accessible, the role of capital in higher education, and lastly the unique positionality of liberal arts colleges such as Colorado College.

After the creation of the Higher Education Act of 1965, President Lyndon Johnson boldly declared that the Act's intent was to ensure "the path of knowledge [be] open to all that have the determination to walk it" (Scott-Clayton 2015). Although overall enrollment rates in higher education have risen since the mid-twentieth century (Engle et al. 2008; Gilbert et al. 2013; Scott-Clayton 2015), the gaps in *who* is able to access this education remain wide. It is critical for researchers to "scratch the surface of this apparent success," and more deeply analyze for whom, in practice, is higher education actually accessible (Engle et al. 2008:5). Disparities in higher educational attainment between more privileged students (oftentimes white and from high-income backgrounds) versus students who are first-generation, BIPOC, or low-income are larger now than they were in the 1960s (Scott-Clayton 2015). It is widely acknowledged that higher education in the United States is a system which remains extremely inequitable (Engle et

al. 2008; Gilbert et al. 2013; Halabieh et al. 2022; Scott-Clayton 2015). Students whose parents attended college, come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, and attended well-funded public or private high schools not only have more access to applying to college, but are also more likely to succeed in obtaining their undergraduate degree once enrolled (Scott-Clayton 2015). The question remains, then, what can be done to equitably address these issues in both the short- and long-term?

After the end of World War II, American society and governmental policy prioritized making higher education more accessible. Many see this process as beginning with the 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education (PCHE) under the Truman Administration followed by the 1965 Higher Education Act. The PCHE was the first time there was published national rhetoric on higher education policy. According to Gilbert et al. (2013:439) and other scholars, "this was a report remarkably ahead of its time. Commission members envisioned a higher education system, and by proxy a nation, that was radically more equitable, supportive, and open to social and intellectual advancement." Another turning point was the G.I. Bill post World War II which supported servicemen and was the first example of large scale, federal funding for education. Southern Black soldiers, however, were excluded. From this point on, federal aid has played a key role in the fight to make higher education more affordable and thus, more accessible (Engle et al. 2008; Halabieh et al. 2022; Scott-Clayton 2015).

However, the system for allocating federal aid as it exists currently is deeply flawed. Studies show that complicated processes associated with many federal aid programs—such as Pell grants and FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)—greatly deter many low-income students from applying to colleges and universities (Scott-Clayton 2015). Furthermore, although loans are popular in the eyes of the government due to their low cost, they

are unattractive to many students who fear graduating with significant levels of debt. As phrased by Scott-Clayton (2015:9) in her article entitled "The Role of Financial Aid in Promoting College Access and Success: Research Evidence and Proposals for Reform," "...while the form [FAFSA] may be little more than an annoyance for well-supported, upper-income students, for low-income and first-generation college students, the process can be overwhelming" and thus, feel impossible to get through. A strength of Scott-Clayton's (2015) study is that it makes clear the researched areas where the U.S. financial aid system needs to be reformed and offers specific suggestions moving forward such as simplifying the FAFSA application and restructuring loan repayment. However, it lacks tangible steps for an attainable path forward, and alternative options that are not dependent on the federal government given the present unpredictability of U.S. electoral outcomes. It is also important to note that the FAFSA application process was especially complicated this year. Not only was the form rollout delayed by a few months, but the Department of Education has also stated that schools will not start to receive students' FAFSA information until the end of January. This means colleges and universities will not be able to release financial aid offers until late March or early April, giving students limited time to weigh myriad options and make a decision that is the most financially beneficial for themselves and for their families (Dickler 2024).

Existing literature suggests that in order for more students to be successful in accessing higher education, interventions must begin in high school. Programming, mentorship, information sharing, and pre-college prep can make a significant difference when it comes to an individual's likelihood to attend college if implemented early on (Berumen 2015; Engle et al. 2008; Herbaut et al. 2020; Scott-Clayon 2015; Warren et al. 2021). Studies show advantaged students typically "have greater access to resources (e.g., parents with knowledge of college

processes, more counselors in K-12 settings, and teachers to encourage college going) to access during the application process and overall transition to college" (Berumen 2015:29). These resources make a tangible difference in students' deciding to apply and ultimately enroll in higher education. Therefore, programming which provides support such as application guidance, academic advising, help with financial aid applications, pre-college tutoring, etc. has the potential to play a huge role in promoting equity. Herbaut et al. (2020:5) reported in a literature review on outreach and financial aid that "the effect of the interventions which complemented information with assistance or individualized guidance on college [...] increase[d] enrollment rates of disadvantaged students in most cases." Interventions that not only provide information but also include personal support are most effective in increasing college enrollment rates. They bolster a student's confidence and give them tangible skills that make the process feel less convoluted and inaccessible.

However, this research leaves open the question of the most efficient and impactful way to introduce such interventions. Is programming most effective when it is organized and introduced by the high school and its officials? Or, is it the responsibility of elite higher educational institutions to build out programming for outreach that is hands-on with high school students? Studies such as Berumen et al. (2015) and Warren et al. (2021) can begin to help answer these questions. In their 2015 study "More than Access: The Role of Support Services in the Transitional Experiences of Underrepresented Students in a Statewide Access Program," Berumen et al. argue that a lack of coordination between college administrators and high school teachers and counselors contributes to lower enrollment rates and a more challenging transition to the social and academic environment of college. In their study of Indiana's Twenty-First Century Scholars Program (TFCSP), an early-intervention, statewide, college access initiative

passed in 1990, they discovered that although the program has resulted in higher college enrollment rates, it has failed to soften the social transition to a college campus for many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

Through their study, Berumen et al. (2015) sought to better understand whether and how programs which focus on increasing financial aid impact a student's *success* on-campus, not solely their *access* to campus. They found that a disconnect between high schools and colleges resulted in misconceptions held by students about their new environment making it more difficult for them to transition socially and emotionally. Furthermore, on-campus administrators were not receiving enough support from the college to provide programming, mentorship, and financial support for new students, leaving them isolated. Additional research is necessary to understand exactly how to increase engagement between different departments on college campuses so all are working in tandem to improve outreach, access, and equity. Other studies have also demonstrated the lack of support that accessibility and outreach offices often receive from the wider administration on college campuses. For example, scholar Engram (2023) in his article "Ya'll Don't Hate White Supremacy Enough for Me: How Performative DEI Prevents Anti-Racism and Accountability in Higher Education," gives voice to the lack of commitment by higher ed institutions to systemically and systematically address antiracism. He explains that "in order for higher education to truly meet the moment we have to decenter whiteness, white feelings, and white mediocrity" (Engram et al. 2023:56). Engram et al.'s (2023) message is persuasive, but more comprehensive studies on schools' DEI departments remain critical in order to enable other stakeholders to learn and employ best practices at their institutions.

Research shows that approaches to increasing college access must be comprehensive in nature, addressing not just the inherent financial barriers associated with increasingly expensive

tertiary education in the United States, but also the social, personal, and familial contexts of different students. Researchers typically agree that comprehensive interventions must include the following: more informative and supportive mentoring throughout high school, academic supports to complete coursework, access to college prep courses and pre-college materials, instructions for financial aid, and continued guidance and support throughout college (Engle et al. 2008; Halabieh et al. 2022; Herbaut et al. 2020). In their study of the Scripps College Academy (SCA) Program, Warren et al. (2021:114) make clear that in addition to intensive pre-college intervention, it is critical supports be provided on-campus to ensure that once participants arrive they can successfully "navigate college campus cultures, which are often very different from the lived experiences of marginalized low-income students and students of color." This holistic approach helps to avoid the downfalls of the TFCSP program which left students feeling socially isolated.

The Warren et al. (2021) study explores the SCA program which welcomes an annual cohort of fifty low-income, first-generation, female students of color each year. The program is comprehensive and includes an annual summer residency at Scripps, college-readiness support for students and families, one-on-one consulting, and mentoring. Warren et al. 's (2021) study provides strong insights into what supports, beyond financial assistance, are effective in lessening the gap in higher educational attainment between historically underrepresented groups and upper-class, continuing-generation white students. They discovered that SCA, due to its multidimensional approach, was more successful than programs which "focus on a single dimension of student support such as financial aid or college admission guidance" (Warren et al. 2021:129). Women enrolled in SCA were supported socially and emotionally, and described having experienced "personal growth [...] in the areas of time management, mental care,

self-advocacy, motivation, and self-worth" (Warren 2021:123). Weaknesses of this study are that it is focused only on Scripps College and is therefore, not generalizable. More research is necessary on how programs similar to SCA—such as Colorado College's Stroud Scholars—or the specific interventions they employ might be implemented at other schools and in different communities across the country.

To build on literature which explores what increasing accessibility to student resources looks like once people are actually enrolled, it is important to discuss capital. Capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1986:n.p), is "accumulated labor [...] which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor." In his work on reproduction, he describes three primary forms of capital: cultural capital, social capital, and economic capital. Research on higher education tends to center around cultural capital as a way to understand how students exist and relate to the dominant norms, values, or behaviors on college campuses and access the myriad of resources available. However, social and economic capital also play a critical role on campuses as well as when students are in high school and begin the college application process.

It is critical to understand the ways in which cultural capital—or a lack thereof—inhibits one's ability to fully take advantage of the plethora of resources available at elite institutions. In his article "(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University," scholar Anthony Jack (2016) explains how students' identity and pre-college experience greatly influences how they approach on-campus interactions with adults and other support systems. He explains that in higher education, "from asking for help to developing mentoring relationships, engaging authority figures in academic contexts—a form of dominant cultural capital—is a mechanism through which youth gain access to institutional

support and resources" (Jack 2016:2). However, not all students enter college with the knowledge or comfort needed to not only identify these resources, but also fully take advantage of them. This is a strong example of the difference between access and success, and highlights the need for further research on what promotes success once a student has already enrolled. Although there may not be explicit barriers in place on-campus, there is for many first-generation, low-income, and/or BIPOC students a "lag in acclimating to the expected styles of engagement" (Jack 2016:10). This lag can impede a student's ability to access resources and thus be able to achieve the maximum level of success possible. Further research might explore what specific incentives and strategies are most successful in encouraging students to take advantage of resources for their educational as well as personal benefit.

Research suggests, then, that programming which continues to support students once they are on-campus is imperative. Mentoring, workshops, advising, etc. can all play a powerful role in ensuring students feel supported and empowered to advocate for themselves in the same way that their more privileged peers already know how to do. Scholars have demonstrated that programming is most effective when centered around skills and experiences students already possess rather than expecting them to adopt an assimilationist perspective (Ayala et al. 2019; Gable 2021; Yosso et al. 2016). Many DEI offices and outreach programs "all seek to appeal and appease whiteness, which is the antithesis of real DEI work" (Engram et al. 2023:59). However, there are ways to challenge this approach. Both Ayala et al. (2019) and Yosso et al. (2016) do so by resisting the deficit perspective and embracing the *community cultural wealth model*. This model is a framework which validates the breadth of knowledge and experiences that historically underrepresented students bring with them to college campuses that will contribute positively to their degree attainment. It does so by validating other forms of capital such as *familial capital*

which "refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community and history, memory, and cultural intuition" or *aspirational capital*, which is the "ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (Ayala et al. 2019:231). By embracing this model, Ayala et al. (2019:234) and Yosso et al. (2016) are resisting the common cultural assumption that "education is white." However, a weakness of their research on the community cultural wealth model is a lack of demonstration on how an adoption of this framework might materially shift the demographics of undergraduate student bodies and influence the on-campus experience of those students. More research is necessary to demonstrate how college programming which celebrates the lived experiences of students will increase success levels and students' sense of belonging.

A final key element of literature to explore is that which focuses on the unique positionality of liberal arts colleges like Colorado College. Liberal arts schools first became popularized after World War II and were particularly attractive to white, upper-class males (Hu 2017; McPherson et al. 1999). They emphasized "learning objectives, such as citizenship, social responsibility, and community service" in order to develop "well-rounded students" (Hu 2017:2). However, as the century progressed they began to be criticized for not preparing their graduates well enough for the workforce. Aside from a lack of pre-professional preparation, they are also financially vulnerable. Big research universities and public institutions get much of their revenue from federal research grants and contracts, making them less tuition-dependent. Liberal arts colleges, contrarily, are not only more expensive but are also economically reliant on recruiting enough full-pay students to meet their net tuition revenue making them "the most financially and operationally vulnerable institutions in higher education" (Hu 2017).

In their 1999 study "The Future Economic Challenges for the Liberal Arts Colleges," Mcpherson et al. argue that now, more than ever, liberal education is necessary. They state:

> In the face of the rapid obsolescence of detailed technical skills, it becomes clear that what is ended is not more training in today's technology [...] but education. Education includes being prepared to respond to new situations and challenges. It means cultivating the ability for independent thought, for expanding the capacity to cope with new ideas and new outlooks. These are precisely the strengths of liberal education (McPherson 1999:69).

This is a powerful testament in favor of a liberal arts education, but lacks nuance in its analysis of the precarious situation of liberal arts colleges both financially and in terms of mission. Many liberal arts schools have struggled to increase the compositional diversity of their student bodies, and often market diversity in their recruitment materials even when it is not a lived reality for students on-campus. In their article entitled "Legitimating Prestige through Diversity," Holland et al. (2021:2) explain the ways in which "more selective universities use ethno-racial diversity as a signal of prestige in an effort to retain their position." This study argues that this marketing strategy appeals "to White, upper-class students who want diverse educational experiences that will enhance their cosmopolitan (or global) cultural capital" (Holland et al. 2021:22). Their work puts forth a bold analysis on the manipulation of the student experience and how administrators cash in symbolic capital that comes from (perceived) ethnoracial diversity on-campus in order to recruit more applicants. However, it lacks content on students' perspectives of this issue as well as an administrator perspective. How do those in charge of marketing materials and outreach programs grapple with wanting to attract more ethnoracial diversity, but not wanting to mislead prospective students as to the reality of the on-campus social and racial climate? This brings up another important point which is the meaning of the word "diversity" in general. Many colleges emphasize ethnoracial diversity, but fail to also pay attention to other forms of diversity and

identity such as geographic location, nationality, language, gender and sexuality, immigration status, class, religion, ability, etc.

This literature review demonstrates that there is sufficient scholarship on many of the fundamental flaws of the contemporary United States higher education system, namely that it continues to be inequitable and inaccessible (financially as well as socially) for many students from historically underrepresented populations. Some research has begun to document ways in which future reforms might be able to make tangible change in these areas by adopting a holistic approach to access and outreach. However, more research must be done on what these changes actually look like both in the on-campus environment of higher education, as well as early on in high schools through outreach programs and college prep initiatives. This research project will build on the scholarship by analyzing what Colorado College, as a private, tuition-dependent, liberal arts school is or is not doing to promote accessibility and student success on-campus. By gaining the perspectives of several social agents in the College's work of access, outreach, and student life, I hope to contribute to overall research on what is working, what is not, and what the future might hold in the fight for meaningful higher education reform.

METHODS

The methodology used for this case study was a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in person and on Zoom. The research project addresses broad themes related to educational inequity in American higher education but ultimately all interviews focused on Colorado College. Colorado College is a private liberal arts school located in Colorado Springs, CO. The most recently updated demographics of the student body are from the Fall of 2023. There are approximately 2,400 students at the college. The student body is 67.7% white, 25.9% BIPOC, 5.2% International, and 1.1% reporting unknown. There are 48 countries

represented on-campus by enrolled students. The percentage of students who identify as first-generation has steadily increased since reporting began in Fall of 2013, rising from 4.9% in 2014 to 10.0% in 2023. 55.4% of students identify as female, 42.0% identify as male, 1.8% identify as non-binary, and 0.7% identify as transgender. The current tuition of Colorado College, including room, board, and estimated student fees, stands at $87,128. 42.3% of students receive no aid, 28.2% receive need-based aid and no Pell grants, 13.3% are Pell grant recipients, and 16.2% receive non need-based aid only (Colorado College 2024).

The sample for this case study was drawn from a population of full-time staff and faculty members of Colorado College, specifically individuals whose work is in departments that address accessibility, outreach, admission, and student life on-campus. Those departments are as follows: The Office of Admission, the Stroud Scholars Program, Summer Session, the Bridge Scholars Program, the Financial Aid Department, Student Life, Student Success, the Colket Center for Academic Excellence, the Advising Hub, the Butler Center, and the Communications and Marketing Department. To briefly provide context for departments whose titles are not self-explanatory, Stroud Scholars is a three year college-readiness program launched in 2019 for current high schoolers from the Pikes Peak Region. If students successfully complete the program, they earn admission to CC and receive a financial aid package which enables them to enroll. Summer Session is a program allowing non-CC students, as well as current undergraduates, to participate in Block Plan courses over the Summer. Bridge is a year-long program involving mentorship, community building, and additional coursework that begins with an early arrival to campus for first-year students who are first-generation, a member of QuestBridge, Stroud and fly-in programs, or in general come from a background which is historically underrepresented at the College. Colket is an academic resource center that provides

tutoring and other support services through the Writing Center, the Quantitative Reasoning Center, the Speaking Center, the GIS Center, and the Office of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education. The Butler Center is the on-campus student center that promotes and supports antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The mode of sampling is convenience sampling due to the fact that the researcher is a current fourth-year student at CC. Participants were contacted through email, asked to participate in the study, and given a consent form. The sample consisted of sixteen individuals. All participants attended some form of higher education; most obtained a masters degree and multiple participants hold PhDs. Eight identified as first-generation students, seven identified as BIPOC, and the vast majority identified as low-income or having received financial aid during their college education. All departments were represented by one individual with the exception of the Office of Admission (three) and the Bridge Scholars Program (two).

Participants were selected because they hold positions of power in their department and were therefore assumed by the researcher to possess a unique perspective on the current work of the College to increase outreach efforts, become more accessible to a diverse array of high schoolers, and ensure the success of accepted applicants who matriculate. Due to the time constraints on thesis research, the researcher felt interviewing individuals in leadership positions including, but not limited to, director, vice president, and assistant director roles, as opposed to lower level employees would provide greater insight into the realities of access and outreach work at Colorado College. Furthermore, the researcher surmised that this sample might shed light on administrative dynamics as they relate to authority and decision making, and the potential disproportionate power held by participants to influence choices and programs across campus.

Readers must take sampling biases into account. The researcher is a current employee of both the Office of Admission and of Stroud Scholars and has individual relationships with a few participants. It must also be noted that all participants are present employees of the College; therefore, their responses to interview questions may have been biased toward or tailored to represent the College positively in order to avoid employment-related repercussions for responses which may have depicted the College or their specific department(s) negatively. Also, some statements, opinions, or ideas may reflect unconscious biases related to spending a lot of time with the same colleagues in the same department over the years. However, the researcher encouraged open ended responses, took all possible precautions to protect employees by ensuring confidentiality when requested, avoided leading questions about failures of the College, and reminded respondents that the interview could be paused or stopped altogether at any time.

Most interviews took place in participants' offices and the average length of each interview was 1 hour and 9 minutes. With permission, all were recorded and most transcribed using online software. There were no other qualitative methods used. The interview questions were divided in five subgroups under the larger umbrella of higher education, accessibility, and outreach. The interview guide used for all interviews—with slight edits depending on the department of the participant—is included in the appendix. The advantages of this data collection method is that interviews provoke meaningful and personalized responses that survey data cannot. The researcher was able to obtain subjective testimony as to the experiences of the employees and their perspectives on the work and direction of the College. The disadvantages of this study are that, due to the method and sample size, these data are not generalizable. Furthermore, due to frequent turnover in the field of higher education, a study based on the same sample will not be replicable in the coming years. Another limitation to this methodology is that

it centers around personal opinion and lived experience rather than facts and data as a way to understand outreach and accessibility efforts at Colorado College. A more comprehensive study would also include quantitative data that describes actual student demographics and enrollment trends over the years, as well as satisfaction ratings of undergraduates in terms of academic experience, social integration, overall satisfaction, and resource acquisition, for example.

FINDINGS

The findings for this project are organized broadly into two categories: first, the ideological approach of participants towards the work of outreach, access, and student success in higher education; and second, the organizational structure of Colorado College and the ability, or lack thereof, of employees to make change in their departments and on-campus due to a lack of coordination and non-democratic power structures. Within each of these areas, specific themes were identified and will be discussed such as how participants defined college access, the difference between access and student success, the siloed nature of the college, and power dynamics between departments. Other themes will also be explored and all will be indicated by italicized sub-headers.

I. Participant Ideology and Approach to Access, Outreach, and Student Success

What Is College Access?

At the forefront of national conversations about higher education reform is the question of how institutions can increase outreach efforts and thus become more accessible to a diverse array of high school students, particularly those identifying from historically underrepresented backgrounds within higher education (i.e. low-income, BIPOC, and first-generation). This question is ever present at Colorado College, where employees across departments are working towards increasing access and diversifying the student body, which is disproportionately white

and wealthy (though significant strides have been made in shifting this distribution throughout the College's history). Participants' definitions of college access varied; some offered a more radical take than others on what the benchmark for access—both at CC and beyond—should be. For example, an employee of the Butler Center who identifies as BIPOC and was a first-generation, low-income student herself, stated boldly:

> So for me, accessible is basically this very radical [idea]: open enrollment and free. So that's kind of my version of accessible. I think in the same light that K through 12 public [...] education is free to anybody that, you know, is of age, I feel like for me, [for] higher education to be accessible [...] there needs to be open enrollment and it needs to be either free or very low cost.

Others were also steadfast in their belief that higher education as it exists presently is without-a-doubt inaccessible and exclusive. Dr. Pedro de Araujo, who is currently serving his second year as Dean of the College and first year as Chief Operating Officer, responded to the question of whether or not higher education is exclusive by saying "yes, 100% [...] not everyone that wants to go to college can, so, by definition, it is [...] there's no doubt about it." On a similar note, Rosalie Rodriguez, the Associate Vice President for Institutional Equity and Belonging, explained the following belief:

> I think we cannot have a real conversation about equity and access in higher ed without naming the fact that most of us determine our value on how many people we keep out of our campuses [...] CC is known for its exclusivity. The fact that we only accept ten percent of our applicants, but yet we are focused on antiracism and equity [...] [it's on a] foundation of exclusion.

In these responses we see a shared understanding of the fundamental exclusivity of higher education especially of selective colleges and universities and the ways in which various factors, most notably cost, make Colorado College, specifically, inaccessible to much of the general public. Many participants noted how CC's price tag renders it exclusionary, though technically there may not be actual barriers in place for high school students to submit an application. Saúl

Maravilla, the Assistant Director of Admission for Outreach and Access and a CC alum himself, explained that "because of the financial things that have been attached to higher education, it has inherently created an exclusionary process where people who cannot afford, cannot participate." Others similarly emphasized the impact of high costs on students and families with limited means. Libby Fletcher, the interim Director of Financial Aid who understands the financial limitations as well as demands of the College more than anyone, stated:

> I really do struggle with how expensive it is. I get it. I get it on a numbers level because there's a lot of people that are earning salaries and keeping the lights on and [...] colleges keep trying to up the ante with the rec center and the this and the that and all the amenities and it all costs money. So I get it, but at the same time, I don't. You know, I started here when it cost 55 [thousand]. And I thought that was outrageous [...] and now for them to be pushing $90,000 [...] every year I think, 'okay, it's gotta reach the breaking point.'

Although all participants agreed to some extent that increasing access is an area of growth for the College, and one which should be prioritized particularly in the wake of its very publicized antiracism commitment, some individuals were not as convinced that higher education in its most contemporary form is unequivocally exclusive. Despite her struggles with the cost of CC, Fletcher explained her general feeling that "I mean, it [higher ed] is [exclusive], yes, but then also no, because there's other places you can go if you still want to achieve that higher ed." Others agreed, emphasizing the myriad of options available to pursue tertiary education, options which are not limited to private schools with hefty sticker prices such as CC. AliciaRose Martinez, also an alum of the College who is BIPOC and identified as a first-generation, low-income student during her time here, is the current Director of Stroud Scholars and co-Director of the Bridge Scholars Program alongside Dr. Murphy Brasuel. When asked whether higher education is exclusive, Martinez stated:

> I think it is [exclusive], in a lot of ways. I think no, though, because there's so many more options that are being available for people to figure out where they want to go and what

> they want to do [...] but I think it is exclusive in the sense that not everybody is cut out for school [...] it's not that they don't have a love of learning. It's just that maybe the system that is created right now doesn't necessarily lend itself to how they learn and how they want to learn or need to learn.

This reflection points to a wider conversation about U.S. higher education reform in general, and the ways in which stakeholders might increase efforts to promote equity and access through the bolstering of varying forms of higher ed, such as two-year community colleges and low cost public institutions. Although it is imperative for institutions such as Colorado College to commit to serving a more diverse population through robust access and outreach initiatives, federal, state, and local investment in other forms of higher education is also an invaluable step in continued reform. Martinez's comment also points to the question of the difference between college access and student success on-campus, the next area of focus for this study.

The Difference Between College Access and Student Success

Perhaps the most informative aspect of this study was the responses related to the difference between college access and student success, specifically on CC's campus. Student success, across departments, was a primary focus for many participants who repeatedly acknowledged the problem with increasing access without guaranteeing the success of students once they are accepted and matriculate. Stephanie Wurtz, the Interim Vice President for Strategic Communications and Marketing, expressed her feeling that "there's room for education, reminding people that these things are connected. Opening up access isn't the [only] solution [...] [it] has to be held in partnership [with support]." Others agreed, pointing to the potential ethical issues with rapidly increasing access without sufficient on-campus student support resources in place. Saúl Maravilla expressed the following concern:

> There's been a lot of questions on what is admission doing to continue to bring in a diverse class [...] but my question to President Song was like, well, 'I know that there's a lot of conversations about what admissions can do, but like I'm wondering if these

> conversations are also being had outside of admission of like, once these students are here, are they actually gonna be supported?'

Maravilla was not alone in sharing this concern that an increase in recruitment for diverse students without extensive infrastructure in place to support those students could further inequity and social stratification on-campus. Most participants agreed that removing barriers for entry is only the first step in college access, and is rendered meaningless without adequate structures on-campus which will make students—particularly BIPOC, low-income, and/or first-generation students—feel included to the same extent as their white, wealthy, and/or continuing-generation peers do.

Rosalie Rodriguez employed the concept of *universal design*, a popular idea in critical disability studies, to address this question of access versus success. In her words and in the context of CC, universal design means that "whether we're talking about class or race or physical or cognitive disabilities [...] we have the resources and the support that anybody can come here and be successful." Dr. Emily Chan, a professor of psychology and the Dean of the Faculty, also mentioned this concept, noting specifically her desire to ensure that historically underrepresented students see themselves reflected in the structures of higher education. Through bolstering mentorship and support systems, Dean Chan hopes that these students will enter the institution knowing that the space was made for them and not just their more privileged peers. In her many years directing the Bridge Scholars Program, one of CC's primary mechanisms for increasing both access and success for students, she focused on "how do we make the invisible curriculum visible? And also not just to assimilate [...] this is about co-creation of the culture." For Dean Chan, it is critical all students feel emboldened to stake claim to the myriad of resources and opportunities the school provides.

However, not all participants agreed that in order for the school to call itself accessible, all students must have access to all resources and opportunities. Jim Burke, the Director of Summer Session, stated transparently:

> This is where I probably would be a little more like a hard conservative [...] I don't believe that everyone needs to have every opportunity at college [...] there aren't enough opportunities for everyone to have every opportunity. So I feel like there is this chasing an ideal that isn't real because there aren't enough opportunities for everyone to have every opportunity.

Libby Fletcher expressed a similar sentiment, and seemed frustrated by what she described as the College's inability to define itself and what it should be expected to provide for students both in terms of literal financial assistance as well as more general support services. By "trying to meet everybody's needs," Fletcher explained, the College risks failing to meet anyone's needs adequately. Her hope is that by "defining who they are and what they're here for," students will have more reasonable expectations for what to expect in terms of resources and will not be left floundering.

What Defines Student Success?

All participants agreed that student success cannot be boiled down to numeric benchmarks. As described by Dean de Araujo, student success is "more qualitative than anything else." Gretchen Wardell, a Student Success Specialist and pre-law advisor, emphasized her efforts as an advisor to meet students' background and take the pressure off of academics when appropriate. She stated:

> [...] Life happens, right? It's not always about school. It's not always about the class [...] and the more you can recognize that and be in tune with whoever you're talking to, to get some of that other, like junk, out of the way so you can focus on the class and the paper and the book, whatever you're doing. It just makes you more real, and [have a] stronger relationship.

Wardell was not alone in her student-centered, individualized approach to success. Dr. Aaron Stoller, the Associate Vice President for Student Success and a Lecturer in the Education Department, also emphasized the need to support students on an emotional level as well as an academic one, critiquing what he described as the tendency for those involved in this field to place too much onus on a student and their ability to be "resilient" or not as a determinant of their success levels. Others agreed that student success is broad and unquantifiable, and should not be marked by data points alone such as a student's GPA or the College's graduation rate. AliciaRose Martinez explained how she believes "defining success has to be kind of independent and something you do on an individual level because you never know 'what is success for this person?'" She elaborated, explaining that success is simply "somebody who feels empowered and feels that they are pursuing the path that they need to be on at that time."

This type of supportive, student-centered approach to success expressed by Wardell, Stoller, and Martinez was shared by all other participants, as each expressed a genuine commitment to a holistic understanding of success which takes into account the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of students. Dean de Araujo focused his definition of success on Colorado College specifically, and the uniqueness of the education offered here by nature of the Block Plan. For de Araujo, success is a student graduating and feeling like "'actually, I am way better off because of Colorado College, not because of a Bachelor's Degree [...] I understand the world better.'" This points to another recurring theme which was participants' emphasis on the purpose of higher education. Most agreed the main purpose is about far more than qualifications and the completion of a degree, rather a college education is about learning how to be a critical thinker, how to disagree and converse with others, and how to understand the world better. Perhaps the most poignant example of this mindset was expressed by Rodriguez. For her, higher

education is “the opportunity to give people tools and resources to create a better society [...] whether that’s through leadership, innovation, and creativity [...] [it is to] solve big problems that we have, [to create] right in the universe.” Through these responses we see a shared belief of participants in the multidimensionality of the student experience, and a genuine desire to foster an environment in which students feel safe, seen, and valued for more than solely their academic accomplishments.

Which Students Are Successful and Why?

Although participants agreed that there are varying forms of success, what was less evident was whether or not success however defined is actually made possible for all Colorado College students regardless of background and pre-college experience. What became clear in conversations is that there is no shortage of resources on the Colorado College campus; however, staff members have yet to figure out how exactly to incentivize and encourage all students to access those resources. Many participants pointed to the fact that some BIPOC, first-generation, and/or low-income students frequently have a harder time asking for help and accessing resources compared to their white, continuing-generation, and/or high-income peers. This relates to established research on how the possession of *cultural capital and social capital* impacts the campus experience for college students. Students with these forms of capital are often more comfortable recognizing they are in need and subsequently approaching authority figures to ask for help which makes them more likely to succeed. Saúl Maravilla articulated this phenomenon clearly when he stated:

> I think being comfortable in knowing how to ask for help is definitely a really big thing and I think that sometimes underrepresented students have a harder time with that, whereas other students that have come from more privileged backgrounds already have that skill because they have been in spaces where they can ask for help and get that help.

This class-based difference points to a critical aspect of bridging the gap between access and success, that is teaching students how to feel empowered *and* entitled to access resources on elite college campuses. In other words, exposing students to what many scholars refer to as *the hidden curriculum* may be crucial. Participants who work directly with first-years, for example Dr. Stoller who runs the First-Year Program and Dr. Brasuel, a professor in the Chemistry Department and the co-Director of Bridge, specifically described having this issue as a focus of their programming. Dr. Stoller explicitly stated how he sees the purpose of the FYP to be "exposing students to the hidden curriculum." Dr. Brasuel similarly articulated his desire to focus on bolstering these skills in first-years with the Bridge Program, acknowledging the emotional strain that can be experienced by first-generation and BIPOC students navigating this unfamiliar space. He described how "they feel like it's a burden, and so they feel like they're asking for a favor and are reluctant to do so." He hopes that through mentorship and a clear explanation of the College's resources early-on in students' time on-campus, he will be able to break down these barriers—both those which are exterior and also ones which are interior and self-imposed.

Is the Block Plan An Impediment to Equity in Student Success Efforts and Outcomes?

Many participants commented on the Block Plan itself and the ways in which its intensity and the number of contact hours it requires disadvantages low-income students who also have to work to support themselves or their families. Stoller, a continuing-generation student who was low-income himself, reflected on his own college experience as a way to explain the financial inaccessibility of the Block Plan. He remarked:

> 'Come to CC and if you're in my class this block, I own your time.' I've actually heard professors say that, 'I own.' That to me does not seem super equitable, or to set students up for success super well [...] what I see is that students who come from lower SES backgrounds are disproportionately and negatively affected by that virtue [...] I as a student would never have been able to come to CC. I would have failed out because I had to work 30 hours a week.

Others agreed, expressing concern about the stringent schedule of the Block Plan and how it demands a level of flexibility from students that is less achievable nowadays compared to how much flexibility students from higher-income backgrounds may have had when the Block Plan was conceived in 1970. More students now work full- or part-time jobs, especially off-campus. Dr. Brasuel, who is also an alum and identified as a low-income student during his time here, stated the following when asked what he would envision for the College in the next five years:

> I would like to see us offer more scholarships and less work study as part of [our] financial aid package. I do think if we are so sold [on the] Block Plan being our calendar system moving forward, as we have diversified our student body and more students, you know, not only want to [but] have to work, I think the block schedule looks very different for that demographic of students [...] they would be able to engage with intensity of the block plan [...] in a way that would be more open for them, more manageable.

Although the Block Plan is a hallmark of the Colorado College education, and is something which allows the school to distinguish itself from other small liberal arts colleges, these responses highlight a deep concern by participants of its inherent inequities. If the College is truly committed to student success, what might it mean for the existence of the Block Plan if unexamined expectations and assumptions may prohibit success in some cases for low-income students? Reassessing the feasibility of structuring the Block Plan in its current configuration may be particularly relevant as the school makes active attempts to diversify its student body and recruit more students who are not full-pay and high-income. What is student success and institutional success if not the ability to adapt to the needs of new generations?

However, participants expressed frustration with what they felt to be a lack of willingness on behalf of the administration to adapt and think critically about questions it does not typically ask. Many felt the administration is too frequently unable to commit to bold changes and ideological shifts even when presented with evidence that such shifts are in the best interest of

the student body. Whether located in Marketing and Communications, Advising, or Student Success, multiple individuals described the resistance of higher-ups to reorient the school's approach. For example, in discussing the College's desire to recruit more diverse students, Stephanie Wurtz explained that "then we have to do something different because what we've been doing for the past, whatever, 50 years, for example, that's recruiting the same people." Unfortunately, she does not always feel that those in charge of the budget are willing to make that leap to, for example, divert or raise funds specifically to support diversity as opposed to other kinds of priorities. Similarly, Gretchen Wardell explained how "the people with their say [saying], 'this is the way we've always done it. And this is why it has to be [this way] and I'm going to use my power to override.'" This leads to an overarching theme present in many interviews: power structures of the College and the feeling of many staff members that their voice is less valuable, if it is heard at all.

II. Structure of the College and non-Democratic Power Structures

Siloing, Decentralization, and A Lack of Interdepartmental Coordination

A recurring theme across interviews and a point of repeated frustration was the so-called "siloed" structure of the College and the ways in which disconnected offices impede participants' ability to collaborate cross-departmentally on initiatives related to college access, student success, and student life. All of the departments referred to in this paper—Stroud, Bridge, Summer Session, Advising, FYP, Student Life, etc.—perform interrelated and overlapping functions for the student body. Yet, they have never all sat down to have a meeting. Although the vast majority of participants felt that—at least on the staff side—there was a desire to collaborate, the lack of time and intentionality in terms of interdepartmental initiatives has made it difficult to work together. Overall, participants in lower positions of power felt strongly that

collaboration amongst departments was a problem impeding the College's ability to bolster student success. Conversely, those in higher up roles and in the President's Cabinet seemed less aware of the extent to which their employees struggle with this issue.

Dr. Lacy Karpilo, the Dean of Students, Vice President for Student Life, and a member of the President's Cabinet, began working at Colorado College in May of 2023. Being relatively new to the community, she brought a unique perspective to the interview marked by optimism and an energy for change that stood out compared to many of her colleagues whom she now supervises and have worked at CC for many years. Dr. Karpilo acknowledged room for growth in terms of "creating more formal channels for us to come together," but felt strongly that people not only are willing to, but actively do, collaborate across campus. Dean de Araujo, who is also part of the President's Cabinet, expressed a similar sentiment and pushed against the narrative that CC is especially siloed. He shared that he is "sick and tired of people saying 'we're so siloed in this' because [...] it's not just higher education, it's everywhere [...] this is actually a symptom of many organizations where the way you structure things [...] it's not based on function." These perspectives differed from that of other participants with less institutional sway, who seemed exhausted by an inability of departments to sit down and work together in ways which feel productive. It must be noted that no individuals who expressed frustration placed blame on any person in particular, but rather at the overarching system which has made it difficult for social agents located in Student Success, Student Life, as well as Outreach and Access on this campus to do meaningful work together on a regular basis.

Perhaps the most passionate about this issue was Dr. Stoller, who is in charge of planning the First-Year Program for all incoming freshmen. Stoller, who has decades of experience in higher education and extensive knowledge of higher educational theory, acknowledged that

siloing is not an issue unique to Colorado College. However, the near universalism of this structure does not change the fact that its existence at CC greatly restricts his ability to do his job efficiently and to the best of his ability. Stoller stated:

> There's a structural barrier in my ability to get direct feedback from the students on the program [FYP], right. And I don't say this to be critical. Well, I do mean to be critical. I don't mean it to be insensitive, but [...] this is a concrete example of how that decentralization undermines, I think, access and equity.

Decentralization of student resources was a recurring theme. Dr. Brasuel similarly shared how "a lot of departments are understaffed, under-resourced, and so a lot of times we end up covering the same ground in different ways, sometimes to the same students." Many agreed that such overlap leads to inefficiency and ultimately more confusion on behalf of students, particularly for those students who might have trouble accessing resources in the first place for reasons previously described (i.e. entering higher ed possessing less traditional *capital*).

Participants made clear that the problem with a lack of collaboration and coordination is not that it is personally frustrating for employees—although it is—or that it makes their jobs more difficult—although it does. The problem is that work in isolation contributes to inequity, inequity which the College has publicly proclaimed it is committed to solving through plans such as the antiracism commitment. As suggested by Libby Fletcher and also by Dean de Araujo, centralization of resources is perhaps the next greatest step in promoting equity and access on-campus. Fletcher described her desire for there to be "one place where students could go to apply for different types of grant funding whatever that be," while de Araujo shared his wish for a "one-stop-shop" for all things student life and student success related. However, these desires are just that—desires—and it seems many full-time employees are already exhausted and overworked, in need of more immediate support to remedy the repercussions of these structural inefficiencies.

Power Structures and Workplace Culture

Beyond the present structural limitations of the College that inhibit collaboration, many participants shared how they feel their voices are less valuable than those in higher positions of power and that their work is too frequently undervalued. In this section, participant names will be kept confidential so as to prevent any possible retaliation by the College on individual employees who spoke honestly and courageously with the researcher. Commentary shared about power dynamics will be organized into two primary areas: the first being between staff and faculty and the second between staff and the administration.

Staff and Faculty

One participant, despite holding the highest title in his department, described the feeling that "there's a firewall between faculty and staff on this campus. And so as staff what that means is I have certain limits on what I have the ability to do and don't do because I'm not in a position of privilege." Others agreed, pointing specifically to the ways in which the tenure system provides most faculty with a certain sense of security not experienced by staff. One staff member who has worked at the College for twenty years described how she still feels unseen. She remarked on how "it is that elitism here, for sure [...] the, 'you can't touch me.' You're right, I can't touch you. Because you're tenured [...] if I do something wrong, I'm gonna get fired." One participant described feeling misunderstood by members of the faculty, who do not appreciate the intricacies of her role and the limitations she is under to follow rules and procedures for the protection of the College. Despite efforts to explain her constraints, she has experienced that "there's always a rogue department that feels like they can do what they want."

Staff and Administration

Overall, participants expressed a sense of trust that the College operates with good intentions (to increase access and bolster student success), but that there is room for improvement in terms of the inclusion of staff voices, particularly when it comes to college wide decisions and policy shifts. Perhaps the most jarring comment came from a staff member who described how some upper level administrators are supportive, while "others are quite dismissive and cruel." Another individual expressed feeling "critical of the entire business and antiracism commitment, because that's what it is. It's a commitment. But the practice piece, what comes next?" Many spoke of this perception of hollowness when it comes to putting policy into practice. For example, when asked whether or not he felt supported by the College in his work which directly relates to outreach, one participant responded bluntly:

> No I don't. And I will acknowledge that they will do the sort of patronizing outreach to me [...] it's like a formal letter that's like, 'thank you for your contribution' and it feels forced and it feels cheap and it feels fake and hollow and I'm gonna take it that way. Because you don't get to say like 'I appreciate this' and then cut our budget by 60 percent.

This sentiment was not uncommon. Many spoke of the structure of decision making specifically, and being unsure if their voices are included and the needs of their departments accurately represented in high level, administrative conversations. One employee described how "sometimes it feels like Colorado College is all talk and they're not always a lot of do [...] it's always the people at the bottom who have no idea what's going on, you know, they find out late." Another participant who works in their same department felt similarly. In recounting conversations with the President about the direction of the College in terms of outreach and access, he described that "President Song was like, 'yeah, we're having these conversations.' So that's not enough information for me. I really do wish that there was a larger conversation." This

was a recurring theme; that is, the desire for a broader conversation in which employees of all levels are able to better understand who is making the decisions and why.

However, not all agreed that power imbalance is a problem, or that efforts by staff members go underappreciated. Some, in fact, expressed their explicit focus on appreciating staff. For example, one Dean reflected that:

> We need to create a good environment for staff, too. So some of my vision is about what they're able to do because I know when I was a professional, having a supportive environment, having a supportive supervisor, I was able to do a lot more with students. I had less burnout. I need to hold the space for them so they can do the difficult work.

Others at similar levels of power agreed, expressing the concern "have I thanked people enough?" and hoping the answer is yes. Such dissonance between participants can be interpreted as an example of the lack of interdepartmental coordination which results in little common understanding of *what* people are doing and *how* they are feeling while doing it. Moving forward, more consistent communication, collaboration, and efforts to validate the voices of employees may be a step in remedying this tension.

The Value of Stroud Scholars and Similar Programs

Many participants hold singular titles in their departments, some working within departments with only a few full-time staff employees. This leads to the final theme that emerged in the findings: a lack of resources (both monetary and otherwise) being invested in access, outreach, and student success efforts. This lack of investment is particularly problematic given the ways in which the College has publicly committed to antiracism and access in the last few years, likely profiting off of such campaigns. In November of 2019, Colorado College published their antiracism initiative, outlined in a twenty page document entitled "Our Plan to Become an Antiracist Institution." The plan is comprehensive and organized by a series of goals, one of which is to invest in student antiracism resources and efforts. Yet, many participants shared how

they struggle regularly to receive what they need from the College in terms of resources. An employee of the Butler Center, a program highlighted as a fundamental part of the antiracism commitment, described their desire to obtain more funding to build out Butler's capabilities, while noting that other departments are in even more dire need. They explained:

> I don't know who is vouching for us [...] I don't think anybody. We have our Vice President for Student Life but I also recognize other events that are under Student Life are also competing for resources [...] I think selfishly and as the Butler Center, I'm like, 'what about us?' [...] other departments are struggling much more than we are, but I would not be doing my job [if] that was not a concern of mine.

This employee was not alone in feeling like there is not enough being put into their division. AliciaRose Martinez is the only full-time employee of Stroud and also co-directs Bridge. This year, she is operating on minimal funds after the College cut the budget for Stroud. According to Jim Burke, who directs Summer Session and has taken on many responsibilities with Stroud to help with the immense workload, "the real operating budget is like $30,000 because they want to use all the gift funds." Rightfully angry, he called out the College, which "wanted to promote this [Stroud] and [they] can't fund it in the most basic ways." He went further, asking: "why am I using, depleting all of my gift funds for one year and then I have to beg for, without a promise of guaranteed funding, for operations next year. That's fucked up." It is not known if Stroud will have its full budget restored for 2024-2025. Given the fact that Stroud is arguably making the most tangible difference in CC's accessibility work, this uncertainty is incredibly distressing. It should also be noted that in the time Burke was interviewed for this project in late December and its completion in mid-February, he announced that he will be stepping down from his role as Director of Summer Session and leaving Colorado College to complete his PhD and pursue other opportunities in the field of higher education.

Beyond financial constraints, many expressed a lack of resources in terms of time and employee capacity. For example, Gretchen Wardell noted that "the Butler Center does a lot of awesome things. They're really, really trying. I also think there's like four people that work there. There has to be more resources." The lack of staffing makes it so people are overworked, and thus do not always have the time nor energy to collaborate in the ways that they would ideally want to. Martinez, when asked about her ability to work interdepartmentally, reflected that it is "not necessarily that people didn't want to [collaborate] [...] it's more of like, do people have the bandwidth to do this? Because most people in most departments are overcommitted." In her eyes, "there should be an Office of College Access, where people work together to increase college access [...] it's really a disservice to that idea of college access if you don't have [...] [a] team of people to do that work." Martinez's title is technically the Director of College Access Programs, but she has no other co-workers whose positions and professional responsibilities directly fall under this division.

However, not all participants involved in student success described receiving a lack of resources or being unsatisfied with college levels of investment in their programming. Dr. Steve Getty is the Director of the Quantitative Reasoning Center and currently oversees all five programs that compose the Colket Center for Academic Excellence. Dr. Getty has worked at Colorado College for over twenty years with a respite in the early 2000s. Unlike the participants mentioned above, he described feeling very supported by the College in his pursuits for student success. In explaining why, he described how the College has provided his department with financial resources and the capability to hire more professional staff. The combination of these two forms of investment has enabled him to expand the program and its capacity massively. When asked how the Colket Center plays a role in making the campus experience more

accessible and equitable for all students, Dr. Getty gave a simple yet telling answer: with its expansion in resources, Colket was able to serve approximately 92% of the Colorado College student body in the 2022-2023 academic year.

All participants expressed a desire to increase access and outreach, whilst also understanding the financial limitations of the College as a tuition-dependent institution. Although there are intricacies of the budget that potentially the participants do not wholly understand, their perspective must not be discredited as being out-of-line with the financial realities of the school. Participants repeatedly acknowledged the complexity of financial CC's model. And, with this awareness in mind, when asked what Colorado College can be doing to increase accessibility, almost all championed the Stroud Scholars Program both for its ideological value *and* financial feasibility. Rosalie Rodriguez described it as "probably one of the best tools that schools like CC, especially, have." Matt Bonser, the Director of Admission and an alum, stated that "expanding on pre-college or on Stroud in particular" is work which he would like to see the College's focus on in the next five years as part of their outreach efforts. Other outreach and access initiatives highlighted by participants were programs like the Colorado Pledge and fly-in programs. On-campus resources repeatedly referenced as being invaluable to student success and increasing equity were the Butler Center and the Bridge Scholars Program.

Throughout the interview process, employees representing these programs expressed a deep-seated love for and commitment to their work. They believe in Colorado College and its ability to become better equipped to serve all students through a lens of equity, antiracism, and multiculturalism. However, they cannot operate on belief and passion alone. What they also expressed was the need for more money, more time, and more capacity to do that work which is invaluable to the future functioning of Colorado College and its promise to provide "the finest

liberal arts education in the country" to a diverse group of high school graduates (Colorado College 2024).

DISCUSSION

The findings for this study strengthen the assumption that a student's possession of *social and cultural capital* greatly influences their ability to acquire resources made available on elite college campuses. Participants repeatedly noted the importance of individual student agency and the ability to seek out support in order to achieve success, whether that support be financial, academic, emotional, or mental. Participants also described their perception—which is aligned with existing research—that more privileged students frequently enter higher ed already feeling empowered to access resources, whereas other students with less traditional forms of capital often must be taught how, and why, to gain access. By exploring the strategies used on CC's campus specifically to encourage resource acquisition, this study contributes information on what are promising endeavors being used to bolster the confidence of first-generation, low-income, and BIPOC students in order to expose them to *the hidden curriculum* and develop a sense of ownership over spaces which have historically been exclusionary.

An area of further research is continuing to explore how colleges might redesign their curricula and institutional structures in order to celebrate alternative forms of capital presented in the *community cultural wealth model*, forms such as *aspirational capital* or *linguistic capital*. These are types of capital that underrepresented students often already possess upon their arrival to campus. Some participants even noted specifically the ways in which the established curricula at Colorado College require a certain level of academic expertise that not all students are prepared for due to their high school experience. This presents future questions about how elite schools, like CC, might include more introductory courses into the curriculum to ensure all

students are given the tools they need from the start to thrive academically and do not have to go to great lengths to seek additional support and "catch-up." A weakness of this study is that it did not take into account any CC student perspectives. A more comprehensive study would include testimony from students regarding their *sense of belonging* at Colorado College, both academic and social, and the extent to which they feel that programs such as Bridge and Stroud or spaces like the Butler Center and Advising Hub play a role in their acclimation to the campus culture and overall success as an undergraduate at this institution. In a larger study, it would also be critical to understand how and in what ways such spaces contributed to student levels of *social integration* and the building of community.

It is also worth acknowledging the inherent exclusivity of liberal arts colleges not only because of cost—a fact which has been established in existing literature and also by participants in this study—but in terms of educational ideology. As was previously discussed, the type of education proposed by liberal arts colleges, that is one which is interdisciplinary, focused on critical thinking, and not oriented necessarily to a specific professional path, has not historically been available to the masses. The liberal arts have traditionally been most familiar and appealing to upper middle-class and high-income families because children of these families did not need to worry about the probability that they would obtain a high-paying job post-grad. Because of this philosophy and the ways in which it has influenced the structure of liberal arts schools, one might argue that schools of this nature inherently reproduce class inequality. Furthermore, that they might also reproduce racial hierarchy due to the ways in which class- and race-based oppression are interconnected, and also because higher ed has historically excluded people of color specifically. This leads to larger questions about whether or not it is actually possible for an

institution such as Colorado College to pursue antiracism and dismantle institutionally racist structures and practices.

This study also presented an analysis of the extent to which current employees of the College do not feel supported both monetarily and in terms of other resources in their work to advance outreach, access, and student success. The finding that, overall, many staff employees feel unsupported and deprioritized has the potential to contribute in meaningful ways to how the College chooses to move forward with equity focused initiatives, most especially the *antiracism commitment*. By documenting the ways in which participants' feel that their work is not valued nor funded in the ways it needs to be in order to make systemic changes—changes which the College publicly proclaims are their priority—perhaps the administration including the Board of Trustees will reexamine its values and the extent to which it is truly committed to antiracism, diversity, and equity. Without attention to gaps between ideals and practices, the College may engage in little more than *performative activism and access*. Performativity is a concern of many who worry that the continued fight for equity in higher ed is not being taken seriously enough by institutions with power and immense resources, Colorado College included.

The findings regarding the structural inefficiencies of the College and how the organization is *siloed* advances research on what models for organizational change and institutional collaboration are most valuable. Colorado College, given its small size, should theoretically be more apt to promote a work culture centered on consistent collaboration. Further research is necessary on why siloing happens, and how other institutions have remedied this problem in the context of higher education specifically (if any have at all). An important area of continued research is to better understand what staff members envision when they think of a more collaborative, centralized workplace structure. Furthermore, if there were more

opportunities for interdepartmental collaboration, would stakeholders agree on the future direction of the College and how resources should be allocated? Would there be consensus on what aspects of the student experience should be emphasized in terms of trying to optimize student success? Lastly, the inclusion of more faculty, administrative voices, and even board members would also be valuable in future research to better understand the extent to which the problem of siloing permeates other areas of the College, and how individuals in positions of extreme power plan to promote productivity, create collaborative work streams, and foster a culture of mutual respect moving forward.

It has become widely acknowledged within the field of higher education that despite efforts to diversify undergraduate student bodies and make higher ed more accessible, significant steps still need to be taken to ensure the access *and* success of historically underrepresented students in their pursuit of a degree. This study validates this as an ongoing problem, highlighting specifically the ways in which price greatly limits Colorado College's ability to pursue meaningful outreach and access initiatives. Although the reality of being a tuition-dependent institution does limit to some extent the potentialities of access and outreach initiatives, there are still opportunities for change on both micro and macro levels, for example with an intensive capital campaign to increase the College's endowment and financial aid budget. Although participant responses strengthen claims that access and equity are increasingly becoming a focus of the missions of higher ed institutions in general, the findings do not make clear how shifts in cultural values will influence structural change. Further research is needed to understand the effectiveness of programs such as Stroud and Bridge in the long-term, and how such initiatives might be even more successful in shifting the student body demographics if given more resources.

CONCLUSION

This study built on pre-existing literature about the ongoing work of higher education reform, particularly on those efforts which have been made since the mid-twentieth century. Specifically, it focused on researched, theoretical ideas about how capital and a student's background influences their on-campus experience, the difference between college access and college success, and the ways in which higher educational institutions have become increasingly focused on equity and antiracism in recent years. This study advances existing scholarship by focusing on Colorado College specifically and providing insight into the functioning of a small, tuition-dependent liberal arts college and predominantly white institution. By conducting a deep analysis of the systems and social agents involved in access, outreach, and student success work here on-campus, this study illuminates the ways in which Colorado College is simultaneously on par with broader efforts to make higher ed more accessible, and also where there remain areas for growth and a more material commitment to both ideological as well as structural changes at CC.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guide

I. *Demographics/Background Section*

1. What is your name and your pronouns, if you feel comfortable sharing?
2. Where are you from originally?
3. How long have you worked at CC for?
4. What is your official position (title) at CC?
5. Did you attend college? If yes, and if you feel comfortable sharing, were you a first-generation or continuing-generation student? Where did you attend?
6. If you feel comfortable sharing, would you have identified yourself as a low-income and/or BIPOC student?
7. Have you worked at any other colleges or universities before CC? If yes, how many and which ones?

II. *Positionality and Higher Ed Background/Experience*

1. How did you get into the work that you do now?
2. Has higher education always been a field that's interested you?
3. Based on the above answer to "if you attended college…"
    a. If yes:
        i. Thinking back, can you remember the reasons you wanted to become college-educated? Did you want to attend a particular college or type of college?
        ii. Overall, how would you describe your experience socially in college? Did you feel socially integrated?
        iii. Was your overall experience what you expected? Are there memorable features of your college that contributed to your social integration (or isolation?)
        iv. How was your academic experience? Did you feel academically supported? Was your overall experience with academics what you expected?
        v. Are there memorable features of your college that contributed either positively or negatively to your academic life?
        vi. Would you say your college provided a sense of community? If so, what specific features contributed to the community? What communities were of the most value to you?
        vii. Was college a challenging or easy time for you? Why and in what ways?
        viii. Did you feel like your college provided support systems for you and most or all of your needs on-campus?
        ix. What was your college process like (by process I mean while still in high school, filling out applications, researching schools, acquiring materials to apply, etc.)?
    b. If no:

i. What was your educational experience like in high school? Was it largely positive or largely negative? Were you stimulated and supported academically?
ii. Did you want to attend college at the time? If not, why? If yes, why?
iii. Did you feel like there was support in place to guide you in the college process?

III. *Opinions on Higher Ed (Ideology)*

1. In your eyes, what is the purpose of higher education?
2. Do you feel that higher education is exclusive? If yes, how? If not, how?
3. Some people argue that higher education should be more accessible. What does accessibility mean to you?
4. In what ways do you think colleges can be most accessible to high school students?
5. Do you think most students view colleges as accessible once they enroll? What would make college life more accessible to most students? In your view, what forms of accessibility are essential or most important?
6. How do you think CC approaches accessibility?
    a. In admissions, with outreach programs, during orientation, on-campus for students etc. (the focus of this question will shift depending on who the participant is)
7. What are some ways, in your opinion, that colleges can promote accessibility?
8. In your opinion, what is the difference between college access and college success? In what areas could colleges improve?

IV. *Student Success and Resource Acquisition*

1. What qualities, skills or experiences do you think make a student most likely to succeed in higher education? Most likely to succeed at Colorado College?
2. Where do these skills, qualities and experiences come from? How are they developed? What types of students enter college already having these?
3. What specific incentives and strategies are used to encourage students to take advantage of college or campus resources?
4. How does CC support the success of a diverse array of students?
5. In what ways is CC's student body diverse? In what ways is it not?
    a. Push here beyond ethnoracial and compositional diversity to consider other forms of diversity based both in identity and also life experience.
6. How might a CC student's high school experience influence their adjustment to campus?
7. How does the school, from your perspective/with the knowledge you have, try to make the experience accessible/equitable for all students who enroll regardless of high school experience?
8. How do those resources play a role in making campus more equitable?

V. *Daily Work and Responsibilities at Colorado College*

1. Do you enjoy your job? What drew you to this role?
2. What are the most meaningful aspects of your work?

3. What objectives are prioritized the most in your work (either for you, personally, or within your larger department)?
4. What is the most challenging about your role at CC?
5. What other departments do you work with the most?
6. Do you coordinate programming with other departments and the administration?
7. What are the biggest limitations to your work?
    a. If those limitations were not in place, what would you like CC to look like? If that feels too broad, what would you like your department to look like, to focus on, or to aim for and prioritize?
    b. What kinds of risks or creative opportunities would you like to see your department take? Do you think your department or office has a lot of freedom to design its programs as it sees fit?
8. Do you feel support from the college for your work?
9. If you could envision what your department looks like in 5 years, what would be some things you would see?
10. If you could envision what the college looks like in 5 years, what would be some things you would see?

VI. *Specific Questions for Different Departments (when applicable, not used for all departments)*

1. The Office of Admission
    a. What percentage of admitted students come from feeder schools? What are the primary feeder schools? What qualities do feeder school applicants usually have? Are there efforts within the Admissions Office to broaden the range of feeder schools? If so, how and why?
2. Stroud Scholars, Summer Session, Bridge Scholars
    a. What are some specific examples of successful or promising endeavors?
    b. Are there any obstacles to building connections and coordinating work?
    c. Which programs and offices coordinate most?
    d. In what ways do programs interact with, hear from, and consult with students?
3. The Financial Aid Office
    a. Does the office feel that the college does a fairly good job of meeting needs and taking care of students who struggle to pay their share of costs?
4. Communications and Marketing
    a. What do you focus on highlighting in your marketing materials? Do you feel like there is a typical type of CC student?
    b. Has the office felt it has made progress in representing and depicting the college realistically? If so, what are some examples of specific strategies it has taken to manage marketing well?