

Urban Preparation

An Introduction

I wrote this text to subvert dominant narratives that insist on casting urban-dwelling young Black men and boys as “at-risk” or “disadvantaged.”¹ *Urban Preparation: Young Black Men Moving from Chicago’s South Side to Success in Higher Education* depicts the ecology of people, moments, lessons, incidents, and interactions that collectively help determine the journey to and through college for seventeen young Black men from Chicago’s South Side. This book acknowledges the cultural strengths young Black men and boys bring with them to school and the important role of Black communities in their educational attainment. It refutes menacing plot lines that portray Black boys growing up in enclaves of concentrated poverty as hypervulnerable. These young men do not need another ill-conceived education reform to “fix” them. *They* are not broken; but they are too often exposed to broken education systems that conserve their academic vulnerability. *Urban Preparation* amplifies the voices of young Black men who grew up in densely populated, economically disenfranchised communities of color. Their points of view also counter pervasive stories of school failure that conveniently misplace critical analyses of the institutional structures that created, and presently sustain, the problem of Black male school underachievement.

Adversity does not discriminate based on race, gender, or class. These young men’s exposure to risk in the urban environment at the intersection of these three identity markers underscores their development of various valuable cultural competencies. These are place-based intelligences they employ, and cultural resources they acquire, to adeptly negotiate and overcome some of life’s most difficult circumstances. Hence, a central premise of *Urban Preparation*

is that young Black men and boys are indeed resilient. They wield tremendous agency to effectively navigate the pathway from their home neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side to and through a four-year college or university despite numerous personal struggles and social and cultural barriers. My use of *agency* in this book centers on the supposition that young Black men and boys are actively involved in the experiences that shape their educational trajectories. They are not passive subjects being acted on. Instead, they take an active role, one way or another, in determining their education outcomes.

This book also aims to sharpen urban education reform efforts, and thus improve schooling outcomes for Black male youth by calling attention to the important implications of their perspectives on the matter—if we are listening closely to the details of their experiences inside and outside of school. Better understanding the factors that contribute to these young men's education trajectories help in the fight against structural and institutional impediments to education opportunity resulting from White supremacy and America's legacy of anti-Black racism.

The seventeen young Black men whose stories I tell here are members of the inaugural graduating class of Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men (UP), a single-sex high school for boys established in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago's South Side (see figure 2.1). Today, with three campuses serving several hundred young Black men and boys throughout the city of Chicago, UP is widely celebrated for helping 100 percent of its graduates earn admittance to four-year colleges and universities. To date, however, little scholarly work has been published on the factors that undergird the school's success, broadly defined. The public, including those aiming to potentially replicate Urban Prep or its successes, know too little about the philosophies, practices, and circumstances behind the school's accomplishments. *Urban Preparation* aims to unveil the dimensions of UP's (in)effectiveness in both reversing trends in Black male school failure and preparing young Black men to be productive contributors to society.

Moreover, an urban school's partnership with families and communities is one component necessary to ensure that Black youth realize their greatest academic potential.² Beyond an impressive branding campaign centered on "changing the narrative" about young Black men and boys, it has been difficult

to determine UP's long-term impact on urban education school improvement or education reform writ large, the material conditions of the Black communities where its campuses are located, and the life outcomes of its graduates.

Urban Preparation is one attempt to examine the relationship between urban living and urban schooling, as well as the important role of secondary education institutions for positioning young Black men to pursue a higher education, should they elect to do so.

The book has three chief aims:

- to describe the features of UP's organizational design and the influence of its institutional practices on its graduates' college preparation and persistence through the first-person perspectives of young Black men who were members of UP's inaugural graduating class
- to examine the intersections of place (growing up on Chicago's South Side) and space (attending Urban Prep) from a critical race perspective to better discern: the factors that contribute to developing the collegiate aspirations of young Black men who grow up in economically disenfranchised communities of color; strategies for cultivating antioppressive visions of Black manhood; and understanding about the young men's conceptions of becoming "successful Black men"
- to explore the types of schooling environments, experiences, and conditions most likely to narrow "opportunity gaps" for urban youth, and the implications of these factors for young Black men and boys' academic success and positive race and gender identity development

The Urban Prep College Persistence Study

In late June 2006, I left a position teaching eighth-grade math at Paderewski Elementary School in the North Lawndale community, a school in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system, to become the founding math teacher at Urban Prep. I had applied to the school and interviewed in the spring of 2006 but was not initially hired. After teaching summer school at Noble Street College Prep, where I had just been offered a job for the next academic year, I received a phone call from Dennis Lacewell, one of UP's founding principals, informing me that a math position had been created for me at Urban

Prep. With three professional opportunities looming, I had to decide whether to return to Paderewski, accept the position at Noble Street, or become the founding math teacher at Urban Prep. I chose Urban Prep.

Teaching at the nation's first all-boys public charter high school represented an opportunity to help build a school that would be(come) a national model for how to best educate young Black men and boys who attend urban schools. In my role, I was responsible for six sections of ninth-grade math, which meant I taught every student enrolled at Urban Prep in 2006–7 (except for a small group of students who were taught by a colleague). Beyond the classroom, I was involved in coauthoring the Urban Prep Creed, starting the school's musical ensemble, and interacting daily with 150 of some of the most brilliant Black boys I've ever met. Although my contract was not renewed for the following academic year, teaching at the school is still one of my proudest professional accomplishments.

After UP I went on to teach at a middle school on Chicago's South Side, completed my principal licensure, and worked as a mathematics instructional coach at two different CPS turnaround elementary schools. I enjoyed almost ten years of service as an urban educator and administrator before entering the professorate. I have not had any formal or informal affiliation with Urban Prep since 2007, but I have maintained cordial relationships with my former colleagues. And, thanks to social media, I have been able to reconnect with many former students, including several of the young men who are featured in this book. Working at UP helped to spark my passion to better understand the schooling conditions and teacher dispositions that enable young Black men and boys' high academic achievement. My sustained interest in expanding urban youths' access to high-quality public education opportunities inspired the research study behind this book.

Urban Preparation comes out of the Urban Prep College Persistence Study (UPCPS), which examined UP's role and function in the college persistence and retention of members of the school's first graduating class. I conducted this study with Dr. Derrick R. Brooms, another founding faculty member at Urban Prep; he worked at the school for four years before leaving in 2010. The participants in the UPCPS are our former students, and we collected data during the 2013–14 academic school year. At the time of data collection,

each UPCPS participant was four years out of high school and on track to earning an undergraduate degree within six years of his initial college enrollment.³ Derrick and I collaboratively conceived of the UPCPS, collected data together, and engaged in early analyses of the data. I am solely responsible for the final data analysis/interpretations, theoretical framing, and data reported in this book. The original ideas put forward in this text are mine alone, but *Urban Preparation* would not be possible without Derrick's contribution to developing and conducting the research project.

The seeds for the project were planted in 2007 during early conversations Derrick and I had with other founding faculty about the best organizational arrangements and pedagogical approaches for realizing the vision of an innovative urban high school for boys that would put each of its graduates on track to college. Derrick and I kept in touch over the years, and in 2012 we began imagining a research study that would allow us to learn from members of UP's inaugural graduating class. Since completing graduate school and securing positions in higher education, we have both maintained a steady commitment to doing empirical research that opposes widespread deficit discourses and perspectives about Black people, Black communities, and young Black men in particular. This commitment, in part, emerges from our experiences as urban educators. But, even more, it is our own cultural intuition as Black men—native South Siders, products of an urban environment and the Chicago Public Schools—that has motivated our continued intellectual engagement in this area of inquiry.

The primary data source for the UPCPS were the interviews we conducted with the young UP graduates. (A detailed account of the research methodology is presented in the appendix.) In gathering this data, Derrick and I were interested not only in the young men's journeys to college but also in the specific experiences they thought were important or valuable. We were concerned not just with the *what* of that journey but also with the *why*. From the beginning, Derrick and I openly communicated with the young men our reason for the research project: to understand their perspectives on how to improve schooling experiences for young Black men and boys growing up in high-poverty communities of color. The rapport we established with them—because of our role in their lives as teachers and, in Derrick's case, as a coach—was neces-

sary to facilitate the integrity of this research and the trustworthiness of its findings.⁴ Furthermore, research that represents this level of intimacy between the researcher and the researched requires a way of knowing that more fully aligns with the communities this text aims to represent.

In writing *Urban Preparation*, I relied on each of my multiple identities—man, educator, Black, race scholar, Chicagoan—to provide me with the epistemological and ontological perspectives necessary to gather “deep meaning” from these young men’s personal narratives.⁵ This allowed me to produce a text that is honest and authentic, deferential and critical, thoughtful and straightforward. I make no claims to neutrality or scientific objectivity. In fact, this research is fully subjective, so that I might be most responsible and accountable to the young men whose stories I tell, the communities from which they emerge, and the many young men just like them whose voices may never be heard in the mainstream.⁶ The reader can argue with my interpretations, but the words and points of view revealed in conversation with these young Black men cannot be denied. Like Black lives, #BlackMensStoriesMatter.

Counterstorytelling and Experiential Knowledge

Critical race theorists argue that a function of racial oppression is the production of majoritarian stock stories that cast people of color negatively.⁷ Solórzano and Yosso contend, for instance, that majoritarian stories include broad characterizations of “darker skin and poverty” as correlates to “bad neighborhoods and bad schools.”⁸ The word *urban* tends to conjure images of low-income, underresourced, high-poverty Black and Latinx communities—which are rarely acknowledged for the important cultural knowledge, skills, and resources they afford the youth raised there.⁹ Stock stories about why young Black men and boys fail and the evidence of their alleged lack of school engagement, or care for their education, do little to disrupt widespread deficit perspectives about them in education discourse, theory, and practice. Dominant depictions and perceptions of them (and Black girls) as uncontrollable, deviant, and anti-intellectual tend to drive urban education reform efforts centered on discipline and control. This orientation underscores the logic used by school district officials to close or “turn around” neighborhood schools in order to “fix” poor Black communities or offer more “options” to

Black families (cue the proliferation of “no excuse” charter schools as an urban education reform strategy in almost every major US city).

The narratives in this book are written and framed using a critical race counterstorytelling methodology.¹⁰ Counterstorytelling is the active pushing back against deficit perspectives about people of color through first-person narratives about a set of experiences, conditions, or circumstances. Counterstories are essential for presenting opposing pervasive deficit points of view, stories, and images like the ones I’ve just described. This methodological approach highlights important racial blind spots.¹¹ Parker and Lynn insist that storytelling “provides readers with a challenging account of preconceived notions of race.”¹² In other words, the young men’s personal narratives presented in this book are intended to complicate, unveil, and disrupt dominant discourses of race in urban education, and the intersections of race with class and gender. The counterstorytelling in chapters 2–5 reveal the logics of White supremacy and anti-Black racism that likely influence teaching and learning practices in urban schools and preK–12 youth development. These young men’s words and perspectives humanize Black men and boys in ways not often accomplished in mainstream education research. Counterstories offer an empirical database from which to derive more justice-centered pedagogical orientations and shift dominant discourses of Black student school achievement.

Moreover, critical race scholarship intimately links theory and practice to the “activist social justice and change” needed to disrupt racist school practices that attempt to subordinate youth of color to positions of perpetual academic inferiority.¹³ That being the case, I relied on the young men’s experiential knowledge to construct their counterstory. *Experiential knowledge* represents the conventional sense making, understandings, and/or expertise afforded through personal experience useful for explaining or discerning racial subordination. Experiential knowledge is sound bites, if you will, that offer the alternative points of view necessary to better understand how race and racism restrict and/or pose threats to each young man’s access to education opportunity as he moves along the education pipeline.

I constructed a counterstory based primarily on my reading and rereading of more than five hundred pages of interview transcripts. I analyzed these data to find patterns of experiential knowledge across the seventeen research

participants (see the appendix). Together with knowledge gleaned from extant research literature and my own personal experience, as well as the logical juxtaposition of the young men's experiential knowledge, these data produced one compelling counterstory—a continuous narrative intended to oppose widely accepted assumptions, perceptions of, and narratives about urban Black male youth that function to maintain supremacy.

Experiential knowledge situates an individual's point of view as fundamental to interpreting the circumstances that lead to various racialized outcomes. The new knowledge generated by the young men, as a result of their lived experience as members of the very first graduating class of Urban Prep, as life-long residents of the South Side of Chicago, and as graduates of a four-year college or university where many of them were in the racial minority, was essential for providing the most authentic account of the factors that support or impede urban-dwelling young Black men's college going and completion. Deep discussions of these factors appear in both the counterstory and my follow-up analyses.

It is my hope that this book casts doubt on any news report, research study, or media representation that fails to name race and, more specifically, anti-Blackness as a variable for determining Black male school failure. I also aim to compel educators and others to critically scrutinize the quality and intention of programs, (new) schools, or initiatives aimed at improving the school success of Black (male) youth.

Composite Characters and the Counterstory

The counterstory presented in chapters 2–5 is primarily based on the young men's experiences and other details specific to *real-life* places, people and scenarios, as well as interactions I had with them. Given my explicit aim to make this research accessible to a broader audience, I arranged actual research data (quotes from interviews with the UPCPS research participants) into one coherent, continuous narrative constructed around dominant themes that emerged from my data analysis. I created specific details, such as the setting, to construct a coherent story that reveals the racialized, classed, and gendered experiences of these young men.¹⁴

To be clear, the counterstory in *Urban Preparation* is not fictional. Everything about it is based on my field notes, the analytic memos I made during my interactions with the young men, the UPCPS interview data, my own professional experiences as an urban educator and founding math teacher at Urban Prep, and knowledge of the research literature.

The telling of this counterstory necessitated that I develop five composite characters. The composite characters are not imaginary; nor are they grounded in fictional details.¹⁵ Researchers have long supported the use of composite characters in qualitative research scholarship.¹⁶ I constructed the composite characters of Jeff, Winston, Quentin, Reggie, and Antwan by combining these young men's overlapping real-life experiences and their personal characteristics. In grouping the seventeen participants into five composites, I looked for similarities in disposition, family structure, college type attended (predominantly White institution versus historically black college or university), upbringing, and academic profile.

The setting of the counterstory is a real place in Chicago, and it depicts a similar dinner gathering that Derrick and I had with UPCPS participants about a year after we completed data collection. I included real aspects of the restaurant setting. The conversation in the counterstory centers around data Derrick and I collected during our one-on-one interviews with the young men. Even the coffee shop conversations in chapters 2–5 are amalgams of real-life discussions Derrick and I have had over the ten years since we worked together at Urban Prep. Moreover, all “dialogue” comes directly from a participant's comment during a research interview. Of course, when it was necessary to clarify, enhance readability, or further anonymize the seventeen young men, I did make minor revisions to this dialogue.

Urban Prep students, graduates, families, and (former) employees are a small-knit community, and the individuals from UP's first graduating class who are also college graduates is even smaller. And since certain experiences are deeply personal and specific, and therefore difficult to completely mask, I endeavored to protect their identities as best I could. Similarly, for this reason I used pseudonyms for any of the young men's mentions of individual's names, such as former teachers from UP.

Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men, the First All-Boys Public Charter High School in the United States

In conceiving of the Urban Prep Academies in 2002, fourth-generation Chicagoan Tim King set out to improve the educational outcomes of young Black men and boys in his hometown. After completing law school at Georgetown University, he returned to Chicago to run Hales Franciscan, a small private high school serving young Black men on the city's South Side. He would later pursue the idea of establishing a high school that would broaden access to college for urban-dwelling young Black men and boys.¹⁷

King recounts how the school's motto, "We Believe," was the sober reminder he needed to persevere after his application to establish the charter high school was twice rejected by Chicago's charter authorizing agency. On the third try, Urban Prep was granted a charter to become the nation's first all-boys public (charter) high school. The "We Believe" motto evidences a conviction held by King, UP's supporters, and multiple other stakeholders, and a staunch confidence in every Black boy's capacity to graduate from UP ready for college, no matter the external obstacles. This philosophy suggests that *believing* young Black men and boys can achieve academic success is necessary for *seeing* the substance of that success demonstrated. "Either you do or you don't [believe]"—there is no in between. The idea of believing shows up throughout *Urban Preparation* as a critical factor in these young men's preparation to finish high school, enroll in college, and attain success in higher education.

The first Urban Prep campus was established in 2006 as a single-sex, grades 9–12 college preparatory high school open to any male student living within the CPS district.¹⁸ UP's founders used district data to identify three communities where the first campus might be opened. A needs assessment revealed that Englewood was lacking a high-quality secondary education option. The flagship campus began with a ninth-grade class of approximately 150 students. The school added a new group of students each year until it reached the maximum capacity of 600 students.¹⁹ Today, there are three UP campuses, located in the Englewood, Bronzeville, and University Village/Little Italy communities. UP claims to use a blind lottery system to admit students, which means that

factors such as a student's test scores, grades, or exceptional learning needs are not considered in the selection process. Students apply by completing a one-page application that includes a demographic section and a short questionnaire which invites them to identify their academic and educational interests. Transfer students have a special form they complete for admission that is different from young men applying for a seat in the freshman class. Once the maximum number of students has been met, the remaining students are waitlisted. At capacity, UP may enroll approximately 2,000 students across its three campuses. To date, the school has served primarily young Black men and boys, with about 80 percent of them receiving free or reduced-price lunches.

Urban Prep's mission is "to provide a comprehensive, high-quality college preparatory education to young men that results in [their] graduates succeeding in college."²⁰ "Succeeding in college" is understood to mean that UP graduates are prepared to earn a baccalaureate degree from a four-year college or university. The young men whose stories are featured in this text are 2010 graduates of UP's Englewood campus. Data from the 2015–16 Illinois Report Card show that there was a 94 percent high school graduation rate for students from this campus.²¹ In 2016, ten years after UP opened its doors, the school celebrated its seventh year in a row of helping 100 percent of its graduates gain admission to a four-year college or university.²² That same year, however, only 16 percent of those graduates were considered college ready leaving high school.²³

A 2011 data report from the school, published a year after the graduation of UP's inaugural class, maintained that about 30 percent of Black boys who start high school at Urban Prep leave the school before completing their senior year. This data point is referenced as one of UP's successes, since it can be compared with attrition rates for young Black men from other Chicago high schools that hover at 56–61 percent. In the same 2011 report, UP announced that 94 percent of its 2010 graduates were enrolled in college, with 80 percent of them having completed the first year. I have not been able to locate a report that reveals the percentage of students from the inaugural graduating class who persisted through the second year and beyond. There is also no easily accessible, publicly available data about college persistence or completion rates for graduates of Urban Prep.²⁴

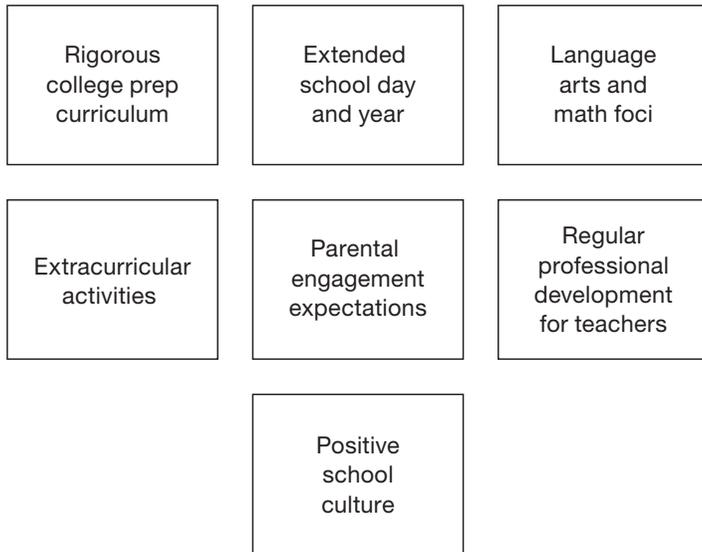
Urban Prep's mission is underscored by four guiding aims:

- Prepare young men from urban settings to gain admission to and succeed in college.
- Provide a comprehensive learning experience through a college preparatory curriculum, extracurricular participation, and community service.
- Maintain high expectations for all students.
- Promote a positive environment that facilitates and nurtures respect for students, staff, and the community.

Key Design Elements

All incoming freshmen participate in a multiweek summer orientation, the Transition Program, prior to the start of their first year at the school. Additionally, students are required to adhere to a strict school dress code (khaki pants; a white, collared, buttoned shirt; black shoes; a school-issued red tie; and a black blazer). Each day begins with a schoolwide meeting referred to as Community. This is the time of day when students recite the Urban Prep Creed, which articulates aspects of Urban Prep's school culture emphasizing respect, responsibility, ritual, and relationships. Each student also meets daily with his small advisory group, referred to as a Pride. Finally, through its Arcs—four foundational dimensions or principles guiding the school's operations and organizational design—UP aims to provide its students a rigorous college-prep program, deepen their sense of responsibility, bolster their confidence and leadership capacity, and increase their understanding of the world around them.²⁵ (See figure I.1.)

Community. Community is convened, usually in the school gymnasium, at the beginning of each school day. It is the one time each day when every teacher, student, staff member, and administrator gathers together. Students greet one another by shaking hands and checking one another's uniform. School leaders acknowledge students for their superlative attendance, character, effort, and academic performance. One such celebration is recognizing when a young man has earned his first college acceptance, which is a moment marked by trading in his solid-red tie for a red-and-gold-striped tie. It is also the time and place when announcements are made about programming efforts,

FIGURE I.1 Distinctive elements of Urban Prep’s organizational structure

upcoming events, and other school-related activities. Community concludes with recitation of the Urban Prep Creed, “We Believe.”

Creed. The Creed is a litany of self-affirmations that members of the UP community memorize and recite together each school day.

We Believe. We are the young men of Urban Prep. We are college bound. We are exceptional—not because we say it, but because we work hard at it. We will not falter in the face of any obstacle placed before us. We are dedicated, committed and focused. We never succumb to mediocrity, uncertainty or fear. We never fail because we never give up. We make no excuses. We choose to live honestly, nonviolently and honorably. We respect ourselves and, in doing so, respect all people. We have a future for which we are accountable. We have a responsibility to our families, community and world. We are our brothers’ keepers. We believe in ourselves. We believe in each other. We believe in Urban Prep. WE BELIEVE.

The Creed represents UP’s cultural ethos. Most importantly, each line is a declaration intended to embolden the young men’s academic self-efficacy

so that they are prepared to seamlessly transition into college, overcome any challenging academic tasks and personal obstacle, and persist through college to complete their degree program.²⁶

School culture and climate. UP's school culture and climate is a defining feature of the school's overall organizational design. In describing UP's educational philosophy, Tim King said, "At Urban Prep, we provide our young men with swords and shields. The sword is a high-quality education based on a rigorous and culturally relevant curriculum . . . The shield is the self-confidence, self-possession, and self-awareness necessary for protection in an often unfriendly and unforgiving world. Our students develop these shields, thanks to a school culture grounded in four elements that Urban Prep calls the '4 Rs': respect, responsibility, ritual, and relationships."²⁷ The 4 Rs are reinforced in myriad ways through UP's academic curriculum, extracurricular activities, athletic programs, and service learning initiatives. One way the school aims to encourage and model respect for the young men, for example, is by referring to each student by his surname (as opposed to his first name). Every man in the building, student or adult, is referred to as Mister. Also, during the time I worked at the school, male teachers were required to wear a buttoned shirt and a tie each day. Daily recitation of the Creed during Community is an important ritual the school observes. Students practice responsibility by keeping their uniforms clean and pressed. School administrators place a premium on building substantive interpersonal relationships with the young men, so much so that, during my time at the school, "relationships" was a category on the UP official teacher evaluation.

Prides. Urban Prep's mascot is a lion. Playing on this, the small, teacher-led advisory groups are called Prides, reinforcing the idea of family and collective responsibility for each other's well-being. Prides meet every day, and their focus on peer interaction is designed to counter students' tendency to think only about themselves and their individual achievements. They are like an in-school family. Students stay in the same Pride—with the same teacher leader and the same set of peers—throughout their time at Urban Prep. This space allows for peer and adult mentoring and the development of life skills, in addition to

providing time to develop group service projects. Moreover, through participation in the Pride, the young men garner positive peer associations, build a sense of community and school spirit, and share and disseminate schoolwide communications. Students line up in their Pride groups during Community.

College preparation. Messages about college going are a central feature of UP's overall organizational design. The school's culture and climate establish the conditions necessary to put every young man on track to enroll in, and eventually complete, an undergraduate degree from a traditional four-year college or university. The academic program includes double periods of English all four years and core courses in math, history, and science, as well as two years of a foreign language. By the time students reach grade 12, they should have established a competitive college admissions portfolio that includes their participation in several extracurricular activities and community service projects, the equivalent of eight years of English/language arts coursework, and six years of math. Furthermore, students participate in college visits beginning their freshman year, and the college counseling department works to identify and match students with summer academic enrichment programs. Students tend to be selected for these programs based on grades, academic performance in specific subjects, and interest.

Reading *Urban Preparation*

In writing *Urban Preparation*, I did not intend in any way to exceptionalize these young men, their home lives, or their families' decisions to send them to UP for high school. Nor did I write this to provide a rosy or unrealistic picture of growing up on the South Side of Chicago, in the "hood." I characterize UPCPS as a fundamentally descriptive qualitative study, and *Urban Preparation* paints a vivid picture of these young men's journeys from their home communities to and through college with respect to the factors they perceive have contributed the most to their education trajectories. The counterstory in this book demonstrates how attempting to provide a high-quality education to young Black men and boys *without* paying critical attention to the legacy of anti-Blackness, patriarchy, heterosexism, and White supremacy only works to reproduce racialized inequity, oppression, and marginalization

within Black communities, rather than eliminate them. While discussion in *Urban Preparation* tends to center around one school, the themes revealed reflect broader social phenomena. And though these young men do not see themselves as better than their peers who have not completed college, their successes (and trials) in pursuit of a higher education are instructive for advancing justice in the education of young Black men and boys (and Black urban youth) everywhere.

Chapter 1 reviews relevant research literature focusing on opportunity gaps and the impact of anti-Black racism on the education of Black youth in the United States. This chapter helps frame the issues contributing to young Black men's persistent school failure, and it also reveals the historical and sociopolitical contextual knowledge necessary to understand the contemporary significance of Urban Prep's founding.

Chapter 2 begins the counterstory and introduces life on Chicago's South Side through the eyes of the young men. UPCPS's participants describe what they most and least enjoyed about growing up on the South Side, their initial motivations for leaving home, their aspirations toward future success, and gaining access to opportunities that enable them to one day improve their own and their family's quality of life. In chapter 3, these young men reflect on the reasons they (or their families) decided they would attend Urban Prep and their transition into the school during their first and second years of high school. This chapter is an in-depth examination of the young men's acculturation to UP's schooling environment. It looks at their descriptions of "brotherhood" and be(com)ing a "successful Black man." Analyses unveil UP's role in shaping these young men's conceptions of manhood and masculinity. Chapter 4 continues the counterstory by exploring how these young men experienced their junior and senior years of high school. More specifically, the chapter foregrounds specific aspects of the young men's college planning, the messages they received (and/or internalized) about college going, and Urban Prep's effectiveness in preparing them to be college ready. Chapter 5 concludes the counterstory and provides an overview of these young men's descriptions of their transition into college and their persistence through to completion. The young men reflect thoughtfully on college life, including the roadblocks they faced during their matriculation as well as the factors

that helped them circumnavigate threats to completing their undergraduate degrees. This chapter features important reflections from the young men about what they perceive to be the difference(s) between them and their classmates who did not complete college.

In broad strokes, chapters 6 and 7 provide important considerations necessary to deepen the reader's understanding of the forces that mediate the effectiveness of urban schools to provide high-quality educational experiences to young Black men and boys. In chapter 6, I put forward some ideas about an appropriate starting point for reimagining the education pipeline for young Black men and boys as something altogether different. I theorize the effects of anti-Blackness on the (im)possibilities of structural-level urban education improvement. I then reflect on ways to rethink notions of "success" necessary to foster a learning environment that ignites young Black men and boys' school engagement. I build on these considerations in chapter 7, where I present some final recommendations for strengthening urban education reform efforts. I contemplate the concept of "urban education reform" as well as the utility of coeducational versus single-sex schooling arrangements, charter versus traditional public schools, and the importance of listening to urban youth to bolster school improvement efforts.

Critical race scholars create counterstories based on real-life details to expose the oppression and racialized disparities associated with the intersections of race with class, gender, and other social identity markers.²⁸ The counterstorytelling I employ includes the counterstory *as well as* the scholarly interpretation of this narrative around larger issues of anti-Black racism and White supremacy. I break up the counterstorytelling chapters into three parts. Chapters 2–5 begin with a brief vignette featuring Damani and Glen (characters meant to represent Derrick and me), the two former UP teachers who inaugurated the reunion of alums from the first graduating class of Urban Prep. Their conversations reflect on and foreground discussions that unfold in each chapter and also provide some contextual knowledge about Urban Prep based on their own experiences working at the school during its early years.

The Zoom In portions of each chapter follow. These are the narrative parts of the counterstorytelling. The setting is Giordano's, a famous Chicago pizzeria. There is a group of UP graduates and two of their former teachers who

tell specific stories of their journeys to college. The Zoom Out portions of each chapter analyze the significance of these shared reflections and experiences to the broader issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality for determining these young men's education trajectories.

Think of a camera lens—zooming in gets you up close to the object of scrutiny so that you can examine the particularities of the object or case; and zooming out allows you to see the bigger picture, where all the smaller details cohere to tell a larger story of general significance to the observer. In my counterstorytelling, Zoom Ins are about being attentive to the individual experiences, interactions, lessons, and moments of each young man's journey. Zoom Outs are about making sense, from a more scholarly perspective, of how or why these details matter for determining the education success of young Black men and boys in an anti-Black racist society.

Conclusion

Improving education outcomes for young Black men and boys begins with a firm understanding of where they're growing up. Schools do not operate in isolation from the community space surrounding the building. Understanding the factors that collectively help determine these young men's education trajectories is limited without attending to the specific roles communities and families play in the process. Knowledge of the sociocultural and sociopolitical context of urban schooling adds depth and nuance to assessing the value of having attended Urban Prep. *Urban Preparation* is not about Urban Prep the school, per se. The title of the book is meant to represent the meaning associated with growing up in an urban environment. It is a statement of opposition to deficit discourses fixated on foregrounding the perils of poverty and disadvantage as predictors of future academic success. These narratives fail to adequately account for the resiliency and agency of urban youth. And because terms like *urban/inner city/ghetto* are used to socially construct Black and Latinx communities as places of destitution, desperation, and disinvestment, educators are left to establish schools around (or based on) perceived deficits rather than on the cultural strengths and expertise of urban youth.

More than anything, I hope this book adds substantively to conversations about how to expand access to education opportunity for young Black men and boys. Some would argue that the "promise of equal education opportunity"

for Black people is a farce. Nonetheless, a commitment to at least reducing or minimizing barriers to education opportunity necessitates an orientation toward justice, not simply creating more diverse or inclusive schooling environments.

Attending to justice means having a reasonable command of the historical and political context shaping contemporary public schooling arrangements. This includes knowledge of neoliberalism, the persistent challenges of improving urban schools in Black communities, and the political forces that allow unsubstantiated narratives of academic success to endure without concrete evidence of an education institution's pedagogical effectiveness. Justice is questioning the public's pathological preoccupation with, and fetishistic consumption of, Black boys in tidy black blazers, shirts, and ties and the simultaneous exploitation of Black youth and families in the communities where these boys are being raised.

Justice is insisting on the creation of single-sex schools that make *explicit* commitments to embracing and honoring diverse forms of Black manhood and gender performance. Justice requires that we push back against the ways that certain charter schools in Black communities become exceptionalized and, by default, actively underwrite master narratives that characterize traditional public neighborhood high schools as "drop-out factories."²⁹ Such stock stories do nothing for reimagining these spaces so that they no longer exist as sites of Black pain and suffering while we keep "waiting for Superman" to save Black youth.³⁰ Justice involves being intentional about allowing young Black men and boys to conceive of a future for which they can be proud, instead of simply preparing them to talk, dress, and behave in ways palatable to a society that does not see them as fully human.

The counterstorytelling in *Urban Preparation* belongs to, and is written in honor of, these young men. They have graciously shared their lived experiences in the hope that educators and researchers learn to think, say, and write something different about them. Some of what is said may be surprising. At other times their stories will resonate with some readers' personal experiences, while other reflections may directly challenge one's cultural sensibilities. But all of what they say is insightful and educative. I ask readers to be open-minded, to embrace the parts of this book that are unsettling, and to come away with an idea of how they will inspire change and resist the status quo of present-day urban schooling. We all have a part to play.