

## Finding their SPARCK: College and career readiness groups for African American females

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### **Abstract:**

Though often ignored or stereotyped in school settings, African American females have the strengths and resiliency needed to explore postsecondary options. Yet, current college and career readiness interventions does not meet the unique needs of this population. This article will integrate two models that may be effective in facilitating college and career exploration with African American females: the ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors for Student Success and SPARCK, the Life Design coaching intervention. Theoretical foundations of the models, as well as best practices and implications for practice and research will be presented.

**Keywords:** African American females | college and career readiness | group work | school counselor

### **Article:**

College and career readiness (CCR) is a current catch-phrase that has been utilized in many sectors of education but does not have a consistent definition. CCR has been discussed descriptively as an aspiration that counselors, educators, advocates, and family members have for promoting opportunity and success for students (Alger & Luke, 2015). It also has been discussed empirically as a framework for interventions in schools that are trying to boost student outcomes (Glessner, Rockinson-Szapkiw, & Lopez, 2017; Martinez, Baker, & Young, 2017). Moreover, CCR is mentioned in policy studies that are seeking to measure/assess readiness (Lapan, Poynton, Marcotte, Marland, & Milam, 2017; Mattern, Allen, & Camara, 2016) and connect it to K-12 standards and assessments, like the Common Core Standards or the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (Malin, Bragg, & Hackmann, 2017; Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). At the broadest level, college and career readiness characterizes students who have the necessary levels of proficiency to enter college or career training programs without remedial assistance (Conley, 2012). However, those levels and types of proficiency vary depending on the goals and next steps chosen by the students. That is to say, CCR for entering a four-year college may be

slightly different from CCR for starting a certificate program or entering a technical training program. Yet, some areas of overlap have been postulated.

Conley (2012) generated four keys to CCR, including key learning skills, key content knowledge, key cognitive strategies, and key transition skills. Conley's definition is seen throughout the CCR literature as an early example that has continued influence on the scholarly conversation. NOSCA, the College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (2010), put forward a list of eight components of college and career readiness tied to the work done by school counselors as key contributors to CCR. NOSCA's list included promoting college aspirations, academic planning, extracurricular engagement, college/career exploration, college/career assessments, college financing, college/career admissions, and the transition from high school to the next setting. Alternatively, the American School Counselor Association, or ASCA (2014), described college and career readiness as mind-sets and behaviors that could be organized by domain (academic, career, social/emotional) and broken down into actionable standards (e.g., demonstrate ability to work independently, create relationships with adults that support success). The ASCA (2014) definition expands beyond academic learning and career skills to incorporate personal/social skills and non-cognitive variables, such as self-beliefs, social skills, self-management skills, and learning strategies. Conley (2012) also mentions the importance of attitudes like resilience, motivation, and self-regulation, but notes that his four keys are based on attributes that can be taught or influenced within the schools. Thus, the accountability movement has influenced what is seen as possible or feasible to measure in terms of students' CCR outcomes, and perhaps curtailed our discussion of what CCR ideally could mean to students, families, and school counselors.

Some qualitative explorations of CCR have been published, which are helpful to counterbalance the assessment and accountability perspective. For example, Calaff (2007) described Latina/o students' pathways toward college and the influence of community-based outreach programs on the students and families who had the least amount of resources and social capital. She concluded that students who lived in low SES immigrant households, under-resourced communities, or families where no one else had gone to college needed multiple supports for college readiness across settings (school, home, community) in order to balance out their needs. Farmer-Hinton (2008) also examined the needs of low-income students of color who might be first-generation college students, whom she described as students "residing in contexts of concentrated disadvantage" (p. 138). Her student focus groups uncovered themes related to the importance of college networks and enrichment activities, the need for school-based support when the family had less educational social capital, and the sense that going to college was "outside of the norm" for these students who had fewer college ready role models to observe.

It is important to ask what has been missing from these CCR conversations, with an eye to the ways that a group-based intervention could be theorized. Beyond the lack of a consistent and shared definition of CCR, most of the discussion in the scholarly literature has been acontextual and generalized. In other words, the literature has not always acknowledged that privileged and disenfranchised students do not have equivalent opportunities to build college and career readiness in the same way at school and at home (Bryant, 2015; Calaff, 2007; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). The existing definitions and conceptual frameworks for CCR may be a good fit for some, but not all student populations. In particular, students with fewer role models or lived

experiences with CCR would benefit from a group-based approach where students can ask questions in a safe environment, learn vicariously from each other, and experience a reduction in isolation and an increase in optimism and hopefulness (Yalom, 1995).

In an attempt to address those concerns, Castro (2013) utilized a critical race theory lens to evaluate a statewide pilot program to bolster CCR based on Conley's (2012) framework. She found that while the activities of the program did align with Conley's model, there was no information about how students responded to those activities or whether the activities addressed differential contexts of low-income students, students of color, etc. Starting with the assumption that CCR programs (and educational institutions in general) tend to replicate the economic and racial inequities present in the culture at large, Castro questioned whether Conley's framework was sufficient. She suggested that future CCR efforts should be interrogated to see if they had a deficit perspective on students of color or low SES students, if they had acknowledged the realities of differential readiness for college and career due to poorly resourced schools and communities, if students had barriers to participation, and if outcomes of all students (or only some students) were being improved. The current article takes up some of Castro's suggestions to frame a CCR program that is more culturally responsive and less deficit-based.

Martinez et al. (2017) created and evaluated a classroom guidance curriculum meant to improve CCR self-efficacy beliefs and college-going knowledge in ninth graders from under-represented populations (e.g., 35% of participants were Latino/a, 29% were Black, and 40% of the school district was Title I eligible). The curriculum focused on increasing knowledge and awareness of postsecondary options, encouraging college ready behavior sets, and developing attitudes such as high aspirations and self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, the curriculum did not assume that all students had the social capital needed to start the CCR process, but sought to build those networks, information, and skills. The intervention included eight modules delivered in a classroom guidance curriculum that incorporated content (CCR knowledge and thoughts/attitudes) along with engaging exercises and assignments. This intervention represents an advance in that it combined information and process in a structured group setting, but did not focus on the concerns of a particular population (e.g., African American females).

Mayes and Hines (2014) have also contributed a gender and racially responsive framework for promoting CCR to the literature. These scholars generated a list of ideas for providing effective support to gifted African American girls based on The College Board's (2010) eight components of college and career readiness. For each component, Mayes and Hines (2014) provided suggestions for how school counselors could work with talented and motivated African American female students on CCR tasks in the context of their peer group, their family members, their teachers, and school environment. This provides a conceptual example of how general guidelines for CCR can be tailored to fit the needs of a particular population. Overall, the literature shows that a "classroom" or instructional approach to CCR can provide information, but a more experiential/holistic psychoeducational approach is a better fit for the population of interest and for delivery in group format by school counselors. The purpose of the current manuscript is to propose a theoretical foundation that could serve as a structure for a CCR group for ninth and tenth grade African American female students.

### **Strengths and Considerations of African American Females**

Despite the obstacles African American girls may face due to societal roles and stereotypes based on race and gender in America, they have made significant gains in college attendance and achievement when compared to their African American male counterparts. African American girls make up 63% of African American college enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b). However, many studies only support their achievement when compared to African American males (and not females from other ethnic/racial groups), and discount research suggesting African American girls experience stress and social opposition to their achievement (Morales, 2008). Yet, African American females still have the desire to achieve academically. Crenshaw (2015) emphasized how African American females have made significant contributions to our nation's advancement in the math and sciences; for example, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Winston Jackson all notably contributed to sending Americans to space for the first time. Additionally, as African American females tend to adopt matriarchal roles within their families, they are more likely to serve as leaders inside the classroom (Crenshaw, 2015; Smith-Evans & George, 2014) and aspire to be leaders more so than their White and Latina female peers (Girl Scouts of America, 2017).

Despite these positive traits and achievements, African American girls still have barriers when it comes to academic equity. That is, although African American females are stereotypically portrayed as angry, hostile (e.g., Sapphire), and hypersexualized (e.g., Jezebel) in the media (Collins, 2004), they generally are not perceived as dangerous as African American males; yet, this contributes to the lack of visibility or educational research on African American girls. Teachers may subconsciously use racist and sexist stereotypical images of African American females to interpret behaviors and respond more harshly to African American girls who display behaviors at school that do not align with traditional, White standards of femininity (e.g., docile, diffident, and selfless) (Collins, 2004). In fact, African American girls are 5.7 times more likely to be suspended from school than their White female classmates (National Women's Law Center, 2018). Healthy psychosocial development and positive academic development do not occur when students are pushed out of classrooms and treated with bias and discrimination.

Specifically regarding college and career readiness, African American students have several systemic obstacles placed in their way when compared to their White peers, as well as other peers of color. For instance, fewer of them meet their ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, and they are the least likely to meet Benchmarks in math and science (ACT, 2016). At times, this is due to the lack of placement into advanced coursework (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b) by school leaders who do not see African American students as "at potential." Moreover, though 85% of African American students aim to obtain a postsecondary degree, achievement and opportunity gaps contribute to 20% of this population being undecided or not selecting a college major (ACT, 2016).

Whereas the literature on the CCR needs of African American females, in particular, is limited (Mayes & Hines, 2014); these statistics suggest that this population may not be receiving equitable opportunities to succeed academically or explore postsecondary options. The K-12 school structure is one that views students of color through a deficit lens and does not encourage the mind-sets and behaviors that can lead to college and career aspirations (Martinez, Dye, & Gonzalez, 2017). Moreover, the collectivistic cultural viewpoint of African Americans may

influence these females to consider familial elements into postsecondary planning (Maxwell, 2007), such as making the decision to stay close to home to care for parents or younger siblings. This, combined with the previously addressed stereotypes and deficit thinking from teachers, can serve as obstacles in the college and career planning process. Thus, the CCR needs of African American females can be summed into three factors: access to equitable experiences and opportunities, consideration of networks and familial influence, and countering the presence of negative expectations or bias in the educational system.

The bottom line is that African American girls are not understood in the intersectional and complex way that they deserve; they are passed over as “doing okay” in comparison to African American boys or viewed with a deficit lens as not at potential in comparison to White girls. This dynamic minimizes their level of risk and ignores the opportunity achievement gap that continues to plague our schools and affect students of color. African American girls deserve to be known and understood for who they are and to receive needed resources appropriately. Research suggests the strengths of African American youth lie in the development of a positive racial/cultural identity, cultural knowledge, strong kinship bonds, and high achievement orientation (Nicolas et al., 2008). Students’ strong kinship bonds with family and fellow African American students can help affirm personal self-worth and pride in racial identity, which have both been linked to academic achievement (Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). School counselors play a key role in the provision of CCR services, and should take these cultural and relational strengths into account in their work with African American girls.

### The School Counselor’s Role

ASCA asserted that school counselors must meet the needs of all students in three domains: academic, personal/social, and career (2012). Addressing the career domain proves difficult for many school counselors (Anctil, Klose Smith, Schenck, & Dahir, 2012), especially when differentiating for students at each grade level (McIntosh, 2000). For example, middle school counselors assist students in investigating interests and how they may relate to high school courses and, ultimately, college majors and careers (Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005). High school counselors primarily aid students in finding scholarships, completing college applications, and navigating college credit (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). School counselors at all levels also implement Career Days or Career Fairs; though scope and focus may vary, these events typically include members from the community sharing information about their educational and occupational experiences with students (Kolodinsky, Schroder, & Montopoli, 2006).

These various attempts of addressing CCR needs have received mixed reviews from students. Williams and Portman (2014) found that whereas students are aware that they can go to school counselors to receive information about college and careers, the amount of time school counselors actually completes these services are limited (Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2015). In fact, school counselors spend significantly less time implementing the career domain of the ASCA National Model on average compared to the personal/social and academic ones (Anctil et al., 2012). In schools with fewer resources and a low college-going culture overall, counselors have less time for personalized CCR conversations and are stretched thin across other responsibilities, and are thus less available to students (Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

This impersonal approach is not effective for many students but in particular African American students. African American students report rapport, empathy, and humor all contribute to an effective counseling relationship (Washington, 2015). Cultural competence is another critically important variable for culturally dominant counselors interacting with minoritized students (Martinez et al., 2017; Moss & Singh, 2015). Although many school counselors have received training in multicultural competencies, the translation to culturally competent practice takes time and effort (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). School counselors must take seriously the mandate to approach this task through a lens of constructivism, trying to understand marginalized students from their own perspective (Martinez et al., 2017). Even counselors who have identities from dominant social groups can accomplish this goal, with the important caveat that they must understand their privilege and engage in a collaborative working alliance with their students (Moss & Singh, 2015). If this relationship is not solid with the school counselor, African American students are less likely to seek the school counselor for CCR services (Dellana & Snyder, 2004; Mayes, Hines, & Harris, 2014). The importance of an effective working relationship cannot be overstated (Bryant, 2015).

African American females, in particular, have unique needs as it relates to CCR that the more general services provided by school counselors may fail to meet, such as access to opportunities, overcoming stereotypes by peers and teachers, and prioritizing family. In fact, family attitudes and experiences are major factors that impact career decision-making for African American females (Mayes & Hines, 2014). Overall, the educational and family/community context of African American females has to be acknowledged for its positive or negative influences on CCR, and the young women themselves must be seen clearly for their strengths and challenges outside of stereotyped notions of their group. For example, counselors should help young females anticipate the educational or career barriers due to sexism or racism that African American females are more likely to face compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Kim & O'Brien, 2018). Additionally, family factors, such as placing value on education and significant role models, influence postsecondary success of African American females (Pearson & Bieschke, 2001). Hence, in order to ensure that postsecondary options are effectively promoted and reinforced to this specific population, school counselors may need to consider a framework to present this information in comfortable settings that not only replicates a familial environment, but also provides a safe space to speak about concerns such as racism and sexism.

The current conceptual article seeks to fill a gap by proposing a theoretical model for promoting college and career readiness for African American female high school students. The concerns of the population as it pertains to CCR include the need to be seen and understood in both their gendered and racial realities, the need to be addressed from a strengths-based lens, and the need to have their aspirations and their resiliency promoted in a person-based manner. In order to address those needs, we integrate the American School Counselor Association (2014) mind-sets and behaviors for student success as a framework for exploring CCR and the SPARCK life coaching model as elaborated in the Life Design program (Johnson, 2017).

## **Theoretical Foundation**

### **ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors**

ASCA has created a set of standards called Mind-Sets and Behaviors (2014) to ensure that K-12 students are effectively guided toward college and career readiness. All 35 standards are grounded in three domains: academic development (or creating interventions to ensure that students are able to learn), career development (or helping students understand the connection between school and work and preparing these students for a successful transition into the workforce), and social/emotional development (or assisting students in developing intrapersonal and interpersonal skills). The first two authors sorted the 35 ASCA standards into six groups, based on perceived alignment with the six parts of the SPARCK coaching model (described below). Overall, we evaluated the ASCA standards to be strong in terms of behaviors and actions, but less focused on reflection, aspiration, identification of personal narrative and purpose. Of the 35 ASCA standards, only six had to do with mind-sets, while 29 were focused on behaviors. In addition, the six mind-sets could be difficult for African American girls to sustain in an environment where racist or sexist attitudes were prevalent (e.g., self-confidence in ability to succeed, sense of belonging in the school environment, positive attitude toward work and learning). Thus, a CCR intervention for African American girls with a focus on mind-sets would need to be developed more fully than what is in the ASCA standards. We integrated a life coaching model to focus more fully on mind-sets in a way that could be culturally responsive.

### SPARCK Life Coaching Model

Coaching (as a field with roots in counseling and psychology) focuses on creating a collaborative, solutions-focused process between the coach and the client/student whereby specific goals are identified and progress toward goals is jointly monitored (Green, Grant, & Rynsaardt, 2007). Coaching activities have been directed toward various goal areas, such as retirement planning and adjustment, financial coaching, relationship coaching, and educational coaching. The coaching model encourages individuals to discover their own paths (academic, career, personal) and focuses on self-awareness and exploration in a way that is more culturally flexible than other models. Life coaching, which incorporates educational, career, and personal goals, has been effective in increasing striving behaviors, feelings of resilience and well-being, and openness to new experiences, and in decreasing anxiety and stress (Green et al., 2007).

Life coaching fits with a holistic conceptualization of well-being that should be consistent with the work mission of school counselors to help adolescents flourish, grow, and develop in all ways (Green & Norrish, 2013). In particular, one study (Green et al., 2007) described how a life coaching program applied to high school females increased their sense of hopefulness and cognitive hardiness (an aspect of resilience). The racial/ethnic background of those participants was not specified, but this study provides initial evidence that life coaching could be an effective approach for female adolescents. Coaching is seen as a viable approach to working with African American female students because it is a personalized and tailored approach, not making broad assumptions that may not be fitting for this specific population. In addition, it is strengths-based and flexible, moving past the limiting stereotypes and deficit views of African American females to tap into their dreams and possibilities in the students' own words.

As stated in the Life Design training manual, the SPARCK coaching model in particular “incorporates a holistic view of the world and engages students in a process where they feel empowered, passionate, energetic, and committed to create a life they desire – a life that

represents who they are and where they want to go” (Johnson & Delph, 2017, p. 7). The SPARCK coaching model and the Life Design framework (Johnson, 2017) use a comprehensive approach in examining internal and external factors that may influence an individual’s decision-making process. Life Design coaches engage participants through this process by implementing the SPARCK model (described subsequently). The Life Design framework and the SPARCK model have been successful on college campuses in that they have improved retention and graduation rates, assisted students with deciding their majors, and maintained student engagement both within and outside of the classroom (Johnson, 2017). Though proven effective for college students, this program’s potential at the secondary level has not yet been documented.

## **Guidelines and Best Practices for Implementing SPARCK Groups**

The life coaching aspect of the SPARCK model meets the needs of African American female students due to its emphasis on acknowledging resilience, as well its holistic approach of considering all aspects of the students’ life – including self-identity and family – not just the behavior presented at school. Thus, implementation of the SPARCK College and Career Readiness Group Model focuses on the following six areas: *Story* (or how the student defines herself), *Purpose* (or the student’s role in the world), *Aspirations* (or dreams and goals), *Reflection* (or how the student is doing regarding reaching these dreams and goals), *Connection* (or support systems), and *Kick-start* (or the student’s action plan). Moreover, these components integrate with the ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors for Student Success in that they provide opportunities for the school counselor (or facilitator) to support student learning, help students plan for postsecondary transitions, and enable the development of interpersonal skills. Yet, the SPARCK CCR Group enables the school counselor to expand beyond the prescriptive lens of the ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors by providing space to learn holistically about group participants, as well as how internal and external factors can guide participants toward college/career goals. Guidelines and best practice ideas for SPARCK CCR groups for ninth and/or tenth grade African American females follow.

### Component 1: Who Are You? (Story)

#### *ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors Addressed: M 1, M 5*

The ultimate purpose of the first session is to enable group participants to share their stories. As previous career counseling in schools takes on a more impersonal lens that may isolate African American students (Williams & Portman, 2014), the school counselor must get to know group members first before assisting in CCR activities. Thus, the authors recommend that the school counselor facilitate an activity for group participants to share their stories, or any contextual factors that might influence their postsecondary decision-making, whether its personal obstacles, families, or memories of positive experiences. For example, participants could complete a “My Life Story” handout in which they title their memoir, and come up with five to six chapter titles to highlight significant events that may have occurred during their lives up until this point; discussing the transition to high school may be a potential chapter to highlight. The school counselor may provide examples of memoirs and autobiographies of successful African American women to assist students and to counter the internalized racism and sexism to which

the girls may have been exposed. Through these stories, the school counselor can collect data regarding group members' strengths and resiliency to encourage them in the process.

Best practices for this first session would include reviewing group logistics and ground rules. Group logistics include what time the group will meet, how often, and for how long, though this information should also be provided during the group screening process (Brigman & Goodman, 2001). Group rules should be established through collaboration; that is, allowing the participants to create guidelines and consequences for the group as a way to facilitate accountability. African American females, in particular, respond well to leadership opportunities, as it provides a sense of empowerment that they may not receive in other settings (M. W. Morris, 2016b; Smith-Evans & George, 2014). The first session also presents an opportunity to collect data, as a pretest can be provided to assess the effectiveness of the group.

#### Component 2: What are You Here to Do? (Purpose)

*ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors Addressed: M 2, B-LS 6, B-LS 8, B-SMS 6, B-SS 8*

The authors suggest school counselors use the second session to assist group members in identifying their purpose, or the reason why they may want to pursue certain postsecondary options versus other options. In order to do this, the school counselor may conduct an activity that allows group members to not only highlight their own strengths, but also the strengths of each other, as African American females commonly thrive in supporting others (Crenshaw, 2015; Morris, 2007; Smith-Evans & George, 2014). School counselors can introduce random objects during the session (such as office supplies or toys) and ask participants to select one or two items that reflect their strengths. For example, a group member could select a tape dispenser and discuss how she is the glue that holds her friends and family together. In turn, the school counselor may present case scenarios with obstacles related to college and career access and allow group members to problem solve how to use their strengths to overcome these challenges (i.e., how might being the “glue” resolve the conflict of being placed in separate classes from friends? Or having different college or career paths than friends?). Other important obstacles to introduce to the group might be access to college and career resources (such as college tours, financial aid, and study skills for PSATs and other college-entry exams), as well as stereotypes they may have to overcome as African American females.

Another potential idea in this session is to conduct a value or guided visualization activity that encourages group members to connect how their personal beliefs and standards align with their future goals. Best practices to consider in helping group members find their purpose is to integrate details students provided from their stories in the previous session. For instance, if one or more of the chapter titles from students' memoirs highlight family, the group can discuss how having family as a value may impact their decision attend college in or out of state – or perhaps choosing a career field where they could help individuals with similar family backgrounds. This will enable group members to see how their past and their purpose are connected. Additionally, using real-life scenarios from the students' stories when creating obstacles for case studies may prevent relying on presenting stereotypes common to discussions of college and career access issues for African American females, especially for counselors who have less exposure to this population or are building their cultural competence.

### Component 3: Where Do You Want to Go? (Aspirations)

*ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors Addressed: M4, B-LS 1, B-LS 2, B-LS 5, B-LS 7, B-SMS 10*

Once the school counselor has learned more about the group members through their stories and strengths, the third session can focus on goals as it relates to college and career exploration. School counselors have commonly used a variety of inventories, such as interests and skills assessments. However, best practices suggest the use of a less prescriptive lens. A more culturally responsive way to engage students of color is to integrate cooperative and hands-on learning activities in a community of similar peers (Azziz, 2009). Thus, the school counselor can engage students in an activity to explore careers through watching motivational videos, constructing posters, and/or completing a jigsaw activity in which group members can work together to find information to pressing questions. The experience of community with other African American girls who are naming their aspirations and pursuing them can be powerful.

As group members will be in either ninth or tenth grade, they might not have had previous experience of collecting data on specific career interests. Thus, the school counselor could facilitate a jigsaw activity with the following prompt: “How can I find a career best suited for my strengths and interests?” Each group member could then receive an index card with a topic that may address this question (i.e., “Discovering Your Strengths and Interests,” “Navigating Postsecondary Options,” “Career Search Engines,” “Obstacles to Getting Your Dream Job,” and “Developing Resiliency”), and share responses to the larger group after researching on their own. It is recommended to hold this group in a media center, computer lab, or any other location where resources can be reviewed. Before ending this session, the school counselor will facilitate a large group discussion on what this process has taught the members about their own postsecondary and/or career aspirations. It is crucial for school counselors to facilitate hope and identify group members’ resiliency as they navigate this exploration.

### Component 4: How Are You Doing? (Reflection)

*ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors Addressed: B-LS 3, B-LS 4, B-LS 9, B-SMS 1, B-SMS 4*

Students typically have limited time to process college and career exploration with the school counselor (Williams & Portman, 2014). Yet, having time to consider postsecondary choices and how to navigate them is a crucial component in the development of hope and resiliency. Thus, the authors recommend using the fourth session of the SPARCK CCR Group to reflect on how they feel about taking the steps to potentially obtain the career they explored during the previous session. Suggestions for facilitating reflection include acknowledging how their race and gender may impact college and career decisions. For example, what might be important for African American girls to consider seeing on a college tour? Is the college(s) in which they are interested known for diversity? What about the career(s) in which they are interested? How might this influence their choices? Best practices indicate that school counselors may want to provide resources to students regarding how to further research these careers on their own time, and then schedule individual meetings with students to review their findings upon request. During the closing of this session, the school counselor should encourage the group members to think of

others who may be able to assist them in dealing with any negative emotions they may have about navigating postsecondary options.

#### Component 5: With Whom Can You Partner? (Connection)

*ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors Addressed: M 3, B-LS 10, B-SS 2, B-SS 3, B-SS 6*

Research supports that African American individuals have a collectivistic viewpoint, in that they prefer a more group and/or family-oriented approach as opposed to individualistic thinking (Sekaquaptewa, Waldman, & Thompson, 2007). Thus, the authors propose that the fifth session focus on support systems, both inside and outside of the school. Specifically, the school counselor will assist group members in identifying individuals that can support them while they navigate college and career options. There are a number of ways to encourage students to find partners, such as creating floorplans of their homes and schools and identifying areas in which students feel supported, as well as recognizing the individuals they are with during these times. As ninth and tenth graders may not be too familiar with all the resources available at school, the school counselor can assist in not only in constructing the floorplan but also in identifying individuals who can be helpful (e.g., academic coach, media specialist, assigned school counselor, etc.). Additionally, group members can create their “Personal Board of Advisors,” a commonly used coaching activity (Johnson & Delph, 2017). Through this activity, group members can think about who can support them in different tasks, such as those who can support them emotionally, those who may have expertise in a certain career, and those who are strong motivators (just to name a few). The goal of this session is to help students recognize that there are several individuals in their corners and who will assist them in this process. The group can also discuss what personal traits they seek in their Board of Advisors in case they ever want to replace and/or add a member. The school counselor will encourage group members to invite an Advisor who attends or works inside the school to the final group session so that the advisor can be an active support system during the college and career exploration journey.

#### Component 6: What Will You Do Now? (Kick-Start)

*ASCA Mind-Sets and Behaviors Addressed: M 6, B-SMS 5, B-SMS 7, B-SMS 8, B-SS 1, B-SS 5*

The final component of the SPARCK model addresses how individuals will take action. That is, what are their goals as it relates to making postsecondary decisions? The school counselor should use this last session to process everything the group has discussed over the past few sessions and enabling the members to create their own “Toolkit.” This toolkit can consist of information that was collected from each previous session, such as an aspect of their personal story, a list of their strengths, career path ideas, the names of individuals in their support systems, and so forth. As they add items to their toolkit, group members can share what they learned with their invited Advisor. Moreover, the group members should be asked to complete a pledge that requires them to list three concrete steps they will take for the remainder of the school year related to college and career exploration; invited Advisors can assist in constructing this pledge. The steps in the pledge could include CCR tasks related to the ninth and tenth-grade experience, such as creating a four-year high school plan, researching extracurricular activities, studying for the PSATs, and scheduling meetings with their school counselor every grading period. Another possible step to

encourage group members to include would be to shadow a successful African American female at work (and provide a contact list if necessary). The school counselor will also schedule individual meetings with each group member to review these pledges and to assist in achieving these concrete steps. They will also check in with students regarding their Personal Board of Advisors to ensure they are receiving the support they need. Finally, if data was collected in the first session, the school counselor may want to also collect data during the closing of the group to assess any potential statistically significant changes.

## **Discussion and Implications**

In general, the integration of the American School Counselor Association [ASCA] (2014) standards with population-specific awareness and a coaching model (Johnson, 2017) provide a springboard for school counselors and other practitioners to work more effectively with African American girls on college and career readiness. It includes the structure and goals of ASCA, which fits within most school counseling models as far as training and implementation and is familiar to school personnel. It also includes life coaching, which focuses on self-knowledge, purpose, and aspirations, and takes an experiential approach that honors the expression of all parts of a students' identity (gender, race/ethnicity, etc.). Finally, this approach integrates cultural factors that have been delineated as important to African American females, such as having family support, effective role models, a caring mentor, the ability to access school resources/supports, and a strengths-based view of identity (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007). Together, these conceptual frameworks create a strengths-based theory that is practical and promotes resilience on the pathway to CCR.

### **Implications for Practice**

Group counseling is an integral duty of the school counseling role (Steen, Bauman, & Smith, 2008). Additionally, group work has been found effective in meeting the needs of students of color (Shin et al., 2010) and African American women (Short & Williams, 2014). African American girls, in particular, have felt ignored or stereotyped in school settings (Annamma et al., 2016), and students of color have experienced difficulties in navigating postsecondary options with school counselors (Dellana & Snyder, 2004; Mayes et al., 2014; Williams & Portman, 2014). Thus, creating a group in which African American females can process their thoughts and feelings surrounding CCR with each other is crucial.

Integrating the SPARCK model with ASCA's (2014) Mind-Sets and Behaviors is an effective way to meet the postsecondary needs of this population. Not only does this synthesized approach provide opportunities for collectivist thinking and race/gender conscious support between group members, but also encourages group members to form resilience that can promote hope in navigating college and career options. Moreover, this model allows the school counselor to assist students in meeting their goals within the three domains of the Mind-Sets and Behaviors. Academic development is addressed through activities involving finding purpose and creating action plans. Social/emotional development is encouraged through activities such as sharing personal stories, finding support systems, and reflecting on the process. Finally, career development is addressed throughout the proposed curriculum, both directly and indirectly.

Promoting hope, resilience, and cooperative interaction among group members are the key factors in this integrated model – as well as characteristics that are beneficial for African American females. The SPARCK group model provides opportunities for participants to lead, receive college and career information, and network with professionals in the field, all of which are integral in the college and career development of African American female students (M. W. Morris, 2016a). The main role of this school counselor is to encourage interactions between group members in exploring college and career choices. Thus, the gender and racial identity of the school counselor facilitating this group is not critical. However, as school counselors from dominant cultures may misinterpret the norms of students with different world views, the group facilitator must have empathy, strong self and interpersonal awareness, and willingness to critically examine how factors, such as family, society, and emotions, impact the behaviors of the African American group members (Martinez et al., 2017). Additionally, consulting with African American female colleagues regarding best practices is also encouraged.

### Implications for Research

The conceptual approach presented in the current article is well grounded in theory but needs to be tested for initial efficacy in schools. Aspects to attend to in the initial implementation would include (1) training of professional school counselors or school counseling interns to facilitate the groups, (2) effectiveness of the content and activities aligned to the SPARCK model, (3) selection of desired outcomes for the group participants (e.g., instillation of hope/resilience, concrete progress toward CCR milestones, comfort seeking help for CCR tasks) and (4) method of assessing progress toward outcomes.

### Conclusion

As reflected in the literature review, African American students are often subjected to a deficit view of their potential and their futures, and little research has focused on evaluating a strengths-based intervention for increasing the CCR of African American girls in schools. African American girls need CCR programs that accurately acknowledge their context (both for its relational and cultural strengths and possibly its limitations in social capital or networks), that support gains in non-cognitive factors (e.g., resilience, high aspirations, motivation, self-efficacy, positive racial identity connected to scholar identity), that connect them to role models and resources in school/family/community settings, and that use experiential methods to build college knowledge and skills. Getting examples of such CCR programs with good theoretical foundation into the scholarly literature would help both researchers, counselors, and specialists in group work.

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