Understanding the College Application and Decision-making Process in Context:
African American Students and their Families

by

Kim Callahan Lijana

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Higher Education)
in The University of Michigan
2015

Doctoral Committee:

      Professor Phillip J. Bowman, Co-Chair
      Associate Professor Deborah F. Carter, Co-Chair
      Professor Elizabeth B. Moje
      Assistant Professor Awilda Rodriguez

Acknowledgments

This project was possible because the district and high school were open to building a strong partnership. I am forever in debt to the students, families, and educators who gave me a window into their lives. A special thank you to the educators at the research site who consistently kept me updated and in the loop.

Thank you to my dissertation committee for patience, support, and guidance. When I needed your assistance, you were always there for me. A special thank you goes out to Awilda Rodriguez for stepping in late in the game and providing thoughtful and insightful feedback that will forever shape my work.

I offer a heartfelt thank you to my family and friends who have provided encouragement, love, and support on the long road to my doctorate. I feel incredibly lucky and blessed to be a member of the CSHPE cohort of 2008; I can't imagine a better group of colleagues to accompany me on this journey. My husband, Dan, has been by my side for every high and low; his love, patience, and encouragement sustained me.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Abstract

This study explores the postsecondary decision-making processes for African American seniors in an urban public high school in Michigan. While there is considerable research on college choice processes, few qualitative studies have examined college application behavior in urban high schools that serve predominately low-income African American students. The main research question that guides this study is: How do high school seniors and their families engage in postsecondary planning and select a postsecondary pathway in an under-resourced school committed to college access?

Using a case study design, the author closely followed twelve students (6 male and 6 female) in a class of 100 and the families of eight of the 12 throughout their senior year at an urban high school dedicated to encouraging all students to pursue postsecondary education. Students selected for the study were all academically eligible to attend some four-year colleges. A major finding was that students and families relied on trusted information sources when determining where to apply and enroll. Moreover, guaranteed financial-aid also influenced students to attend specific eligible institutions because they believe the funds were reliable. Where students applied and decided to attend college was shaped by higher education marketing and recruitment: college representative visits, on-site admissions decisions, college visits, and flyers by mail. Peers played a critical role in sharing information about specific institutions and providing encouragement, which influenced both where students applied and decided to attend.

Overall, findings suggest that low-income urban high schools can create opportunity for African American students by developing a strong "application culture" and collaborating with colleges. Nevertheless, an application culture does not necessarily mean high-achieving students will attend institutions that are best suited to their academic goals or that all students will enroll.

African American students and their families tend to perceive college to be the pathway to a career that can provide financial stability and happiness. However, interventions that promote their college-going may have unintended consequences, including dampening four-year college aspirations and redirecting many to two-year institutions. Intervention strategies that provide more opportunities for students' families and peers to learn about college options could further promote college access.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The decision to pursue postsecondary education is one of the most important decisions in shaping one's life and career trajectory (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Electing additional education immediately following high school graduation (Berkner, He, & Forrest Cataldi 2002) and enrolling at an institution that matches the student's academic ability (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009) and offers adequate financing (Paulsen & St. John, 2002) increases the likelihood that a student will complete a degree. Over 90 percent of students who graduate high school expect to continue their education (Adelman, 2006) and over 60 percent of eleventh graders expect to graduate from college or graduate school (Ingels & Dalton, 2013). Participation rates in the U.S. higher education system are at an all-time high, yet a persistent postsecondary enrollment rate gap remains based on family income and student race/ethnicity (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Furthermore, African Americans have been found to have higher educational aspirations than other groups (Hearn, 1991; Orfield et al., 1984; St. John, 1991), but their higher aspirations have not led to corresponding rates of postsecondary enrollment or completion.

With more people attending postsecondary institutions, attendance by institution type is becoming increasingly stratified. Wealthy students are clustered at highly selective colleges; while students historically underrepresented in higher education (i.e., first-generation, low-income, students of color) are found at concentrated rates in bottom tier institutions (i.e.,

community colleges, for-profit institutions), which is negatively associated with both the likelihood of baccalaureate attainment and lifetime earnings (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011).

In addition to the higher education stratification, family and community demographic characteristics shape educational opportunity in the U.S. due to inequitable state and local education funding plans (Epstein, 2011). Unfortunately, there has been a significant gap between what public K–12 education in the U.S. prepares all students for and the requisite expectations for college and university success. The public discourse on education in the U.S. describes it as the way to get ahead in the U.S. meritocracy, the great equalizer, and the means for leveling the playing field (Bowman & St. John, 2012).

The reality is that the K–12 public education system in the U.S. is highly stratified and provides differential outcomes and opportunities for different students; in short, the education system mirrors the unequal structures found in U.S. society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; 2002). College preparatory suburban public high schools and private high schools are vehicles for college preparation (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Rural and urban high schools alike have struggled to offer a rigorous college preparatory curriculum for most students (St. John, Bigelow, Lijana, & Masse, 2015) and support student matriculation at a postsecondary institution (Mazzeo, 2010). Further, about 13 percent of high schools are labeled "drop-out factories," predominantly serving low-income, students of color, one in three of whom does not graduate high school (Balfanz & Letgers, 2005). Moreover, today's schools are homogenous and even more segregated than in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* era of the 1950's (Orfield & Lee, 2007).

A "college access for all" agenda has faltered in districts without additional resources allocated to its success and during a time when state economic circumstances have resulted in

budget cuts; consequently, the principles and premise of the "college for all" reform have started to be questioned (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Historically, students who are typically underrepresented in higher education are concentrated in high schools with constrained educational resources and limited information about college (McDonough, 1997). For example, students of color are less likely to go to high schools that offer a college preparatory curriculum and about one-quarter of the high schools that serve the highest percentage of Black and Latino student do not offer advanced math including a second year of algebra (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Disappointingly, Black and Latino students comprise 37 percent of high school students, but only 27 percent of students taking an AP course and 18 percent of students passing AP exams (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). To increase access to higher education, policy makers and researchers have focused on access to a college preparatory curriculum for all students and federal education policy including No Child Left Behind and the Common Core State Standards are the result. However, access to adequate financial aid and support in completing key steps in the process like applying to colleges is inconsistent across states and high schools in the United States of America.

Background

Enrolling in college immediately after high school increases the likelihood a student will complete their degree (Berkner, He & Forrest Cataldi, 2002). However, immediate college enrollment rates of high school completers vary based on family income, student race/ethnicity, gender, and parent's education level. Students from high-income families enrolled in institutions directly after high school at higher rates, exceeding 10 percentage points, when compared to their low- and middle-income peers during each year between 1972 and 2007 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2008). Even though rates have increased for White, Black, and Hispanic students

between 1972 and 2008, the enrollment rates of Black and Hispanic high school completers have trailed the rates of their White and Asian peers (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2008). Between 1975 and 2009, college enrollment has increased for both males and females; during this same period, an enrollment pattern shift has occurred based on gender. The rate of immediate college enrollment for females increased from 49 to 74 percent and the rate for males increased from 53 to 66 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

In addition to the demographic characteristics discussed above, income, race, and gender, first-generation college students, defined by parent's highest level of educational achievement equaling high school completion, are less likely than other students to enroll in college (Bozick & Louff, 2007). Choy (2001) found in a nationally representative sample of 1992 high school graduates with a parent with a bachelor's degree, the college enrollment rate was 93 percent; in contrast, the rate dropped to 75 percent among those whose parents had only some college, and plummeted to 59 percent among those whose parents had not attended any form of higher education. Interestingly, the pattern remained with a nationally representative sample of sophomores in 2002, but immediate enrollment dropped across all three groups when tracked from sophomore year; for parent's with a bachelor's degree the immediate college enrollment rate was 74.6 percent, the rate dropped to 56.7 percent among students whose parents had attended some college, and fell to 41.7 percent for students whose parents did not attend any form of higher education (Bozick & Lauff, 2007). In these nationally representative samples, first-generation students were more likely to be Black or Hispanic and come from low-income families. In addition, they were more likely to delay postsecondary entry and begin study at a two-year institution (Bozick & Lauff, 2007). Student demographic characteristics should not be shaping educational opportunities and outcomes; this trend is particularly troubling because of

the correlation between education attainment and lifetime earnings (Baum, Ma & Payea, 2013).

The problems of access to higher education have been studied from multiple social science disciplines (e.g., economics, history, sociology, etc.) and applied fields (e.g., education, public policy, etc.), each addressing both unique and overlapping explanations of the causes and consequences of different opportunities and preparation for access to college (Trent, Orr, Ranis, & Holdaway, 2007). At the same time, federal public policy has been using levers intended to increase college access for low-income students (e.g., Pell Grants, the Higher Education Act, No Child Left Behind [NCLB] and increased high school graduation requirements with an emphasis on math). In addition, the philanthropic community has contributed with high profile programs and initiatives like the Gates Foundation support for the Gates Millennium Scholars program, Early College High Schools, and the Achievers program; Jack Kent Cooke's support for the National College Advising Corps[1]; and the Lumina Foundations' Big Goal of 2025 "to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by 2025."[2] The private sector and even the First Lady have been contributing to efforts to encourage young people to further their education through her Reach Higher initiative.

Given all the interest and investment in this area, it is surprising how little is known about how low-income African American students and their families experience the various aspects of the postsecondary planning and college choice process. Sociologists and higher education researchers have focused on the development of aspirations to pursue postsecondary education (Hossler et al., 1999; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Whereas economists and higher

---

[1] The National College Advising Corps partners with under-served high schools to increase postsecondary education access by providing a college adviser to support the important work of principals, counselors, and teachers in fostering a college-going culture in their schools and in their communities; the adviser is an important complementary resource for the schools as they assist high school students in navigating the complex postsecondary planning process.
[2] www.luminafoundation.org

education researchers have historically focused on the college choice process, emphasizing the selection of institutions (Kane, 1999; Long, 2004; Manski & Wise, 1983). Today, college choice frameworks are built on a combination of sociological and economic principles to offer a more robust model that explains student college choice decisions by taking into account that students make college choice decisions in context; in short, an individual's perceptions of expected benefits and costs of higher education are informed by demographic characteristics, social capital and cultural capital (Paulsen, 2001; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2000, 2006; St. John & Asker, 2001). We still know relatively little, however, about the steps between developing college aspirations and selecting an institution—from how students learn about and research options, select colleges to apply to, and complete application (i.e., college, financial aid, and scholarship) materials, to how they learn about and use resources intended to help students and their support systems navigate the postsecondary planning process (Hossler et al., 1999).

For as much as we have learned about the factors such as socioeconomic status (SES), race/ethnicity, and student access to financial aid (Heller, 1997; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; St. John & Noell, 1989; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005) associated with the college access and choice process through a significant number of quantitative studies and a small but robust set of qualitative studies focused on different student populations (to be discussed in Chapter 2), we still know very little about the student search process (Hossler et al., 1999). The availability of information has also dramatically changed from when students' college search relied primarily on guidebooks and print materials to today's digital age of email, websites, and social media. The digital divide both in access, online skill, and usage is well-documented (Agarwal, Animesh, & Prasad, 2009), but how technology access and availability to

both reliable and unreliable sources of information influence the college search process has not been explored.

Yet, we do know that a small but growing percentage of students are applying to more than the counselor-recommended eight institutions, thanks in large part to the online Common Application that is now used at over 400 universities (CollegeBoard, 2011). With the expansion of high school-based college advising interventions and the important work of the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR), we are starting to learn more about how low-income, African-American high school students in urban schools are supported in their postsecondary planning process (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). The research from CCSR has emphasized the importance of high schools helping students to find a "good fit or match institution" and the issue of undermatching has been well-documented (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2011; Rodriguez, 2013, Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2012). However, the college research process is understudied, particularly for students in high schools predominately serving low-income African American students. The limited research on students' college search has been conducted by trade associations like the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC); unfortunately, the majority of high school counselors and college access program providers are not members of this association (McDonough, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation study is to explore the postsecondary planning and decision-making processes for high-achieving, low-income African American urban high school seniors and their families in an underserved[3] high school in Michigan. Despite being underserved, school administrators and staff at this high school have demonstrated a

---

[3] Defined by being a College Advising Program (CAP) partner high school; partner high schools have low college matriculation rates and a high percentage of free and reduced lunch eligible students.

7

commitment to increasing access to postsecondary education for enrolled students. Though African American educational attainment has increased over the decades (Snyder & Dillow, 2013), it is still in need of marked improvement. The study site was specifically selected because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the college application process for low-income, African American students in the context of an urban high school that historically has a low college matriculation rate, but in 2010 added a college adviser to increase access to higher education.

While the final college choice decision is the most researched part of the multi-stage college choice process, this study will improve our understanding of the earlier steps or stages in the postsecondary planning process—specifically the college search and exploration of postsecondary options to create an initial choice set. The focus of this study is on high achieving students because they have more options to explore and negotiate than lower achieving students who are often limited to enrolling in two-year colleges immediately following high school graduation.

This exploratory study focuses on students and families in context, adding to the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) on the three-stage college choice process and Freeman (2005) on the college choice process for African American students. Building on Freeman's (2005) work on the first stage, which she terms "predetermination" to choose to attend college, this study advances our understanding of the second and third stages, the search and its connection to the college decision. This study aims to shed light on our understanding of the postsecondary planning process for high-achieving African American students with financial need who may be the first in their families to attend higher education; the study also includes students who are considering options other than college in their choice sets.

Specifically, I examine the role of school-based resources, families, and influential individuals who engage in postsecondary planning with the student.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this study:

I. How do high-achieving, low-income African American urban high school seniors and their families engage in postsecondary planning and select a postsecondary pathway in an under-resourced high school committed to increased college access?

a. How do students search for postsecondary options (i.e., education, military, employment), perceive their options, and build their initial college choice set?

b. How do the students determine where they will submit undergraduate applications and make final postsecondary decisions?

c. How do students in a school committed to supporting postsecondary access experience school structures and resources intended to support students' postsecondary pathways? What are the perceptions of educators, students, families, and others engaged in supporting students' postsecondary planning?

d. What role do external influencers (colleges, families, peers, school personnel, advisers, mentors, coaches) play in the various stages of the process?

Statement of the Problem

We know that students expect to attend postsecondary education and that there is a benefit of enrolling in postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation (Berkner et al., 2002). Yet, we also know that a significant number of students do not follow this path, especially students who are from low-income families, would be first-generation college students, and are students of color (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). In addition, fewer male students are

graduating from high school and enrolling at postsecondary institutions (Buchmann, DiPrete, & McDaniel, 2008). And students who are underrepresented in higher education are more likely to "undermatch" by attending an institution below their academic capability (Bowen et al., 2009). However, the public discourse on higher education access continues to center on the idea of merit and the assumption that the highest achieving students are applying and attending the best schools, but researchers have illuminated this is not actually the case for low-income, first generation college students, or students of color (Avery & Kane, 2004; Bowen et al, 2009; Roderick et al,, 2011; Rodriguez, 2013, Smith et.al, 2012).

Considering all the scholarship regarding, and the significant amount of public and private investment in increasing student postsecondary access and success, it is surprising how little we know about how students and families in context search for options, utilize support resources, and make decisions that may constrain or create opportunities in the early stage of this process. How individuals operate and interact within structures that constrain and provide opportunities and utilize resources needs to be further explored. Instead of focusing strictly on actual college selection and enrollment, understanding earlier aspects of the process and how earlier actions and decisions may shape the final outcome will provide insight regarding how to better support students and families.

In the field of higher education, we know a significant amount about the experiences of white, middle- to high-income students and families seeking attendance at selective institutions. It is this perspective that the general public reads about regularly in forums like the discontinued "The Choice Blog" in *The New York Times* or on the "College Confidential" website and that, unfortunately, often informs public policy and programs. In the field of higher education, we have understudied and under theorized the experiences of high school students and families who

10

are underrepresented in higher education, as well as the experiences of the educators who work with them.

Significance of the Problem

Low-income, first generation college applicants and their families rely more on high school counselors for college information than do other more affluent students and families (McDonough, 1997). According to the Consortium on Chicago School Research, high schools have an important role in guiding students to apply to colleges that are a good match and in shaping their college choices (Roderick et al., 2011). However, the national student-to-guidance counselor ratio is 471:1 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010-11), and in Michigan the ratio is 706:1 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010-11). The students who rely on their high schools most for support are often in schools with the least resources to provide that support (Perna et al., 2008). Research has shown that one barrier to accessing higher education is accurate information about the college admissions process and availability of financial aid (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos & Sanbonmatsu, 2012; Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2004). This is particularly important because, the fastest-growing jobs in the U.S. economy require postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013).

College enrollment and success are important to both the individual (private good) and society (public good). Attending college has costs, to be sure, but it also has economic benefits for the individual and society. Lifetime earnings for those who invest in higher education and acquire a bachelor's degree are higher than for those who only complete high school (Baum, Ma & Payea, 2013). For full-time workers ages 25 to 34, median earnings are 66 percent higher for black men with bachelor's degrees than for black men with high school diplomas, and 56 percent higher for black women with bachelor's degrees than for black women with high school

11

diplomas (Baum et al., 2013). These differences continue to grow as workers acquire more experience. This means that society benefits through both an increased national income and increased productivity.

The benefits of higher education go beyond the individual and assist communities, states, and society. Individuals who complete college tend to have a greater civic orientation, are more likely to vote, and are more likely to take on leadership roles in their communities (Astin, 1993; Bowen & Bok 1998). In addition, increased participation in higher education also leads to a reduced cost of social support programs that are taxpayer-funded (e.g., welfare, Medicaid), and lower crime rates (Baum et al., 2013). Higher education is also increasingly important to a country's global competitiveness, through improvements in knowledge and technology, improved educational outcomes for future generations, and the creation of a highly educated workforce (Bowen, 1997; Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003).

Projected workforce needs suggest that the demand for college-educated workers will continue to grow; by 2020, 65% of jobs nationally and 70% of jobs in Michigan will require postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2013). Projected demographic shifts in the traditional college-age population suggest that the racial/ethnic composition of high school graduates and potential college students will continue to increase in diversity and is projected to reach 45% nationally by 2020 and 26% in Michigan (Prescott & Bransberger, 2012). A better understanding of college access and choice for students underrepresented in higher education is necessary to ensure all students have postsecondary education opportunities (Perna, 2006).

Individuals do not have the opportunity to graduate from college if they never apply or enroll. Applying and enrolling at institutions that are a "good fit" academically, socially, and financially increases the likelihood that a student will complete a baccalaureate degree (Bowen et

al., 2009; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). In the U.S. we are likely experiencing a significant loss of talent that could be developed through higher education.

Bandura (1995) argues, "Societies that fail to develop the capabilities of all their youth jeopardize their social and economic progress"(p. 24–25). In 2010, a higher percentage of female 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college or graduate school at 47 percent in contrast to 39 percent for males. This pattern was observed for White students at 51 percent compared to 43 percent and was even more significant for Black students at 43 percent compared to 31 percent (Ross et al., 2012). This persistent enrollment gap by race and gender shapes the U.S. talent pool and diminishes the ability to increase diversity across fields and in leadership positions in the future. Researchers show that only 30 to 40% of all high-achieving eighth graders apply for higher education by the end of the 12th grade and that only two-thirds of qualified low-income high school graduates based on a college-qualification index comprised of their cumulative academic course GPA, senior class rank, aptitude test, and college admissions test scores, apply to a four-year institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hurtado et al., 1997). A clearer understanding of the needs and experiences of students and families in context is necessary to build on strengths, address obstacles, and improve efficacy and outcomes.

In addition to contributing to the higher education literature on low-income African American students and families searching and selecting a postsecondary pathway in context, this study has already influenced practices at the high school research site. Grounding the conversation in historical school matriculation data provided an opening to discuss high school strengths and areas of growth with the school principal. Preliminary findings led to several changes for the following school year, including counselors and advisers recommending specific colleges for students to explore and increased computer access in the library for researching

13

colleges and completing materials. Furthermore, it is possible that the study findings will be relevant to other educators engaged in increasing postsecondary education access in similar environments or with students and families who share some of the same characteristics.

Organization of the Dissertation

In addition to the introduction, this dissertation is comprised of six chapters and an appendix containing the data collection instruments and consent and assent forms. In Chapter 2, I present and review existing research on student college choice and high school-based college advising resources. I also provide a discussion of the theoretical approaches used to study college choice, and outline the conceptual framework that will be used in this study. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the study's methodology and research design. In Chapter 4, I present student profiles and an overview of each student's process. In Chapter 5, I explore students' college research and application process. In Chapter 6, the decision-making behavior of students and families is examined. And finally, in Chapter 7, I offer a reconceptualization of the college search and decision-making process.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter, I discuss the research literature and conceptual framework that ground this study. In the first section, I define the parameters for inclusion in this literature review and define key terms referenced throughout the chapter. Next, I provide an overview of early college choice research and identify the conceptual foundations of the college choice literature. I discuss Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) classic three-stage college choice model and the factors that influence four-year college choice for African American and first-generation college students. I then turn to the limited research on community college choice. With low-income, first-generation, and African American students all relying on their high school community and educators more throughout this process, I explore the limited research on college access programs and college advising. Finally, I end the chapter by presenting the framework that informs the data collection and analysis for this study.

This study of the college application and decision-making process for high achieving, low-income African American students at an urban public high school committed to increased college access is an important contribution to the field. Previous research identified key factors that influence student college choices and consistently pushed the models and theory forward by developing interdisciplinary frameworks. Yet, despite these gains, there has been very little research on the college application process and its connection to a student's college choice. Furthermore, the experiences of low-income, African American students and their families may

be different than what we have learned about other student populations. Thematic findings from this study highlight the interrelationship among the contextual factors that constrain and create opportunity. A deeper understanding of students and their contexts, particularly how earlier steps shape the final outcome, is needed if scholars are to understand and provide new avenues for supporting students and families.

Defining the Scope and Core Concepts

Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith's (1989) definition of student college choice informs this literature review and study. They propose a two-part definition to describe the process that "results in (1) making a decision to continue formal schooling after high school and (2) deciding which postsecondary educational institution (PEI) to attend" (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989, p. 234). These two decisions comprise the college choice construct. This study examines the space *in between* making the decision to pursue postsecondary education and selecting a specific institution to attend. The focus of this literature review is on "traditional students" involved in the process of choosing to attend a four-year institution.

Traditional students are those who seek attendance at a four-year college or university directly following high school completion, as opposed to non-traditional students—for example, those who delay entry into postsecondary education, go to college part-time, enroll at a two year college, and often work full-time. I am limiting my review in this chapter to traditional students because this study is centered on the postsecondary planning and decision-making process of high school seniors. In addition, a significant amount of research on access and opportunity in higher education has been based on quantitative analyses of longitudinal data sets of high school seniors transitioning directly to four-year institutions (Baker & Vélez, 1996).

Initially, I limited the literature review to focus on the decision to enroll in a four-year college or university, and elected not to consider the decision to enroll in a two-year college, vocational school, or for-profit institution for several reasons. I made this decision because students likely consider different criteria and weigh those criteria differently when deciding to enroll in a four-year institution compared to a two-year institution. For example, Heller (1997) found in his review of prior research that two-year college students are more sensitive than four-year students to changes in tuition and aid. In addition, there are differential benefits for those who complete a bachelor's degree compared to those who complete lower levels of education (Kane, 1995; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terezini, 1991). Furthermore, researchers have demonstrated that students who enroll in a community college with four-year aspirations are less likely to achieve their goal than students who start at a four-year institution (Alfonso, 2006; Grubb, 1991; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Moreover, the underrepresentation of students of color is more profound among four-year than two-year college enrollments (Ross et al., 2012; Nettles & Perna, 1997). Finally, my study sample was comprised of students who were competitive for admission to a four-year institution based on their academic performance in high school because they theoretically have the most options.

However, with the increased likelihood that students of color and low-income students will enroll in a community college and two students in the study making the decision to attend a community college, I added a section featuring the limited research on correlates for students deciding to attend community colleges. Anytime I refer to a two-year institution in this study, I use the term community college or include two-year in the description. The following words are used interchangeably to signify four-year college or university: postsecondary education, institution, college, and university.

This literature review also focuses primarily on research on college access programs and school-based college advising practices published after 2000 because interventions and programs started incorporating high school-based advising in the late 1990s and the research site features a college access program. This time cut-off is important because technology access and availability of online information shifted significantly in the 1990s with the widespread use of university websites for recruiting and the introduction of the common application. This is also when Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), the newest federally funded college access program, was introduced.

College Choice Literature

In the 1980's, college choice models were developed in an effort to help higher education professionals understand students' decision-making, and increase their ability to improve student recruitment and matriculation. Historically, two dominant perspectives framed the higher education scholarship on college access and choice: an econometric model of human capital investment and a sociological model of status attainment (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006). Three conceptual frameworks have typically been used to explore and explain observed differences in college enrollment behavior (Hossler et al., 1989, 1999; Perna, 2000, 2006); each framework will be introduced and discussed in turn here. Econometric models suggest that people decide to attend college by evaluating the perceived expected benefits and costs of all their possible options (Becker, 1962, 1993; Paulsen, 2001); an individual makes a decision to pursue postsecondary education or make a human capital investment decision if the utility of the expected benefits outweighs the expected costs (Becker, 1993; Hossler et al., 1989; Manski & Wise, 1983; Perna, 2000). The dominant sociological theories used to study college choice decisions are status attainment and social reproduction

frameworks focused on family, peers, high school environment, and society's role in the socialization of the college enrollment process (Hossler et al., 1999; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Sociological models have been expanded to include constructs of cultural and social capital to explain differences in how students and families navigate the process (McDonough, 1997). The third model combines the assumptions of the economic and sociological approaches and assumes *habitus*, or a system of values and beliefs that shapes an individual's views, preferences, and interpretations, influences students' educational decisions (Bourdieu, 1977; Paulsen, 2001; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2000, 2006; St. John & Asker, 2001).

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed their classic three-stage model (see Figure 2.1) of student college choice and later provided a revised version in Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper (1999). The model itself is a synthesis of previous work (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). It has been widely adopted as the dominant framework to understand college enrollment because it simplifies a highly complex process into a comprehensive and manageable three-stage model. The first stage is *predisposition*; this is when the student decides to pursue college instead of another postsecondary path. The second stage is the *search*; students obtain information and research specific postsecondary educational institutions and select the institutions to which they will apply. The final stage is *choice*; the student decides which institution to attend based on their perceived options. This process occurs from the time a student is in middle school to when they make a final college choice decision as a senior in high school.

Researchers have generally accepted the three-stage approach, but have been critical of it as centered on the experiences of middle class, White students. The linear nature of the model

has led researches to target only a specific element or stage of this complex process—typically, the development of aspirations in the case of sociologists, and the final choice in the case of both economists and sociologists. However, this approach provides both a limited and disjointed picture that minimizes our understanding of the holistic and potentially intertwined nature of student postsecondary planning and decision-making. Only limited research delves into the actual application process, despite it being a key step required for enrollment that comes at the end of the search stage, but before students actually make a choice (Holland, 2014; Klasik, 2012). Further, some scholars have retained Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model as a foundation, but sought also to better understand the relationships among particular characteristics and college decisions in order to address differences across race and class and variations in the college choice process (Perna, 2006). I have used this approach for the theoretical framing of this study and will elaborate on it further at the end of this chapter. In the next section, I review the sociological constructs that are foundations of the college choice literature and important to the framework of this study.

Figure 2.1. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Stage College Choice Model[4]

```
┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
│  Predisposition  │─────▶│     Search       │─────▶│     Choice       │
└──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘      └──────────────────┘
```
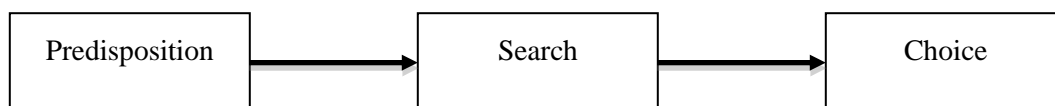
Sociological Approaches to College Choice

Sociological study of student college choice decisions first built on status attainment models (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1994) that explore the effects of students' socioeconomic status (SES) on their educational and occupational aspirations (Perna,

---

[4] Adapted from "Studying Student College Choice: A Three-Phase Model and the Implications for Policymakers," by D. Hossler and K. A. Gallagher, 1987, *College and University* 2(3), 207–221.

2006). Sociologists focus on the role of student and family socioeconomic characteristics, peers, high school environment, and society in the socialization of the college choice process (Hossler et al., 1999; Terenzini et al., 2001). Sociological research has shown that a student's SES has a significant effect on their academic achievement. Due to the consistent findings that parents' education strongly predicts children's educational achievement and attainment, theorists argue that parents transfer class advantage through grades earned and degrees conferred. Sociological approaches also consider the role of college preparation and variations in educational access for underrepresented students and their families, thereby highlighting the societal structures and institutional characteristics that impede both achievement and attainment (Hearn, 1988).

Status attainment models posit that academic preparation, achievement, and student demographic characteristics, particularly SES, influence educational aspirations (Hossler et al., 1999). Aspirations influence both academic achievement and preparation. The models predict that individuals with higher levels of academic achievement and preparation receive more encouragement from "significant others," including parents, teachers, counselors, and peers, which in turn promotes even higher aspirations (Perna, 2006). Socialization and aspiration development thus function like self-fulfilling prophecies (Merton, 1968), whereby higher aspirations lead to greater educational and occupational attainment.

Sociological constructs: Social and cultural capital and *habitus*.

Sociological models that emphasize the mediating relationship between social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Lareau, 1987, 2002; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) and college access and success were first introduced in the late 1990s (McDonough, 1997), and have recently been incorporated into studies of the college choice process for both minority and nonminority students (McDonough, 1997; McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997; Nora, 2004;

Perna, 2006). The constructs of social and cultural capital are used to further explain the psychosocial dimension of the process. The premise is that the added psychosocial dimension will enhance the explanatory power of the college choice models. Prior to this addition, economists studying college choice almost exclusively relied on human capital theory, which assumes that individuals act rationally in order to maximize their utility given their personal preferences, tastes, and expectations (Becker, 1962, 1993) when making educational investment decisions. Essentially, the premise was that students use crude calculations to evaluate the cost of college and forgone earnings against future earnings in order to make their choice.

Yet, we know that students in similar circumstances often make different decisions. Klasik (2012) notes that a limitation of the human capital model is its tendency to assume a one-time decision when the application process actually requires multiple decisions. The sociological concepts of cultural and social capital are particularly useful in understanding the ways students navigate these multiple decisions (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Individuals who lack the valued and required forms of social and cultural capital may acquire differential rewards for their investments in education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Perna, 2000, 2006). In addition, they may have to over-perform in order to compensate for their less-valued cultural resources (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Perna, 2000, 2006). Without having the necessary social connections or understanding of cultural norms, individuals may lower their educational aspirations or self-select out of certain situations without being aware of the long-term consequences (Boudieu & Passeron, 1977; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Perna, 2000, 2006). The initial theoretical development of the concept of social capital is attributed to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and American sociologist James Coleman (Portes, 2000). Bourdieu (1986) writes about the interaction of three sources of capital:

economic, cultural, and social, while Coleman (1988) focuses on the role of social capital in the

creation of human capital. Both scholars explore the benefits to individuals or families resulting

from their ties with others, but the roots of their conceptualizations vary significantly. Coleman's

model has structural-functionalist roots, while Bourdieu's model is grounded in theories of social

reproduction and symbolic power. Thus, Coleman views social capital in terms of norms; while,

Bourdieu views it in terms of access to institutional resources. Similar to human capital, a person

may invest in cultural and social capital resources to enhance productivity (Coleman, 1988) and

facilitate upward mobility (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

Social capital refers to networks that provide information, social norms, values, expected

behaviors, and support (Coleman, 1988). The emphasis here is on social connections and how

they are sustained (Morrow, 1999). Social capital provides individuals with access to other forms

of capital (i.e., human, cultural), as well as access to institutional resources and support

(Coleman, 1988; Morrow, 1999; Portes, 1998). Portes (1998) emphasizes membership in social

networks and other social structures as a key vehicle through which people obtain social capital.

In short, social capital is acquired through relationships; indeed, for some students, establishing

such relationships may be a primary focus and benefit of their high schools.

The assumption of social capital theory is that membership in a social network provides

resources and assets to individual members. These resources increase opportunity for social

mobility in terms of power, wealth, and prestige (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998).

Social capital theorists view membership in a social network as positive; they offer few if any

costs that individuals will face from being a member of a social network (Farmer-Hinton, 2008).

However, Farmer-Hinton (2008) and O'Connor (2000) both found that high school-based social

capital networks provide important information and resources, but also impose pressure and fear on the students.

Related to, but distinct from, social capital, cultural capital is the set of social behaviors that makes one accepted at different levels of society (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985). Cultural capital is derived, in part, from one's parents, but is more generally based on an individual's class status and comprised of attributes including cultural knowledge, language skills, and mannerisms (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1997). It may also include access to social networks, college information, and educational credentials of dominant groups (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; McDonough, 1997, 1998). In the U.S., middle- and upper-class individuals possess the most valued forms of cultural capital (McDonough, 1997). These are a form of symbolic wealth transmitted from parents to their children to sustain class status from one generation to the next (McDonough, 1997). In terms of college choice decisions, social reproduction suggests that higher education and the admissions process are designed to legitimate class advantages and reproduce current class inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, 2002).

Habitus is an individuals' internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, values and perceptions acquired from their environment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This internalized system is typically common to one's social class and derived from the students' family, community, and school environments. An individual's *habitus* shapes expectations, attitudes, and aspirations (McDonough, 1997). Cultural capital and *habitus* influence students' educational investment decisions (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997, 1998). A student's *habitus* provides a "powerful filter" that determines how students interpret and value their educational options and what actions the individual will elect to take as a result (Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

A number of researchers have applied Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) to studies of the college choice process (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; McDonough, 1994, 1997, 1998; Nora, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005). Their research demonstrates how aspects of the high school context and an individual's *habitus* shape student college choice decisions (McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2005).

Building off individual habitus, McDonough identified and explored organizational habitus in high schools. In McDonough's (1997) qualitative study, she found significant differences in the organization and structure of guidance counseling across high schools based on the SES of the school community, which affected the quality, time, and resources counselors had available for postsecondary education guidance. McDonough collected qualitative data to address her research questions on high school context and *habitus* and added significantly to our understanding of how high schools and school-based advising practices reproduce inequality in the U.S society.

Farmer-Hinton (2008) explored the kinds of school-based social capital needed for students living in under-resourced communities to transition to college by conducting student focus groups at a high school that serves low-income, African American students. She found that college planning has to be prioritized and purposeful. Three themes emerged: the importance of social ties and resources that make college a viable option; the importance of students' access to needed information and resources for making "good" college choices; and the challenge students' face after gaining school-based social capital while living in an under-resourced community.

Perna and Titus (2005) used multilevel modeling to explore how high school context influences college enrollment decisions. Conceptualizing the role of parental involvement as a

form of social capital, Perna and Titus explored the structural characteristics of schools that

encourage parental involvement. However, social capital was not part of the original data

collection; Perna and Titus attempted to find proxies to represent social capital in the data. In

contrast, Nora (2004) explored the role of precollege psychosocial factors, namely, *habitus* and

cultural capital, on students' college choices. Nora used survey items to identify the underlying

dimensions of *habitus* and cultural capital. Both Nora's study and that of Perna and Titus found

that the variables and factors employed to capture social and cultural capital and *habitus* had a

significant influence on college enrollment decisions. Because quantifying these complex

sociological constructs has proven to be so challenging, one has to question what the variables

and factors actually represent. Are they actually capturing *habitus*, social, and cultural capital or

just SES and parental involvement?

Researchers like Nora (2004) design survey items that attempt to capture *habitus* and

cultural capital, which has often been described but not tested. Large pre-established data sets

like the High School and Beyond study of 1980 and 1982 and NELS were not designed to

measure social capital (Dika & Singh, 2002), yet most of the measures in the research literature

come from these data sets. It is common for the variables that are used to make up this construct

to function only as proxies for wealth or family background.

Perna (2000) carefully constructed her conceptualization of cultural capital using

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) to define it as an individuals' social status based on immediate

family. This definition led Perna to focus on how individuals use and acquire information. After

controlling for differences in costs, benefits, ability, and social and cultural capital, Perna found

comparable four-year college enrollment rates for Hispanics and Whites. But quantifying cultural

and social capital is challenging; even after thoughtfully constructing her conceptualization of

cultural capital, the variables Perna used are very narrow interpretations of these complex constructs (Zeidner, 2006).

Better measures of these constructs need to be developed. For example, the parental involvement variables capture the quantity (e.g., hours, times, etc.) but not the quality of the actual involvement (Dika & Singh, 2002; Morrow, 1999; Perna & Titus, 2005). Measuring the quality of involvement and expanding the definition of parental involvement to family involvement (Tierney, 2002; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005) to include older siblings and members of the extended family may be more informative given the growing diversity of support networks upon which students and families rely.

Much of the college access and choice literature has utilized quantitative methods, with a resulting overemphasis on the quantity and presence vs. absence of various factors, at the expense of information about the quality of the factors or nature of experiences. By contrast, this study focuses on the quality of family involvement, and its definition of "family" relies on students to identify the immediate and extended family members influential in their postsecondary planning and decision-making process. The study also takes into consideration the students' consistent identification of their status as an older or younger sibling as a motivating factor and source of information.

Studies designed and implemented to understand the role of *habitus*, cultural, and social capital offer a useful approach to explore how structural constraints and opportunities shape an individuals' perspective, aspirations, and orientation toward postsecondary education. Sociological approaches have been particularly helpful for exploring differences both within and across groups through the college choice process (Horvat, 2001). Individuals' race/ethnicity, class, and gender all influence *habitus*, as well as the types of cultural and social capital

27

possessed (Horvat, 2001). The sociological approach offers constructs for understanding individuals' preferences that are not examined in economic conceptualizations of the college choice process. This approach explicitly shows the societal structures and mechanisms that influence access to information and resources, but similar to the economic models, still under examines how students and families use of information and resources shapes the process.

Combined College Choice Models

Recent research has incorporated the strengths of both economic models of human capital investment and the sociological constructs of cultural and social capital and habitus (e.g., Freeman, 1997; Paulsen, 2001; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2000, 2006; St. John & Asker, 2001; St. John & Paulsen, 2001; St. John , Musoba, & Chung, 2004). To increase the explanatory power of econometric models and better incorporate an understanding of individuals' preferences and risk tolerance, researchers have turned to sociological constructs. Measures of social and cultural capital have been used to reflect differences in expectations, preferences, tastes, and certainty about education investment decisions (Perna, 2000, 2006). St. John and Paulsen (2001) conclude that "Social and cultural theories are also important for the study of higher education finance because they provide an alternative, more complete explanation of the role of nonmonetary factors that foster and inhibit access"(p. 555). The college choice conceptualizations discussed next combine the strengths of different approaches to increase understanding of college access and choice highlighting the role of the context. Each model and study discussed in this section is included because it informed the framework of this dissertation study.

Paulsen and St. John (2002) developed the "financial nexus model" to examine the ways in which college costs affect the college choice and persistence decisions of students in different

income groups. This approach allowed for an exploration of the diverse patterns of student choice influenced by financial factors and social class. They argue that "students have dramatically different choice contexts, which have a pervasive influence on multiple stages of the sequences of student choices" (Paulson & St. John, 2002, p.194). This study challenges the implicit assumptions made in most previous research that suggest students make choices under similar circumstances and in similar contexts.

In addition, St. John (2004) offers a "balanced access" model that suggests both financial aid and academic preparation have to be considered in order to increase college going. Bridging the financial aid and academic preparation literature is extremely valuable to the field and offers a much more comprehensive understanding of the access picture (Hossler, 1999; St. John, 2002; Zeidner, 2006). Unfortunately, like most of the combined models, it seems to favor economics or financial aid as opposed to offering a truly "balanced" approach.

Perna (2006) proposes a conceptual model that posits a multi-contextual approach. This model:

> assumes that, although college choice is ultimately based on a comparison of the benefits and costs of enrolling, assessments of the benefits and costs are shaped not only by the demand for higher education and supply of resources to pay the costs but also by an individual's *habitus* and directly and indirectly, by the family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social and economic policy context. (Perna, 2006, p. 119).

Given the identified multiple layers of context that influence an individuals' college-related decision, this comprehensive model should be particularly useful in understanding differences both within and across groups.

Tierney and Venegas (2009) offer the cultural ecological model, which focuses on the contexts that affect financial aid availability and access to financial aid. Similar to the researchers previously discussed (Perna, 2006; St. John, 2002, 2004), the authors suggest "that

29

there are multiple environmental influences that play a role in access to financial aid" (Tierney & Venegas, 2009, p. 364). In the cultural ecological framework, individuals are social decision-makers and organizations and groups are social entities that the individual constructs and reconstructs. Their figure, a diagram of four interlocking ovals representing the educational environment, the out of class environment, the familial environment, and the community environment, emphasizes the social context for financial aid decision-making.

Students' own perceptions regarding their ability are another factor shaping their postsecondary education decisions. Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) used a combined model to examine the influence of students' ideas about college entrance exams, interpretations of their scores, and the influence these factors had on the students' subjective interpretation of their own ability on college decision-making for low SES students. The authors "found that students interpret both their test scores and their college options in the context of the information and parameters provided by high school personnel"(Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010, p. 167). This means that the information (and lack thereof) provided to students by their high schools has the ability to influence students' perceptions of available opportunities. A students' context may shape their assumptions about postsecondary education and influence their ability to take action and make decisions in their planning process (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010).

College access and choice for underrepresented minority groups.

Researchers have used the improved explanatory power of combined models that incorporate sociological constructs in order to better understand college access and choice across diverse groups of students and families. In the last two decades, researchers have examined college enrollment behavior both within and across student groups, focusing on variations among students of different racial and ethnic background (Freeman, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1997; Perna,

2000; St. John & Noell, 1989; Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough, 2004) and income groups (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Paulsen & St. John, 2002), relying on sociological constructs to explain differences. However, despite the improved explanatory power and advances in the field, there are still unanswered questions regarding the forces that influence college choice for underrepresented minority students. Within and across racial/ethnic group comparisons of college access and choice have offered inconsistent findings, even after controlling for other variables.

In one of the first studies exploring postsecondary enrollment rate differences across three racial/ethnic groups using controls, St. John and Noell (1989) found comparable college enrollment rates for African American, Hispanic, and White high school seniors after controlling for background, ability, and educational aspirations. After controlling for financial aid offers, they found that African American college applicants were less likely than their White peers to enroll. Other researchers found that African American high-school students are less likely to attend highly selective colleges (Hearn, 1988) and enroll in college at all (Nolfi, et al., 1978). A closer examination of more recent studies highlights the challenge of studying within and across racial/ethnic group differences in college access and choice behaviors.

Freeman (1997) conducted a qualitative study interviewing African American high school students in focus groups about their perceived barriers to participation in higher education. Two broad categories of barriers emerged from the structured group interviews: economic barriers and psychological barriers. Allowing students to both define the problem and offer solutions brought a new and more nuanced understanding to this challenge; in particular, the students emphasized a "loss of hope" and the idea that "college never an option" as strong influences discouraging African Americans' participation in postsecondary education.

31

As mentioned earlier, Perna (2000) used an econometric model of college enrollment that was expanded to include sociological constructs—specifically, measures of social and cultural capital as proxies for expectations, preferences, tastes, and uncertainty—in order to examine differences in college enrollment decisions amongst African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. Perna found comparable four-year college enrollment rates for Hispanics and Whites when controlling for differences in costs, benefits, ability, and social and cultural capital. Perna's findings suggest that the relationship between cultural and social capital and postsecondary enrollment varies by racial/ethnic group, but that this relationship is a more important predictor for African-Americans and Hispanics than for Whites. This study contributes important knowledge and understanding of across group differences, but it is equally important to examine within group differences.

Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, & McDonough (2004) attempt to conceptualize the college-choice process specifically for Asian Pacific American (APA) students, examining how class and ethnicity influence the college decision-making process and destinations for various subpopulations. Teranishi et al. (2004) found differential rates of enrollment based on ethnic and socioeconomic background. Differential rates show that within the categorization, APA, there are significant college choice differences based on ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The college-decision making process varied by the ethnic and socioeconomic class backgrounds of different APA student populations.

Expanding on Paulsen & St. John's (2002) study, St. John, Paulsen, & Carter (2005) examined the role of perceptions about college costs in the response by African American and White students to student financial aid in their college choice and enrollment decisions. They found diverse patterns of educational choice both across and within racial groups (St. John, et al.,

2005). The majority pattern among African Americans was similar to the pattern of college choice by students from low-income families (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). They also found that student grants and tuition levels have a greater influence on college choice for African Americans than for Whites while access to loans favor White students (St. John, et al. , 2005).

Overall, however, most college choice research and frameworks continue to be grounded in the experience of White and middle income students. The researchers who have examined college access and choice for underrepresented minority groups suggest that traditional college choice models are helpful in conceptualizing studies (Hurtado et. al, 1997; Teranishi et al, 2004), but that there are key differences in college application behaviors and choice both across and within racial/ethnic groups.

Research on College Choice

In this section, I return to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice as a framework to organize the last two decades of research findings on student college decisions. I first focus on the details and correlates for each stage and then turn to findings based on student background characteristics that are relevant to this study. This section concludes with a discussion of the research on community college choice.

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the *predisposition* stage starts the college choice process and encapsulates students' educational aspirations. This is the "developmental stage in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their formal education beyond high school"(Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 211). During this stage students make an active decision to pursue postsecondary education. The following variables are correlated with a predisposition toward postsecondary enrollment: family SES (including parent education level), academic ability and achievement, race and ethnicity, parental encouragement,

33

peer encouragement, high school personnel encouragement, student educational and occupational plans, and high school curriculum quality (Frost, 2007; Goldsmith, 2004; Hossler, et al., 1989, 1999; Manski & Wise, 1983; McDonough, 1997). Typically students go through this stage before the tenth grade, but in their study of low SES high school students Deil-Amen & Tevis (2010) found that students developed their predisposition toward the end of high school and experienced a condensed version of the stages.

The *search* stage is when students gather information about college opportunities; this is the least researched stage of the process and is the focus of this dissertation study. The limited research on this stage typically focuses on the number of colleges considered instead of examining the actual college application process (Klasik, 2012). The act of applying to colleges has been under researched considering the importance of this step and the otherwise abundant research on college choice.

Typically, students engage in the search stage of the process during their junior year of high school (Hossler et al,, 1989). At this time, students still exhibit an openness to options and engage in a time of discovery (Hossler, et al., 1999). They gather information through three methods: an attentive search, by paying attention to college information; an active search, by seeking out college information; or an interactive search, by starting conversations related to that information (Hossler et al., 1999). As students move closer to completing high school, they start looking externally for advice from others like school personnel instead of internally relying on their own ideas and assumptions in order to identify which colleges they should consider applying to. This is an active stage of the process, which requires students to initiate activities.

During this stage, individuals interact with institutions by reading their print materials and websites, visiting campuses, talking to institutional representatives, and participating in

additional research activities. Individuals learn about institutional characteristics, and begin to weigh the ones that are most important to them. Research has found the following influence a students' college search process: socioeconomic status, family income, academic ability, race, higher education marketing, high school personnel including college counselors, tuition and financial aid policies, and state financial aid programs (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Dynarski, 2000; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Hossler et al., 1999; Kane, 2003; Litten, 1982; McDonough, 1997; McDonough, et al., 1997). Individuals acquire information about institutions in general and those they are considering from many sources including: institutions, peers, parents, and high school personnel (Flint, 1992). In this process, students learn about specific institutions to consider and what institutional attributes they desire.

In exploring the search process, Hossler et al. (1999) found that high-ability students—like the sample in this study—have higher aspirations, less stable choice sets, and consider more institutions including more selective and more expensive colleges, but are less certain about which institutional characteristics are important to them. Earlier in high school students typically talk more to their parents than others about their postsecondary plans, but those students who talked more to their parents and family are actually less certain than those students who talk to their teachers and peers. Women and students with higher GPA's consider larger choice sets; low-income students and students with fathers with low educational achievement consider fewer options.

High school seniors are still actively considering their choice sets at the start of the year. Women typically start applying to colleges earlier than men (Hossler, et al., 1999). The admissions application timeline to the most selective colleges with record numbers of students applying has moved up with over 450 institutions offering early admissions (CollegeBoard,

2011), but remains between October and April for most students. Unlike previous studies on this topic, the data collection design of this study (to be discussed in the next chapter) will include the application timeline including specific months and even weeks to be recorded for each high school student in the sample. Understanding how active and engaged each student is in the process is important because researchers have found that students who are actively engaged are more likely to be satisfied with the college they attend (Hamrich & Hossler, 1995); how students experience the process shapes the outcomes of their decisions (Hossler, et al., 1999).

The *choice* stage is contingent on students applying to institutions for acceptance. During this stage, individuals compare the academic and social attributes of each institution to which they applied and have been accepted at in order to select an institution with the best value and the greatest benefits (Hossler, et al., 1989). College choice patterns are correlated with: family SES (including parents' education), parental encouragement, student academic ability and achievement, race/ethnicity, high school, local colleges, prestige, economic expectations, and financial factors (i.e., tuition, costs, state and institution financial aid programs) (Desjardins, 2002; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, et al., 1989; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, Musoba, Simmons, & Chung, 2002). The actual college choice selection is the most researched stage of this process.

All the stages of this process require a student to make intermediate decisions and take action. The research literature overemphasizes the factors that influence the final college selection while underemphasizing the many small intermediate steps and decisions that students and families must make to stay on track and enroll at an institution. By conceptualizing this as a process composed of stages, rather than a more fluid, iterative, interactive process, these kinds of intermediate decisions are often overlooked and underestimated in terms of significance. Figure

2.2, below, outlines an alternative way to conceptualize the relationship among the stages that
will be explored in this study.

Figure 2.2: Hossler and Gallagher Reconceptualized
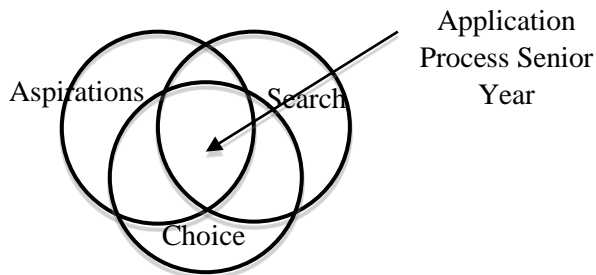
College choice for African American students.

Research on college choice for African American students highlights different variables
and differential effects throughout Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model. Freeman's
(2005) book, *African Americans and College Choice*, is a significant contribution to the field that
illuminates the college choice process for African American students, revealing that families are
the primary influence on African American students' predisposition and aspirations. Hossler and
Gallaghers's model (1987) generally recognizes that families play an important role in the
process and specifically suggests that parents are more involved in the first stage of developing
aspirations than in searching for options or influencing the final decision, but the role of parental
involvement in the process is unclear. Freeman (2005) expands the Hossler and Gallagher (1987)
model to highlight additional important factors including family and kinship, school
characteristics, and student cultural characteristics, all of which influence a student's
"predetermination." Freeman adopts this term instead of "predisposition," noting that
"environmental circumstances often have much to do with whether students choose higher
education"(2005, pp. 110–111). The three specific family and kinship factors identified that

influence African American students to attend college are: family expectation, encouragement to go beyond the family, and student self-motivation.

For African American students, academic performance, economic expectations, family including siblings who attended college and extended family who did not attend college all had a positive effect on student aspirations (Freeman, 1997, 2005). Interestingly, the effect of academic performance is less significant for African American students. However, students' perceptions of economic return on investment plays an important role when making postsecondary education decisions. High school climate and school racial composition shape students' postsecondary plans (Freeman, 2005).

Research on the search stage for African American students found timing, family encouragement, high school counselors, and affirmative action all influence the student's search process (Freeman, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; McDonough, 2005; McDonough et al., 1997; Smith & Fleming, 2006). High school counselors shaped the types of institutions considered and high school racial composition influenced both the college search process and outcomes (Freeman, 1999, 2005; McDonough, 2005; McDonough & Calderone, 2006). Interestingly, Black students who attended predominantly Black high schools were more likely to consider Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) than their peers who attended predominantly White high schools, who were more likely to attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (McDonough et al., 1997).

Hossler et al. (1999) theorized that parental or family support occurs through three avenues: influence, encouragement, and support. Influence has been defined by five signals: predisposition, direction-setting, price, proximity, and institutional quality. The three components of encouragement are: attitude, consistency, and congruence. Parental and family

support is distinguished by action-oriented activities. Smith and Fleming (2006) studied the parenting practices of African American families in the search stage and found that unintentional differential expectations and support for sons based on fears of survival and daughters based on fears of dependency may contribute to the college enrollment gap by leading male students to enroll in community colleges. In addition, even though parents were involved, their limited understanding of the process may diminish the effect of their role (Smith & Fleming, 2006).

In the choice stage, students select an institution to attend. In addition to the factors outlined in the previous section, there are some additional variables that shape the college choice for African American students. African American students' postsecondary education decisions are also influenced by: religion, social conscience, geography, and interest in attending an HBCU (Freeman, 2005; McDonough et al., 1997; McDonough et al., 1997; St. John, 1990).

College choice for first-generation students.

First-generation college students are influenced differently in the college choice process than their peers with college-educated parents (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). The term "first-generation" is defined various ways in the literature. Some studies define first-generation as a student who has not had a parent or sibling attend college before them (Rooney, 2008; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998). Other scholars focus on students whose parents may have some college experience, but have never earned a bachelor's degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Mendez, 2003). Finally, researchers from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Study published a 40th Anniversary report on first-generation college students that defined as first-generation students whose parents' graduated from high school or left formal education before that point (Saenz et al., 2007); their definition aligns with studies that broadly

define first-generation students as those whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education

(Nunez & Caccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pryor et al., 2006).

The findings from the CIRP report highlight that the national average of first-generation

freshman students in 2005 was 16%, however the proportion was higher for African American

students at 23%. In addition, since 1975, African Americans have had the greatest decline in

their representation of first-generation students in postsecondary institutions and this rate is faster

than the relative proportional decline of both first-generation students in other racial/ethnic

groups and African American adults without a college education (Saenz et al., 2007). The report

finds that key college choice factors that influenced first-generation students to attend college

were that their parents wanted them to go and the student expected college to increase their

earnings. In addition, first-generation students were more likely than students who have family

experience with higher education to consider financial factors as very important in their choice to

attend a specific institution and to consider financing college as a major concern. Proximity to

home and reliance of advice from high school guidance counselors and relatives were both of

particular importance when selecting an institution. Finally, all students report that "being well

off financially" is a very important personal goal, but first-generation students report this at a rate

of 81%, at eight percentage points higher than their non-first generation peers. The research thus

shows that for first-generation students, different factors come into play and/or they weigh

factors differently than do their peers whose parents have college experience.

Community college choice.

The process a student undergoes to decide to attend a community college instead of a

four-year institution is complex. There is limited research on the decision to attend a community

college. However, we know community colleges enroll a significant number of low-income and

underrepresented students (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Financial barriers are a primary reason

students decide to attend a community college (Bers & Galowich, 2002). Location also appears

to be a major factor for students choosing a community college (Cohen & Brawer, 2002;

Monroe, 2002; Stokes & Somers, 2004). Low achieving students are more likely to enroll in

community colleges than middle and higher achieving students (Tinto, 1975; Cohen & Brawer,

2002; Kurlaender, 2006; Joshi, Beck,& Nsiha, 2009), as are Latino/a students (Kurlaender,

2006).

Family and high schools influence students' decision to attend a community college.

Somers et al. (2006) found parents are more likely than students to introduce the idea of

attending a community college, possibly due to the consideration of college costs (Somers et al.,

2006). McDonough and Calderone (2006) discovered that high school counselors can also shape

student college choices by using student's social class background to influence their community

college recommendation. Research has shown that the following variables influence a students'

decision to attend a community college: finances, employment, location, family, academic

performance, and high school climate and personnel (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Cohen

& Brawer, 2002; Joshi et al., 2009; Kurlaender, 2006; McDonough & Calderone, 2006;

McPherson & Shapiro, 1994; Monroe, 2002; Santiago, 2007; Somers et al., 2006; Stokes &

Somers, 2004).

In summary, there has been extensive research on the factors that shape student college

choice decisions. The majority of the research focuses on aspiration development and the final

college choice. Even though researching and actually submitting applications is necessary to

make a college choice decision, this part of the process has received less attention. Contemporary

research is much more attentive to differences in the college choice process based on student

demographic characteristics, yet Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) framework has primarily been

powerful in modeling the college choice process for White, middle class students. The more

researchers examine other groups, the clearer it is that this process does not apply equally to all.

Thus, researchers now examine alternate factors or differential weighting of variables that shapes

college choice decisions for a wider range of student subgroups.

College Access Programs

College access programs exist because of college enrollment rate differences among high

school graduates. The programs typically target students who are underrepresented in higher

education; this includes low-income students, students of color, first-generation, and

geographically diverse students. The intention of these programs is to provide underrepresented

students with the skills, knowledge, and general college preparation required to enter and

succeed in college (Perna & Swail, 2001). A particular emphasis of these programs is often

placed on the steps necessary to apply and enroll in postsecondary education because the process

is so complex, especially for students who are unfamiliar with the steps. Pre-college outreach

programs attempt to familiarize students with the process, and evidence suggests that the

programs do help to increase access for underrepresented students (Perna, 2002).

The first College Access Programs (CAPs) started in churches and in the late 1960's

three federal CAPs emerged, collectively titled "TRIO": Upward Bound, Talent Search, and

Student Support Services (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Upward Bound profoundly influenced CAPs

that were established after its introduction (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Upward Bound and programs

modeled upon it focused on providing individual students with opportunities. A new trend,

however, emerged during President Clinton's second term that focused instead on collaborations

and partnerships to serve entire schools (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Gaining Early Awareness and

Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) is the newest federally funded college access program that exists among a number of private, not-for-profit, state- and federal-level agencies, all providing college preparation and outreach. Similar to the influence Upward Bound had on the programs designed after it, GEAR UP has inspired a new type and style of CAP that focuses on school-wide interventions. Rather than operating outside of schools and cherry picking their participants based on individual program criteria, GEAR UP- inspired programs are implemented in under-resourced middle and high schools to serve all students in the building.

Many college access programs are built on sociological concepts. Cultural and social capital development, which was discussed in an earlier section, is one theoretical underpinning for the many pre-college outreach initiatives that seek to have a positive influence on college access. CAPs designed for students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) aim to provide students a network of services with associated benefits to increase low-income students' access to valued social and cultural capital. Building a network that facilitates school success and leads to college enrollment provides a means for students to develop college aspirations while accessing important information and guidance on how to prepare for college academically, socially, and financially.

College Advising

Research on college choice often shows an extended process starting in middle school or at least by the 9th grade. However, in under-resourced high schools,[5] where it is common for students to be the first in their family to pursue postsecondary education, it is not unusual for the entire college search, application, and choice process to be condensed into the students' senior year (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). My reconceptualization of Hossler and Gallagher's model depicted

---

[5] Defined by the percent of students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

in Figure 2.2, represents this condensed, iterative process.

McDonough's (1997) qualitative study explored the college choice process of twelve White, female students attending four high schools in California. McDonough looked at organizational *habitus* to understand how the high school context constrains students' options and thus choice by offering students a class-based perspective on the process. This seminal piece highlights the inequality in school-based college advising practices based on school type and student population and is one of only a handful of studies that samples based on high school. This publication is now eighteen years old and the new popular school-wide college advising interventions that are so prevalent now were not even present when McDonough researched and wrote her book.

McDonough (2004) argues that one of the top reforms needed to improve college access is increasing the amount of college counselors in public U.S. high schools. Both increasing the number of counselors and time devoted to college advising could improve college access (McDonough, 2004). According to HSLS 2009, the majority of public school counselors spend between 0–19% of their time on college advising (U.S. Department of Education). Even though there has been an emphasis in many states to increase high school graduation requirements and align education through P–16 or P–20 reforms[6], counseling or the role of college counseling has only recently been mentioned in these efforts.

State and national leaders focused on P–16 reforms have emphasized student readiness for college and a more rigorous high school curriculum (Adelman, 1999, 2006). Even though this has been widely accepted and mandatory curriculum policies and increased curriculum rigor are being implemented across the country, "surprisingly little is known about whether changing

---

[6] P-16 refers to pre-school through college and P-20 refers to pre-school through graduate school.

44

course requirements will necessarily lead to improved outcomes for students"(Mazzeo, 2010, p. 1).

The Consortium on Chicago School Research has been using the Chicago Public School system as a laboratory to implement and assess urban high school reform and educational policy. Examining the effects of a 1997 effort to implement a mandatory college-preparatory curriculum for all, the key findings are: more ninth grade students took college preparatory classes, there were no positive effects on student achievement, and the new curriculum had negative effects on graduation rates and college enrollment (Mazzeo, 2010). Examining the effects of attending a selective high school with rigorous International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) curricula is not enough to automatically result in selective college enrollment. The key findings are that: strong college qualifications does not mean a student will necessarily attend a college matched to their qualifications, having strong qualifications means students actually may need more support in searching, applying, and selecting a college, and that high schools need to do more than simply set the expectation that students go to college (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca & Moeller, 2009). The Chicago Consortium is now piloting an expensive, intensive college-advising program to make sure students in academically advanced programs and their families make a "fully informed" college choice (Sherwin, 2012).

Studies show that when counselors are available and able to provide direct services to students and parents, they can effectively and positively impact students' achievements, aspirations, and financial aid knowledge (Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997, 2004; Orfield & Paul, 1993; Plank & Jordan, 2001). In addition, African American, Latino, and first-generation college-bound students are significantly more likely than their White peers to have their college plans both positively or negatively influenced by their high school counselors (Lee & Ekstrom,

1987; Plank and Jordan, 2001). The reality, however, is that most counselors are constrained from providing information and counseling related to college due to time limitations and increased counseling loads (McDonough, 2004). Even fewer counselors in urban, rural schools, and high schools serving low-SES students and students of color are available for college advising (McDonough, 2004).

In addition to structural constraints, counseling education programs have not historically prepared counselors in the area of college counseling (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 2004). Instead of incorporating more college counseling training in higher education programs that prepare counselors for U.S. public high schools and adding additional counselors, college access programs are often filling this gap in under-resourced schools and communities. One new college access program that has emerged to address this challenge is the National College Advising Corps (NCAC), a program that partners with high schools to complement the important work of high school counselors.

A key component in the new trend of promoting school-wide outreach for all students is focusing on college advising and providing accurate information and support to students and families through the college search, application, and choice process. Advisers provide students and families access to information and tools for navigating the complex college access and choice process. Very little research has explored the actual college advising and educational outreach practices used by high schools and college access programs to meet the goals of increased college attendance. An increased understanding of the student and family experience working with college advisers through these programs on the college search, application process, and college choice is needed. Because advisers are often new professionals who recently graduated from selective undergraduate institutions, it is important to understand their

perceptions and values related to the college access and choice process of students at the under-resourced high schools where they are employed. This is particularly important because these advisers are placed in schools with student and family populations that rely more on school-based resources for postsecondary planning support (McDonough, 1997, 2004), and how students and families experience the process shapes both outcomes and satisfaction with important, potentially life-altering decisions (Hossler et al., 1999).

An additional challenge for advisers, students, and families is the number of decisions students need to make to stay on the path to postsecondary education (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Interestingly, students who attend a private school or a college preparatory suburban public high school do not make nearly as many decisions about college (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Their schools are designed for college preparation and the cost of postsecondary education is less of a concern. For example, the student will be enrolled without a decision in a college preparatory curricula (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). The student will skip the predisposition stage altogether, as there is no decision necessary regarding college: their attendance is simply assumed. In contrast, in order for a first-generation college student from a low-income background attending an under-resourced high school to access a postsecondary institution, that individual needs to make an active choice to activate the process, a combination of predisposition and search, and continue to make inter-related decisions and take required actions to stay on track. If the student does not make the decision to pursue postsecondary education early enough, acting on their predisposition and aspirations, the student may passively opt out of the college track. They will miss the opportunity to take the "right" courses for a college preparatory curriculum, will not register or prepare for college entrance exams, in addition to missing many other critical steps (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). The student in the

under-resourced high school is in an environment with constrained educational resources and limited information (McDonough, 1997). The opportunity to learn and access a rigorous course curriculum is highly stratified by student race and family SES (Adelman, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

This study incorporates elements from three conceptual frameworks: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model; Freeman's (2005) expanded version of Hossler and Gallagher, which focuses on the college choice process for African American students; and Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model for studying student college choice. As the primary college choice model used to understand student decisions, Hossler and Gallagher's model has informed the organization of the literature review and served as a foundation for the data collection and data analysis.

The strengths of Hossler and Gallagher's model are its simplicity and general acceptance in the field. As discussed in this chapter, it starts with students aspiring to attend higher education followed by students researching colleges to attend, and concludes when students decide on the institution where they will enroll. The model accounts for students' individual characteristics and the institutional characteristics that led to a student's college choice. The significant limitation of the model is its assumption that all students have equal access to information and undergo the same stage process. I argue, instead, that this is not a universal process and varies both within and across racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and other group background characteristics (Freeman, 1997; Hurtado et al., 1997; Perna 2006). In order to develop more precise models the college choice process needs to be studied in context and the first and second stages, predisposition and search, need to be studied in conjunction with the final stage, college choice.

Hossler and Gallagher start with predisposition, but in Freeman's (2005) expansion of Hossler and Gallagher's model, she emphasizes the importance of environmental circumstances, and the influence of family and school in shaping students' cultural characteristics. Culture is absent from Hossler and Gallagher's model. Freeman's (2005) expansion suggests the students' aspirations or college predetermination, as she refers to it, is developed by family and school characteristics that shape students' cultural characteristics. Students' cultural characteristics influence college predetermination, which leads to college participation. While this model adds culture into consideration, it remains limited insofar as it retains Hossler and Gallagher's linear stages.

Building on Freeman's work, this dissertation study explores what happens between "college predetermination" and "college participation." The study responds to Freeman's call for research into African American families' perception of their influence on the college choice process for their children, and for a better understanding of how high schools actively channel students to participate in higher education.

Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual framework assumes individuals' college choice decisions are shaped by contextual layers. In Perna's model, contextual layers represent society (i.e., social, economic, and policy factors), the higher education context (i.e., location, institutional characteristics, marketing, and recruitment), and the school and community context (i.e., availability of resources, types of resources, structure of supports and barriers) and the individual's habitus (i.e., student's demographic characteristics, family, social and cultural capital). The student is at the center of this conceptualization. The school and community context are aligned with Freeman's focus on school characteristics. By emphasizing these contextual

layers, Perna's framework recognizes the impact of environment on postsecondary planning, college access, and choice, both directly and indirectly.

Building on both Freeman (2005) and Perna's (2006) model, the interaction between students, families, and the urban high school context is at the heart of this study. The school and community contextual layer comprises the social structures and resources in communities and schools that can facilitate or impede college access and choice (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Differential access to information and resources shape student and family college choice decisions (McDonough, 1997). We know that for some students, their school context will function as an avenue for upward mobility; while for other students, school context constitutes an almost insurmountable barrier (Tierney & Venegas, 2009).

The influence of the encouragement by significant others (i.e., family, peers, educators) will also be considered carefully in this study. In particular, parental involvement and encouragement have proved to be highly influential factors (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Freeman, 1997, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000), and students in under-resourced schools rely on school-based resources more than students from other contexts (McDonough, 1997).

In summary, the data collection and analysis is informed by elements of three conceptual models. Hossler and Gallagher served as the foundation to explore student application and decision-making behavior. Incorporating Freeman's focus on family and schools and Perna's emphasis on the contextual layers that shapes college choice decisions provides a more comprehensive framework for studying this complex process. This framework facilitates an exploration into how the application process shapes the final decision while accounting for the interaction between students and families and their context.

Chapter 3

Methodology

To meet the study objectives, I employed qualitative research methods to explore the postsecondary planning and decision-making processes for African American high school seniors at a school in Michigan. I used a qualitative case study strategy because in education research in school environments where the variables are embedded in the situation, a case study is often the best method (Merriam, 2009). Like other forms of qualitative research, the purpose of using this method is to search for both meaning and understanding. As the researcher, I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and the end result is a richly descriptive final product (Merriam, 2009). Case studies illuminate our understanding of experiences and processes.

The primary characteristic of a case is that it is bounded by time and activity (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). The case examined in this study is the student postsecondary planning and decision-making process. The study methodology allowed for an in-depth exploration and holistic description of the phenomenon (Yin, 2009). A case study allows the researcher to collect detailed information and use a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time to explore a process or individual(s) in-depth. Yin (2009) elaborates, "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.18).

My dissertation presents rich cases of the individual college planning and decision-making process for twelve Bayside High School seniors. This study is meant to be theoretical

and exploratory, focusing on students, families, and educators in context. The goal of the research is to provide insight into the behavior and perceptions of the students and those they consider influential in their decision-making processes, focusing on how these elements shape the postsecondary planning process, including student decision-making and postsecondary education choices. The emphasis of this study is on the process, barriers, and valued opportunities and outcomes that students, families, and educators, including college advisers, perceive as acceptable and desirable.

Research Questions

    I. How do high-achieving, low-income African American urban high school seniors and their families engage in postsecondary planning and select a postsecondary pathway in an under-resourced high school committed to increased college access?

        a. How do students search for postsecondary options (i.e., education, military, employment), perceive their options, and build their initial college choice set?

        b. How do the students determine where they will submit undergraduate applications and make final postsecondary decisions?

        c. How do students in a school committed to supporting postsecondary access experience school structures and resources intended to support student's postsecondary pathways? What are the perceptions of educators, students, families, and others engaged in supporting students' postsecondary planning?

        d. What role do external influencers (i.e., colleges, families, peers, school personnel, advisers, mentors, coaches) play in the various stages of the process?

Research Site: State, Local, and School Context

The state, local, and school context are in the background with the students in the foreground of this study. In this section, I provide relevant background information that shapes the context the participants (i.e., students, families, educators) are operating within, whether they are aware of it or not. The data collection provided an opportunity to explore the participants' perceptions of their context, including access to accurate information; in addition, it allowed the participants an opportunity to share additional layers of complexity that were relevant to them.

Michigan and Bayside.

The state of Michigan experienced great prosperity in the mid-twentieth century as home of the auto industry, but by the end of the century faced significant challenges due to the decline in U.S. manufacturing. Michigan started the twenty-first century facing high levels of unemployment, declining tax assessments and collections, and significant population shifts (United States Census Bureau). The state's unemployment peaked in June 2009 at 14.9 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics). At the start of data collection in 2012, it was closer to the national average of 8.2 percent, coming in at 8.5 percent. Bayside[7] is a mid-sized city in Michigan. A former manufacturing center, Bayside, saw a significant double digit population decline from 2000 to 2010; population has been shrinking in Bayside since its peak in 1960 (United States Census Bureau). Bayside's unemployment rate peaked in 2010 at 13 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics). About one third of Bayside's population are children and over one third of Bayside's residents live below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau).

---

[7] Bayside is a pseudonym.

Similar to other mid-size rust belt cities[8] and states, Bayside and Michigan residents for most of the twentieth century had access to manufacturing jobs that provided stable levels of income, valuable benefits, and acceptable working conditions, due to the work of powerful labor unions. Individuals could secure employment with limited to no postsecondary education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 20 percent of Bayside residents ages 25–64 have at least a two-year degree. But under 10 percent (9.1%) of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. Michigan higher education attainment is highly stratified between two- and four-year programs based on geographic location and SES (U.S. Census Bureau).

The state of Michigan needs to increase its percentage of college graduates from 35 percent to 60 percent by 2025 to meet workforce demands (Lumina, 2012). The trend projected growth for 2025 is 43.5 percent, which means there is a projected degree gap of 16.6 percent. In order to reduce the gap and reach the goal of 60 percent by 2025, the state needs to improve college access and success for working adults, low income and first-generation students, and students of color. Postsecondary levels of educational attainment for the state of Michigan are: Associate's degree (9.39%), Bachelor's degree (17.17%), and Advanced or Professional degree (9.83%). The national rates of educational attainment follow a similar pattern: Associate's degree (8.44%), Bachelor's degree (19.18%), and Advanced or Professional degree (10.7%). Comparing Michigan to the U.S data, it is clear that two-year Associate's degrees have been pursued and completed at a greater rate in Michigan at the expense of Bachelor's degrees.

---

[8] "Rust belt" is an informal description of areas in the Midwestern and Northeastern US that primarily specialized in large-scale manufacturing. These areas experienced "boom" periods, but have struggled to adapt to economic changes in the late twentieth century. The areas that have struggled the most share common challenges including population decline, reduced tax base, and chronic levels of high unemployment.

The economic condition of the state has also had a significant impact on the K–12 school budget and state postsecondary financial aid system. Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, the K–12 school system in Michigan has been in turmoil. During this time, the system experienced repeated budget cuts due to reduced tax revenue. At the same time increased standards and accountability with the new Michigan Merit Curriculum and Exam with no parallel increase in support or funding have been implemented and increasing state mandated benefit program costs (medical and pension) have further squeezed school budgets. From 2005–2010, state appropriations per student declined nearly 20 percent; the national decline was 3.1 percent (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2010). Institutions and local promise scholarship programs have staff hard at work to try to keep postsecondary education financing available at levels that will provide students access to higher education, but costs have continued to climb for students and families.

Bayside Public School District.

Bayside Public School District (BPSD) is committed to postsecondary education access. The district focused its efforts during the 2011–2012 school year (SY) on academic programs that are globally competitive and cultivate a culture of college- bound or post-secondary learners. The district secured grant funding to assist students and parents with understanding of the college-bound culture in order to help reach this goal. Even prior to this development, the school district partnered with the Midwest University College Advising Corps (MCAC) during SY 2010–2011 in order to provide a college adviser at Bayside High School.

A range of local higher education institutions are located in Bayside, including a two-year community college, a for-profit institution, and a four-year public college. These institutions all have a presence, but have differential levels of involvement with the school district and

community. During data collection, I explored all the higher education partnerships that students, families, and educators engaged with throughout the year.

The school district has three high schools and in SY 2012–2013, there were no charter high schools operating in the district. Two comprehensive high schools are located in the district and a specialty art and science magnet high school, which has entrance requirements including an admissions test and evaluation of other criteria for students to earn a seat in the class. Bayside High School was selected for the purpose of this study because it partnered with Midwest University in order to have a college adviser in the school, and actively works to support high school seniors in accessing postsecondary education.

The local Promise Scholarship is a new program awarding the first year of funding for the class of 2012. To be eligible, students and parents/guardians must be residents of Bayside, attend and graduate from a Bayside School District High School, be admitted and enroll in a postsecondary institution in the state, and enroll in a program leading to a degree or certificate. The award ranges based on institution attended, but students are eligible to receive up to $2,727 for a two-year program and up to $8,000 for a four-year program at any public or private college or university, accredited trade and vocational schools in the State of Michigan. This funding is available for the first two years of post-secondary education and is a "last dollar" award meant to fill the gap between federal and state financial aid and the cost of attendance at the institution.

Research site: Bayside High School.

Purposeful sampling was employed to select a sample from which the most could be learned (Patton, 2002). Using a case study method, it is important to select information-rich cases for in-depth study. The case study site is Bayside High School, in Bayside, Michigan. This school was selected because it is one of only eight high schools in Michigan that had a Midwest

56

University College Advisor[9] placed at the school during SY 2010–2011. The program entered its third year during SY 2012-2013 when I collected the study data. Of the eight schools where this program was first implemented, Bayside High School is unique because the initial advisor was an alumnus of the high school that had a very high level of support from the superintendent down to the school personnel. The inaugural adviser completed his commitment to the program at the end of the SY 2011–2012 and a new adviser replaced him. The school site is the background of this study, but the first level used in purposeful sampling.

I constrained my sample to one high school, Bayside High School, with a college adviser. Previous research suggests that college choice decisions are made via school context and students historically underrepresented in higher education rely on counselors and school-based resources more than other students (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Therefore, my sample of students was constrained to students in this high school, which features an underrepresented student population and the recent intervention of college counseling.

Informants

"The voices of students are rarely heard in the debate regarding their lives, and the voices of disempowered students are even more silent"(Freeman, 2005, p. 113).

Purposeful sampling was used to select twelve high-achieving, low-income African American high schools seniors from my case site. To have a sample balanced by gender, high-achieving was defined as top 20% of the class of 2014; five of the top ten seniors in a class of just over 100 are in the sample. It was important to identify six males and six females because

---

[9] Michigan College Advising Corps (MCAC) is a state program of the National College Advising Corps (NCAC). The program places recent University of Michigan graduates in under-resourced high schools seeking to increase their college acceptance and matriculation rates in order to support high school students access to postsecondary education.

women graduate high school and attend postsecondary institutions at higher rates than males (Snyder & Dillow, 2013); approximately 1/3 of male students in Bayside graduate high school. The majority of students in the top 20% were female; as will be discussed in the recruitment section (below), one male student participated in the study who was not in the top 20% of the class. Unfortunately, it was not possible to identify six male students in the top 20% due to the limited number of eligible male students and one male student deciding he did not want to participate.

The focus is on high academic performers because these students have the largest range of options, particularly compared to the lower academic performers, whose choice is likely constrained to community colleges. Even though high academic performers may have the largest range of options, researchers have found that low-income students are the least likely to apply to the most prestigious public and private colleges that are available to them (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2009). Like many urban high schools in Michigan, the student population at this school is homogenous and exclusively African American. This high school type was specifically selected for this study because of the limited higher education research on the experience of low-income African-American students in context. See Table 4.1 in Chapter 4 for descriptive information about the informants and their family members' involvement in post-secondary planning and decision-making, based on the activities identified in Hossler's model.

A concentrated analysis is necessary to understand the complexity of the process and do the case justice. The study is designed around one high school, Bayside High School. I started with the lowest unit of analysis possible, individual students in one school. The ideal sample for this study was twelve high school seniors. In Lareau's (2003) intensive study and book titled *Unequal Childhoods,* her sample included twelve families; a small sample was necessary in

order to provide a realistic in-depth portrait of the students and parents. McDonough (1997) studied college choice in four high schools and had three white female students per high school in her study for a sample of twelve students. I built my sample around the high school senior, but as will be discussed in the data collection section, I collected numerous data points and interviewed additional informants based on the extent to which students identified those persons as important to their college planning process.

In addition to student informants, school personnel and student-identified external influencers were contacted for study participation. School personnel were interviewed to learn about the educators' perceptions of school-based resources, as well as, perceptions about student opportunities and barriers to postsecondary success. The external influencers were interviewed to gain insight into their perceptions about postsecondary education and to learn about how they were supporting the student's postsecondary planning and decision-making process.

Recruitment

The first level of recruitment was at the level of the school district. After building a research partnership with the school district, I met with the Bayside High School principal, counselor, and college adviser to discuss the study. I recruited the twelfth grade counselor to serve as an on-site liaison; I compensated her for her time and effort assisting with student recruitment, parent consent forms, and keeping me informed about relevant college access resources and activities in the school. In advance of starting the study, I met with the initial college advisor to learn more about the school; he identified the key actors in the building related to student postsecondary access and those individuals in the school who had particularly strong relationships with the 11th and 12th grade students. I built a strong relationship with the Midwest University college adviser so he could keep me abreast of anything relevant to the study goals.

My study started with conversations with school personnel to help identify potential study participants and build my sample of student informants, as well as to learn about the postsecondary planning resources available in the school. Recruitment of student informants occurred with the support of the counselors and college adviser, including the on-site liaison. I secured a list of all seniors who met the academic criteria to participate in the study. All study participants but one came from this list of seniors.

I used maximum variation sampling to identify a sample that represents a wide range of experiences (Patton, 2002); this high school has a reputation for sending athletes and band members to four-year colleges. Interestingly, three of the top male academic students were also athletes. The top female student in the study was also a member of the band. The majority of high achievers were leaders in their class and participated in extracurricular activities centered on leadership and giving back to the school and community.

I held an in-person session for all eligible students identified by the school personnel to inform them about the study and address any questions. Students who were interested in participating completed a student demographic survey and received both a consent form and a parent consent form to be signed and returned; all materials are located in the appendix. Eleven students, five males and six females, joined the study. When selecting the final male participant who was outside the top 20%, maximum variation was used to identify potential candidates. A student whose mother was a principal in the school district, a young man who participated in a welding program at the local community college, and a student who was a foster youth and unsure about college were all considered. After meeting with the candidates, Sweet Jones[10], the foster youth was particularly interested in joining the study sample. I selected him to participate

---

[10] All participants are referred to by their self-selected pseudonyms.

because of his foster youth status, his focus on financial security and uncertainty whether a path directly into higher education was right for him, and because the counselor saw value in him having regular interaction with a caring adult.

In addition to student informants, school personnel and student-identified external influencers were recruited throughout the study. I presented at a staff meeting and educators signed up to be interviewed. Typically, one external influencer per student was recruited and interviewed. There were key teachers and counselors who almost all the students turned to for advice about college and in general. Most students had a family member or peer who they identified as their primary support in postsecondary planning and decision-making.

Data Collection

Purposeful sampling was used throughout this study to determine the site (as discussed above), who to interview (i.e., student sample, external influences, school personnel), what to observe related to college planning (i.e., who, what, and where), and what documents to collect and analyze. A case study method means the researcher needs to "get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly be means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires)"(Yin, 2009, p. 23). I collected comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about each student's college-planning process and use of school-based postsecondary planning resources.

Students submitted their consent forms and background survey to the counselor. Upon receipt, the counselor scheduled student interviews during an elective class. For each participant, I received their high school transcript and college entrance exam scores. Following the first interview, students had the opportunity to opt in or out of future participation; all interviewed students wanted to participate in the study. Data collection occurred throughout the student's

61

senior year and focused on how students perceived their options, took action, processed and managed information, and made decisions during their postsecondary planning process.

I documented the student postsecondary planning and choice process from the student's perspective of why they were pursuing postsecondary education, how they were pursuing it, and what colleges were included in the initial choice set. Through three extended interviews, a minimum of two monthly check-ins, and observations of how the students engaged in postsecondary planning during SY 2012–2013, I documented the process students undergo in learning about and researching options, selecting colleges to apply to, completing application (college, financial aid & scholarship) materials, and the final decision-making process to select a college to attend; I paid particular attention to the resources utilized and highlighted by the students as being important to their postsecondary planning process. The student's perceptions of opportunities and barriers was explored and revisited throughout the course of the data collection.

The depth and layers of data are a unique feature and strength of this student-centered study. During fall 2012 and spring 2013, I conducted an hour-long audio-recorded interview with each student and met with students weekly for one-on-one check-in meetings that ranged from ten to thirty minutes. In 2013, I held hour-long audio-recorded interviews with a family member (parent or grandparent) identified by each student as the primary individual supporting the student in his or her postsecondary education planning. School personnel, including the college adviser were also interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. Semi-structured interviews allow students and informants to discuss the student's postsecondary planning processes, emphasizing the experiences and elements that are most important to them (Merriam, 2009). Using a semi-

structured interview protocol allows the researcher to ask the same series of questions to each participant with different probes and follow-up questions based on the participant's response.

All informant interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder with the informant's and guardian's consent when necessary. Following each interview, I allowed time to write up my notes and capture my initial reflections (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). All informant interviews were professionally transcribed or transcribed by the researcher. A complete interview file was created for each interview on NVivo, a qualitative software program, including the following: during/post interview notes, interview memo, audio-recording, and transcribed interview.

Student participants engaged in a minimum of two monthly check-ins. These check-ins included brief conversations about college visits, updates on application materials or colleges the student was considering, and/or discussions about how the student was feeling about the upcoming ACT. In addition, I conducted observations when the students were engaged in postsecondary planning activities including at: a college visit, college representative visits to the high school, a college fair, a parent and student financial aid night, and time spent working on scholarship and college applications in the school computer lab. A written record of notes from each observation and the student check-ins was added to each individual student folder.

Available print materials and postsecondary planning resources provided to students and parents in the form of mailings, bulletin board postings, the school website, public social media, school curricula, and materials used in workshops was collected. During my visits to the school, I kept a record of college-related announcements, bulletin board displays, and classroom decorations. Throughout the data collection, ongoing analysis and theoretical sampling informed the type of data collected and the foci of the collection process.

Instruments

  The data collection instruments for this study include a semi-structured interview protocol for each formal interview, a guide for the student check-ins and observations, and a demographic survey for all the informant interviews that are all located in the appendix. The student demographic survey was used to collect data on the following: race, educational aspirations, and interests. The educator demographic survey focuses on: race, gender, educational history, and years of employment at Bayside High School. The external influencer survey was built on the educators survey with additional questions related to employment and the individual's relationship to the student. Consent forms were provided before the interview started and signatures were required for all interviews, which were audio-taped.

  Semi-structured interviews were utilized to provide students, important influencers, and educators the opportunity to share their perceptions and experiences. This data collection strategy allowed individuals the opportunity to share detailed descriptions of their perceptions and experiences in their own words (Merriam, 2009; Weiss, 1994). The check-ins and observations provided an opportunity to examine student behaviors and actions throughout the process. The questions on the instruments were aligned to allow comparisons across the students, educators, advisers, and external influencers on postsecondary planning and perceptions and utilization of school-based support resources.

  I pilot tested the student protocol with two Midwest University undergraduate students who fit the sample criteria. The Midwest University college adviser reviewed the protocols and data collection approach. Two additional college outreach professionals who work with high school students provided feedback.

Weiss (1994) recommends pilot interviews; I used this as an opportunity to revise and refine the questions. The purpose of pilot testing is to get feedback on the wording of the questions, probing techniques and areas of exploration, and to consider the interview length and potential challenges the informants may have with the interview and process. I asked participants to comment on the process, the vocabulary and concepts, and my role as an interviewer including nonverbal communication. The pilot interviews were not analyzed as part of this study.

Data Analysis

Transcribed student interviews and observation notes were indexed into NVivo. Transcripts were checked against the audio-recording to ensure accuracy. This case study of postsecondary planning and decision-making at Bayside High School is comprised of smaller individual cases; the stories of specific seniors at Bayside High School as they prepare to embark on life following high school graduation. Case analysis is an optimal methodology for integrating a variety of data sources into a comprehensive understanding of processes both within and across individuals (Yin, 2009). This study is grounded in the cross-case analysis and focused on student application and decision-making behavior throughout the process. Analyzing the semi-structured interviews, observations, and documents collected over a sustained period of time allowed for an in-depth exploration of the students' postsecondary planning and decision-making. The conceptual framing informed the semi-structured interview protocols and provided the descriptive analytic framework for data analysis.

The first step is doing justice to each individual case through a concentrated inquiry into the context and circumstances of each student in order to understand the individual case complexities. Each student folder was examined and written up with an emphasis on the student and external influencers' perceptions and their relationship to student behavior and actions. Each

case was organized chronologically. In Chapter 4, each student profile includes key details from the student's application process and Table 4.2 includes both high school grades and college entrance exam scores for each participant.

Next, I performed a thematic analysis across cases and topics using constant comparative analytic procedures (Strauss, 1987) to analyze across the student and external influencer informant interviews. When relevant, observation notes and written documents were included in the analysis. Coding of interviews was conducted in three phases. I engaged in three levels of coding: open, axial, and selective in order to yield the data to address the study questions.

I started by open coding each transcript, noting and labeling categories and subcategories of data. All emergent themes were coded using NVivo (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Open coding is an iterative process; I was able to test hypotheses, ask questions of the data, and shape future data collection. This process provided the opportunity to seek data to confirm or challenge the emerging codes. The initial data and analyses informed future interview protocols and allowed for member checking throughout the data collection process.

Open coding was followed by axial coding. I focused on coding around the categories that emerged through the open coding process. This allowed me to focus on the categories that appeared to be central to the data. I examined the emerging themes and their connection to the conceptual model. I compared the categories and subcategories to explore topics and codes that were similar, contradictory, intersecting, or even overlapping in order to determine whether categories should be combined, redefined, further separated and distinguished into subcategories under a larger category or code. Throughout this process, I evaluated the emergent categories to assemble the final set of working codes.

The final analytic step was selective coding; I explored the data now organized by category

or code and focused on areas of interest relevant to the research questions of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). I systematically reviewed the data, looking to confirm hypotheses, explore contradictory evidence, and find patterns across the sample. It is this final round of coding that informed the findings and results section discussed in this dissertation study.

Throughout the data collection and constant comparative analyses, I wrote theoretical memos linking the data to the framework. I debriefed with a colleague throughout the data collection and coding process. During data collection and early analysis, member checks occurred by asking student informants, the school adviser, and the counselor to discuss preliminary findings, and comment on the accuracy of the facts and interpretations of the data. This provided an opportunity for informants to share additional insights into the phenomenon, as well as to provide feedback that assisted in the analysis of the data.

Throughout the study, I also used a research journal as a means for continued reflection. The initial entries included an articulation and clarification of my assumptions and experiences that might influence my orientation and the study (Merriam, 1998). Each day I spent in the field, I allowed time for journaling to reflect on the experience. In addition, when analyzing the data, I allowed at least fifteen minutes at the end of each session for either writing in my research journal or writing a memo. Throughout this study, I periodically reviewed the contents of the journal to provide time and space for reflection on potential biases.

Limitations

All studies have limitations; being aware of the limitations and minimizing their effect on the findings needs to be a priority and thoughtfully considered. First, qualitative research in education is often criticized for its lack of generalizable findings (Maxwell, 1992). A case study design is used to generalize to theoretical propositions, not to a specific population (Yin, 2009).

Even though the purpose of this case study is not to be generalizable to specific populations, I have made decisions throughout the project design to address this limitation. I want to be clear that I undertook the project with the belief that context-dependent knowledge is valuable and much can be learned from this particular case (Merriam, 2009). It is this belief that undergirds my decision to pursue a single institution study; in this case, one school in one district in one state, with a small sample of high school seniors. In a case study, it is the researcher's responsibility to provide a rich narrative description that allows readers an opportunity to learn vicariously through the case (Stake, 2005); each design decision is focused on this goal, emphasizing depth over breadth.

In designing this study, strategic decisions were made to address issues of validity and data credibility. Triangulation, saturation, and member checking were utilized throughout the data collection and analysis to address validity and credibility concerns. Triangulation is a technique used to collect data through multiple methods and informants to minimize researcher subjectivity and substantiate findings (Patton, 2002). To increase credibility, the case study findings and conclusions are based on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). The students are the focus of this study and triangulation was utilized throughout by collecting multiple points of data surrounding each student.

Even though the sample of students may be small, student interview data were collected longitudinally over the course of one school year. Each student participated in three interviews allowing for greater depth and development of a research relationship over time (Weiss, 1994). Even with a sample of only twelve student informants, saturation was reached. Saturation occurs in data collection when the informants no longer provide new information (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). In a study with interviews as the primary method of data collection, a minimum of fifteen

interviews is recommended to reach saturation (Ortiz, 2003); this study included additional

methods of data collection to complement and supplement the student informant interview data.

To improve the credibility of the research findings, member checking was used to create a

feedback loop for informants to provide ongoing feedback throughout the study (Creswell, 2007;

Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). In addition, using the case data compiled for each student allowed

for all findings and conclusions to be based on more than one source of evidence so as not to

overly rely on the semi-structured student interviews (Yin, 2009).

Michigan and Bayside were purposefully selected due to unique circumstances and

characteristics that make this a rich case for study. These same unique circumstances (i.e.,

presence of a Midwest University adviser, low postsecondary matriculation, local Promise

Scholarship, state economy, and state history of manufacturing) provide both opportunities and

challenges. It is possible that this is such a unique situation or combination of factors that there is

no other place like it. At the same time, however, there are over fifteen schools with Midwest

University advisers and over twenty other schools with advisers from another university in

Michigan. Through the National College Advising Corps, there are advisers in sixteen states and

over 500 high schools. The state economy, state history, and low postsecondary matriculation

rates are challenges across many communities in Michigan. And to date, there are at least ten

communities with Promise Scholarship programs.

Erickson (1986) argues that since the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a

particular case can be transferred to similar situations. It is the reader, not the researcher, who

determines what can apply to his or her context. It is possible that other advising corps

partnerships could learn from this study or that even educators from other schools with similar

student demographics or local challenges may find the study findings informative. A case study

has the potential to both advance a field's knowledge base, and improve practice (Merriam, 2009). Nieto (1992) suggests that qualitative studies allow us to examine "particular situations so that solutions can be hypothesized and developed"(p.5).

I selected a case study design because of the nature of the research problem and the questions being asked. The case study provides a way to investigate and understand a complex phenomenon with multiple variables of potential importance (Merriam, 2009) and multiple data points for evidence (Yin, 2009). Qualitative methods and a case study approach are the most appropriate research method to provide a rich and holistic account of this in-context phenomenon. I have put strategies in place to minimize the limitations of this study design.

Researcher Bias

Having worked in two high schools as an English teacher and one high school as a college counselor, my research interests developed out of these experiences. I have worked individually and in classroom settings with hundreds of students and families on their postsecondary planning. I believe in counseling and teaching that are both intrusive and empowering with high expectations and varying levels of support based on student needs and development. These foundational experiences shape my research interests and how I read and understand the higher education literature.

I am very aware of my biases based on my work as an educator and my own postsecondary planning experience. My own postsecondary planning process was greatly influenced by a school-based counselor on whom my family and I relied to provide a list of colleges to consider in my initial choice set. I enrolled and graduated from a college that I knew very little about and had no initial intention of ever applying to or attending. A random decision

to apply based on a counselor recommendation and an easy application changed my educational and life trajectory.

I am aware that I am an outsider in both this school and community. As a White, middle-class, thirty-year old female, there are visible cues and characteristics that the students, educators, and members of the community immediately used to try to make sense of me and my reasons for conducting this study at Bayside High School. My affiliation with the University of Michigan as a graduate research assistant and a doctoral candidate in the School of Education brought both positive and negative connotations that I had to be aware of when working in the field.

Awareness and the ability to identify biases is very important in being able to devise strategies to reduce their influence on a study design and findings. To reduce bias and increase validity and credibility, I worked with colleagues to peer-debrief. As mentioned above, member checks were also incorporated throughout the study for feedback from informants. The college adviser and school counselor reviewed excerpts and chapter 4 in its entirety.

Chapter 4

Participant Profiles

At Bayside High School, the college search, application, and choice process was condensed into the student's senior year—something not uncommon for students who attend under-resourced high schools (Farmer-Hinton, 2008). The school has a developed college application culture in which all seniors are expected to apply to at least four institutions including the local community college and local residential four-year university, with the majority of students applying to all of their colleges before the holiday break in December. Many of the family members in this study set aspirations, provided encouragement, and were engaged in active support of the student's postsecondary planning and decision-making process (Hossler, et al., 1999). Yet, despite all the support from the school and family, only a minority of students actually had someone recommend a college for them to consider.

In this chapter, I introduce the student participants and the individuals who were most influential in their college application and decision-making process. In the following chapters, I share findings related to the college application and decision-making process for low-income, African American high school seniors in an urban high school committed to postsecondary education access. The findings are organized by college application behavior (Chapter 5) and postsecondary education decision-making (Chapter 6).

The students, families, and educators at this school provided me a window into their lives for which I am forever grateful. I begin with a summary table, Table 4.1 that provides a snapshot

of the student sample. Following the table, I review a brief narrative of each student participant that shares additional background information and anecdotes about their process. The chapter ends with a summary table that includes each student's academic achievement data and a brief description of the school's guidance counselor and college adviser.

All of the students in this study were in the 2013 senior class at Bayside High School. Table 4.1 offers the student's selected pseudonym, their income status using Pell and TIP eligibility, if they are the first person in their family to go to college, their final postsecondary decision, and the type of support provided by their family. In the table, parental or family support is identified based on Hossler et al.'s (1999) theory that support occurs through three avenues: influence, encouragement, and support. Influence has been defined by five signals: predisposition, direction-setting, price, proximity, and institutional quality. The three components of encouragement are: attitude, consistency, and congruence. Parental and family support is distinguished by action-oriented activities.

Diondra, Jane, LaShea, and Manny all provided reports of their family involvement, but I was unable to hold a formal interview with a family member, which is why you will find NA under family member participant. At the financial aid night, I met Diondra's mother and we spoke casually about Diondra's process and their decision that she start at a community college. I met Manny's mother and father both at the financial aid night and a school basketball game; we spoke about his aspirations, their aspirations for him, and how they were actively supporting him. I was unable to connect with LaShea or Jane's mothers.

The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to student profiles that are not presented in any particular order and a brief description of the college adviser and senior counselor. The profiles

Table 4.1: Student and Family Profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	First Gen	Pell eligible	TIP eligible[1]	Family Member Participant	Family Aspirations/ Influence[2]	Family Encour- agement	Family Active Support	Post- secondary Decision	Intent to Transfer
Carly	F	Yes	No	No	Mother	No	No	No	Military	Yes
Ben	M	No	Yes	No	Mother	Yes	Yes	Yes	In-State Public	No
Bulldog	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Father	Yes	Yes	Yes	In-State Public	No
John	M	No	Yes	Yes	Mother	Yes	Yes	Yes	Out-of-State Private HBCU	Yes
Juliette	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mother	Yes	Yes	Yes	Residential Community College	Maybe
Kobe	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Mother	Yes	Yes	Yes	Out-of-State Public	No
Sam	F	Yes	Yes	No	Grandmother	Yes	Yes	No	In-State Public	No
Sweet Jones (S.J.)	M	Yes	Yes	Yes	Grandmother	Yes	Yes	No	In-State Public	No
Diondra	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	No	Community College	Yes
Jane	F	Yes	Yes	Yes	NA	Yes	Yes	No	In-State Public	Yes
LaShea	F	Yes	Yes	No	NA	Yes	No	No	In-State Research University	No
Manny	M	Yes	Yes	No	NA	Yes	Yes	Yes	In-State Public	No

[1] The Tuition Incentive Program (TIP) provides tuition for two years at a state community college and a small group of public four-year institutions for students who meet a Medicaid eligibility requirement. The program was designed to encourage students to complete high school.

[2] Family aspirations, encouragement and active support are defined by Hossler, Schmit and Vesper's definition. See following page for a further description of these three types of support.

are intended to give you a window into each student's application and decision-making process. I will start by introducing you to Juliette and the rest of the student participants.

Juliette lived in a neighboring town and transferred to Bayside through schools of choice[11] in eleventh grade. Both Juliette and her mother shared how thankful they were for her to be at Bayside for her senior year due to the support Juliette was receiving from the college adviser and how her cousin at her original high school did not have any support. In the spring of the senior year, the high school in the neighboring town was closed due to financial liabilities. Juliette will be the first person from her family to attend college.

Juliette started senior year wanting to attend a regional state college due to its nursing program and because her boyfriend was a freshmen at the institution. She registered and retook the ACT several times in order to improve her score so that it would not prevent her from being able to attend this institution, which she identified as her "ideal college." Her college preferences were aligned with those of her mother and centered on the institution's nursing program and its status as a safe, residential college that she could afford. She was constrained by her ACT score, decision-making timing, and the cost. In January, she started considering community colleges due to the Tuition Incentive Program (TIP) that would cover two years of tuition at a community college. Her incarcerated grandmother saw a commercial for a residential community college on television and told Juliette's mother about it. They first looked up the institution online and then, that same week, drove three and half hours to visit the college. By the time they left campus, Juliette had completed an application and submitted an enrollment deposit. Juliette made her college decision in January, which felt late to her and her mother. As will be further discussed in

_____

[11] Schools of Choice is a state program in Michigan that according to the Michigan Department of Education, "provides students with additional enrollment opportunities, which range from allowing students to determine which school within the resident district they will enroll, to allowing non-resident students to enroll in a district other than their own."

chapter five, Juliette's visit and decision inspired several Bayside peers to look into the college, apply, and enroll for the fall.

Sam grew up in both Michigan and Texas; she attended one semester of ninth grade in Texas and otherwise attended Bayside. She started her senior year in the top ten percent of her class and aspired to be the first person in her family to go to college. Ideally, she hoped to attend an out-of-state college in Texas. She preferred a residential, four-year university that was an elite or "known" institution. She identified University of Texas at Austin as her first choice institution and undertook their laborious application with the support of the school's college advisor. Sam was constrained by her ACT score, cost, and limited supported from her mother. The ACT had a negative effect on Sam, causing her significant stress and dampening her aspirations while diminishing her sense of self-worth. Despite these challenges, however, she retook the ACT several times. Sam's aunt and grandmother supported her financially and emotionally through the application process, but what she really wanted was support from her mother. Her mother was unreliable and even contributed to her missing the ACT in October because she was unable to provide the ride she had promised.

Sam engaged in a haphazard application process; she applied to all the in-state colleges that sent representatives to visit Bayside High School. She also applied to several colleges in and out-of-state that had representatives at the local college fair. Throughout the process, Sam was easily overwhelmed and relied on support from the college adviser and her grandmother when she was feeling down and unmotivated. Even though the University of Texas was the first college to which she applied with the support of her college adviser, Sam never actually received a decision on her application due to a misstep in the process; neither Sam nor her adviser could determine what went wrong. By the time they knew there was an issue, Sam's perception was

that there was no way she would be able to afford the institution. She was accepted to a regional

state college in October, but continued exploring her options until she finally decided to attend

that institution in April. Even though visiting the institution prior to making her decision was a

top priority for Sam, she was unable to do so due to cost and vehicle limitations. She made her

decision following the visit of one of her friends to the institution, who reported back key details

and answered all of her questions. Sam struggled to get the funds to secure her spot with an

enrollment deposit, but her family came through with financial support before the deadline.

Carly squeaked into the top ten percent of her class at the start of her senior year. She was

one of the few students in the graduating class that started the year with an ACT score that would

enable her to attend an in-state four-year institution. She started twelfth grade by applying to

regional in-state institutions, but consistently shared that she planned to enlist in the military and

had made that decision in middle school. Her mother did a short stint in the military and Carly's

sister was in the National Guard. When her older sister had applied to colleges, she had not

received enough aid to enroll without incurring debt and thus decided to join the National Guard

instead and take classes part-time.

Carly was the only student in the study who was not eligible for a Pell[12] Grant and, due to

her older sister's experience, she felt constrained by the out-of-pocket expenses she assumed she

would incur if she enrolled in a college immediately following high school. She knew her family

was open to her exploring other options; from her perspective, her family made too much money

to qualify for aid, but not enough to be able to enroll full time without taking on debt. She felt

particularly uncomfortable paying for college and enrolling full-time since she did not have any

clear career interests. She decided the military was the best route for determining a career path

---

[12] In 2013 a Federal Pell Grant provides students $5,500 annually toward education expenses.

and that she would continue her postsecondary education in the future. Carly had an independent streak and was drawn to the military as an opportunity to travel and see the world. When she became pregnant in the spring of 2013, Carly's family indicated that they would take care of her baby for her; she thus planned to enlist after the baby was born in early 2014.

Bulldog wanted to attend a four-year residential college and pursue engineering. He was the only student in the study who shared that his family intended to support him financially in college. His father told him he was committed to supporting him through his first year and members of his church told him they wanted to provide scholarship money because they believed in him. Bulldog was constrained by his ACT score and re-took the ACT multiple times with his parents' encouragement and active support—for example, they helped him study and engage in additional test preparation between test dates. With each successive test his score improved by one point, until finally his score on the April test crossed the threshold necessary for admission to in-state regional institutions.

Early in the academic year Bulldog was influenced by college recruitment materials received in the mail. He played high school football and wanted to play football in college; both Bulldog and his father mentioned the NFL as an aspiration. He was not recruited for a college team, however, and did not use football to shape his list of colleges. Due to cost, Bulldog decided he would focus on in-state institutions and he visited several colleges with his family throughout high school. Even though he was eligible for TIP aid, it was not a factor he considered when applying to or selecting a college. With his April ACT score, he was able to attend an in-state research university by first enrolling in their summer bridge program. Bulldog and his father decided this was the best institution for him and that the summer bridge program would help with his transition to college.

Kobe started the year intending to enroll in an out-of-state, four year residential college on a football scholarship. He only considered Division One colleges. He aspired to be a true student athlete and was serious about going to a college with a good business program. He shared NFL aspirations and expectations but desired a "legitimate" back-up plan. He was most concerned about getting hurt. He looked the part of an aspiring football player; in short sleeves, you see the script words, *Hard* and *Work*, tattooed on his forearms. He is determined and everyone believes he is "going to make it"—from the student teacher who announced to the class that Kobe was the only student who was college material, to his peers, and his mother, who thinks he is different from his siblings.

Kobe was constrained by his ACT score, the recruitment process, his mother's health, and the timing of the process. He was invited to competitive football camps and was contacted by coaches throughout football season. During his senior year, he did not play the position for which college coaches were considering him, and he was unable to create a highlights video, which further complicated the recruitment process. His mother is supportive and wants him to go where he is wanted, but she has a serious health condition and Kobe helps take care of her. His father lives locally, but is not engaged in his life; still, Kobe desires his father's support and validation particularly by attending his football games, high school graduation, and being proud of where he is going to college. However, Kobe's father did not show up to any events or communicate with him during his senior year. Kobe eventually enrolled in an out-of-state regional institution that provided a partial tuition scholarship; he hoped to earn a spot on the college football team through a strong performance at walk on tryouts. He missed the community foundation scholarship deadline and was TIP eligible, but did not consider it when making his decision.

Sweet Jones (S.J.) is a foster youth living in the care of his grandmother. At the beginning of senior year, he was unsure about attending a four-year college and was considering pursuing full-time work and a certificate program to become a barber. Due to his foster youth status, he felt pressure to work in order to be financially secure. He is interested in studying a combination of business and music if he decides to attend college. His grandmother and father want him to be the first person in his family to go to college and they want him to have the four-year, residential college experience. His grandmother was one of the few family members in the study prepared to borrow money so as to enable the student (in this case, S.J.) to attend college full-time. S.J. was constrained by his ACT scores and college costs. Upon learning he was eligible for the TIP aid, he focused on a four-year regional college for which TIP would pay the tuition for the first two years. He retook the ACT multiple times and his score in February crossed the threshold for his first-choice college.

S.J.'s process was complicated due to his foster youth status. When he applied for financial aid, he supplied his grandmother's financial information instead of applying as an independent foster youth. He sought support from both his guidance counselor and the college adviser, but struggled to get his needs met. In April, he needed his first-choice college to re-review his application with his updated February ACT scores. After he tried for several months to navigate the process on his own and with the support of his school staff, I offered in early May to call the institution on his behalf and get the conversation started for him. It took ninety seconds of my time and after setting up the conversation, he took it forward and received his acceptance letter later that week. He enrolled in the institution despite being unable to visit beforehand due to car troubles and limited gas money.

John was in the top five percent of his senior class. He aspired to be a student athlete and intended to attend a Division One university on a full basketball scholarship. He attended a competitive math and science pre-college summer program on a scholarship at the state flagship institution the summer before his senior year and loved the campus and experience. However, against the advice of his mother, counselor, and friends from the program, he decided not to apply to the college since he knew he wouldn't be able to play on the basketball team at the institution. He had the highest combined ACT and grade point average in his class. He continued to take the ACT without doing additional preparation with the expectation that his score would go up and it did not, as he thought his ACT score limited his opportunity to attend an Ivy League or top private university.

John had the most active application process, spanning his entire senior year and continuing into the summer. He was constrained by his aspiration to play Division One basketball, which meant he was constrained, in turn, by the whims of the basketball recruiters and coaches. He actively researched colleges through sports recruiting websites in order to identify colleges in need of a point guard. In the Bayside graduation program's listing of students, it said that John was going to enroll at an in-state private liberal arts college. However, two weeks later he attended orientation at a regional public institution where he received a full academic tuition scholarship. Despite attending orientation, later in the summer he applied to and decided to attend a private HBCU a thirteen-hour drive away, where he received a full scholarship and elected to red shirt[13] with the intention of transferring at the end of the year.

---

[13] Delay or suspension of an athletes' formal participation on a team to lengthen their period of eligibility.

John's mother is a college graduate and self-described "helicopter mom[14]" who wants the best for her son. Both his parents supported him chasing his basketball dreams, while his grandfather encouraged him to go to the best academic institution and consider basketball as a secondary criteria.

Ben started the year wanting to attend an out-of-state college; his mother even stated she would move to the state in which he enrolled in college. However, upon learning the differences in tuition for in-state and out-of-state public institutions, Ben quickly shifted his focus to in-state colleges due to his perception of their affordability. Ben's mother is a college graduate and before going on medical disability, she worked with students to help them figure out where they wanted to go to college. Ben's older brother had just applied and enrolled in a post-secondary institution and his mother described herself as being "hands-off" during that process and dissatisfied with how it turned out; in contrast, she actively supported Ben during his application process.

Ben was constrained by his ACT score. His mother encouraged him to continue retaking the ACT and shared stories of her own experience starting at a community college and then transferring to a four-year university. Ben applied to regional in-state institutions and to a private out-of-state liberal arts college at a local college fair. His first acceptance was to a regional institution that the senior class visited together; his acceptance was contingent on participation in a summer program due to his ACT score. He was accepted to another regional institution located about two hours away; instead of visiting the institution, he attended an open house about one hour away at a convention center. Ben was not eligible for the TIP aid, which was disappointing for him because during his senior year he was Medicaid eligible; unfortunately he did not meet

---

[14] A mother who pays extremely close attention to a child's experiences and problems, especially at educational institutions.

the two-year requirement for the aid. If he was TIP eligible, he stated he might have attended the regional institution due to its TIP eligibility. After getting his ACT score up, he was accepted to yet another regional institution that he decided to attend, sight unseen. His three options were within a one to two thousand dollar differential; he enrolled at the most affordable institution. Ben and his mother planned to visit the institution, but were unable to do so due to a vehicle issue. He relied on hearing about the college after a peer's visit and used that information in addition to the cost to make his decision. Ben and his mother regularly talked about his plans, but did not talk about the cost or taking out loans. Ben was focused on costs and averse to borrowing, while his mother expected loans to be necessary and saw borrowing for education as an investment in his future.

Manny started his senior year focused on attending a four-year residential college and playing Division One basketball. He planned to pursue a career in medicine and wanted to combine his passion with sports in order to explore sports medicine. He applied to several regional Division One colleges and out-of-state HBCU's and attended a basketball recruiting visit at a Division Two private institution with his father and cousin. After getting injured and having to sit out for several weeks, he decided to focus on colleges to which he was accepted and that were a good academic fit; his plan was to try to join the basketball team after getting there.

Both of Manny's parents consistently spoke to him about his plans and encouraged the prioritization of academics over athletics. They believed he had the potential to play Division One basketball, but felt that that factor should not be prioritized in Manny's decision. His mother dropped everything to take him to a scholarship competition at one of the regional colleges where he was guaranteed $1,000 just for participating. At the competition, Manny decided that he would enroll in that institution. He shared his perspective on the college with several peers in

83

his class who also decided to attend the institution without having the opportunity to visit and see it for themselves. Manny did not have any critical constraints that shaped his decision.

Jane was in the top five percent of the senior class. She aspired to attend a four-year out-of-state residential institution, ideally in Atlanta or Texas due to family in those locations. Given her academic success, she expected a full academic scholarship to the institution of her choice. She was so confident she would attend an out-of-state institution that, against the advice of her counselor, she did not compete in any scholarship competitions that could only be used at in-state institutions. Class rank was calculated at the end of the first semester and John's mother (mentioned above) intervened on his behalf regarding a grade change, which resulted in John moving up in the rankings by less than a tenth of a percent. That tenth of a percent cost Jane several guaranteed full-tuition scholarships at private HBCUs she was interested in attending.

Jane's ability to make a decision was constrained by college costs. She decided she wanted to attend college in Atlanta. She initially researched a private PWI, a state college, and a private HBCU. She decided not to apply to the private PWI because she knew her ACT was significantly below their average, but applied to the two other institutions. She was first accepted to the private HBCU and decided she would go to that institution. But then when she was accepted to the state college and received a partial tuition scholarship there, she determined that that would be the better option given the cost. In order to secure her spot she needed to supply an enrollment deposit of $375 and thought her father would help her with it. As the date got closer, it became clear she was not going to be able to secure the funds. The day before the deposit was due, Jane enrolled at an in-state regional institution that waived her enrollment fee due to her family income, with the intention of transferring to a college in Atlanta after the first year. Ultimately, Jane did not make a college choice; finances made the decision for her.

Diondra aspired to attend a four-year residential college and major in business. She participated in a community college program during high school, in which she explored nursing but decided after shadowing that she did not want a career in medicine. She thought business, maybe Human Resources would be a better fit for her strengths and interests. Diondra took advantage of every opportunity to learn more about college and even participated in an early college program at the local four-year university during her first year of high school. She loved the program but found it was not integrated well with her school district and left when she was nervous it would interfere with her ability to graduate with her high school class. At the start of her senior year, she applied to regional four- year colleges and was accepted at all the colleges to which she applied.

After a conversation with her mother in November, Diondra decided she would start at the local community college with the intent to transfer and graduate from a four-year university. Her decision was constrained by family responsibilities and college costs. Diondra and her mother determined it would be best to take advantage of the TIP aid, which pays for the first two years of community college. In addition, Diondra has a little sister for whom she helps to care given her mother's shift work and intense work schedule. Diondra believed she would need additional family support to succeed at a four-year university and thought her mother would be better able to help her in a few years so it would be in her best interest to start at a community college first, where she could gain confidence and then transfer when she felt ready.

LaShea was in the top ten percent of the senior class. She originally aspired to attend an out-of-state, four-year residential university, but decided at the start of her senior year that attending one of the state research universities was a good, affordable alternative for her. Her options were constrained by her ACT score, which was incongruent with her strong grades, and

her perception of the costs. Since she was TIP eligible, she decided to focus on the four-year universities that accepted the aid for the first two years of tuition, which immediately seemed to eliminate the two research universities. When the TIP representative visited the high school, LaShea approached her after the presentation and learned that there was a way to attend one of the state research universities through a specific college and that TIP would fund her tuition. A representative from the institution visited the high school a few weeks later and conducted an on-site admissions day. LaShea submitted her application, had a brief interview that allowed her to elaborate on her admissions materials, and learned that very day that she had been accepted to the institution. She is the only student who only took the ACT one time and her score was significantly below the university average. She decided that day that she would attend the college and did not apply to any other institutions. Only two other students took advantage of this opportunity and they all enrolled at the institution upon getting accepted.

During the first semester of her senior year, LaShea practically lived in the guidance counselor and college advisers' office. She was one of only two students in the study who did not have a parent encouraging her to attend college. Her mother wanted her to start at the local community college. She was extremely proactive and assertive in order to get her needs met in the college application process. She carpooled with two other students in order to visit the college she ended up choosing—a trip that was important to her, even though she had already decided she was going to enroll in the institution. Since she knew TIP was providing significant aid and the institution offered her a generous financial aid package, LaShea decided not to invest her time completing scholarship applications and prioritized working additional hours.

The table below is organized by high school rank. As you may have noticed in the student profiles, the ACT was a significant factor that shaped students' application behavior so I

included their score, the number of times they took the ACT, and whether they registered but missed a test date. Eight of the twelve students used two fee waivers and then paid out-of-pocket to take the test at least one more time in the hopes of securing a higher score. The ACT will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter on application behavior.

Table 4.2: Student Achievement Data

Pseudonym	GPA	Top ACT[15]	# of ACT	Final ACT Date	Registered for the ACT and Missed a Test Date	Decision
John	4.0	21	3	2/13		Private HBCU
Jane	4.0	20	3	12/12		Public Regional
Sam	3.5	16	3	12/12	X	Public Regional
Carly	3.5	18	2	12/12	X	Military
LaShea	3.3	15	1	3/12	X	Public Research
Diondra	3.3	15	3	12/12		Community College
Bulldog	3.3	16	4	4/13		Public Research
Manny	3.0	18	4	2/13		Public Regional
Kobe	3.0	17	2	12/12	X	Out-of-State Public Regional
Juliette	3.0	15	5	2/13		Residential Community College
Ben	3.0	16	3	4/13		Public Regional
Sweet Jones (S.J.)	2.5	16	2	2/13	X	Public Regional

Mr. Jones is the school's college adviser. He is a member of the Midwest University Advising Corps program and is in his first year serving as a college adviser in an up-to-two-year

---

[15] School average was a 14.

commitment. He had just graduated from the Midwest University and is passionate about more students of color graduating from higher education institutions. He grew up in Florida and attended Midwest University on a competitive academic scholarship, supplemented by need-based financial aid. Both of his parents are college graduates. His first year as an adviser and new professional had a steep learning curve. For his second year in the position, he wants to push for all top students to participate in the Michigan State University on-site application day because their college retention rates are much higher than the regional in-state institutions many students from the class of 2013 were planning to attend. He stated, "College is an adjustment for everybody but someone like me would have had a safety net but they [Bayside students] have no real safety net…in a lot of cases the better school that people go to that they're admitted to the more likely they are to succeed." Seeing LaShea navigate the process and the generous financial aid package in combination with the TIP aid covering tuition has shifted his thinking and influenced his approach for the following school year. When speaking about the college application process this year he said, "There was no rhyme or reason to where people applied." Next year he is focused on a "best fit" approach that targets institutions where he believes the students will succeed.

Ms. Smith is the school's guidance counselor and has worked with this group of students since they were in middle school. She attended a local four-year college, has a family history of attending post-secondary education, and has a Master's degree. She paid for college by working two jobs, and combining an academic scholarship with financial support from her family. She values student grit, motivation, and hard work over everything else.

Ms. Smith believes 90% of students are ready for a community college; 25% of the senior class will enroll in a four-year university and 65% will enroll in a community college. She knows

students from Bayside are going to four-year universities and graduating. Her perspective is, "If you want it, it's here; you just have to want it. I don't know if the rigor is completely in line. I think that they probably go into some of these classes [college] and struggle." The educators at Bayside High School attribute the academic preparation issues to systemic and societal problems. When speaking about the local two-year community college, Ms. Smith said, "I see a lot of our kids that go to the community colleges not ever really finishing though." Despite seeing this pattern, she shares, "Just knowing how the kids struggle and knowing how the families struggle, I can't see sending them and not telling them all their resources. Why wouldn't you point out that you're getting TIP?" TIP aid covers two years of tuition at the community college, but Bayside's principal is adamant that he wants the counselor to promote four-year universities to all students who can get accepted. She is uncomfortable downplaying the benefits of TIP. She stated,

> I say to him to me if that's my own child, would I just want them to go to the four-year just to go to a four-year knowing I'll have a $20,000 price tag, $40,000 after two-years and I'm getting the same classes. I'm still transferring because community college only lasts for two years; TIP only lasts two year.

Ms. Smith values the classes at community colleges and four-year universities equally and feels that, considering the financial situation of the majority of students, starting at a community college is the best option for many students. However, she is also aware a lot of students who enroll in the local community college neither complete their degree nor do they transfer.

These student profiles and overview of their process provide some preliminary insights into the students' postsecondary education planning, college application, and decision-making process. The narratives highlight the importance of sticker price and perceived and actual college costs, the role of the ACT, and the unique experiences and factors that influenced each student's

process. In Chapter 5, I delve deeper into these factors and discuss postsecondary planning and college application behavior that affects postsecondary education opportunities.

Chapter 5

College Search and Application Behavior

In the senior class at this high school every student at the start of twelfth grade had post-secondary education expectations, with just over two thirds of the class wanting to attend a residential four-year institution. Students heard the "Go to college!" message everywhere they turned and the majority had internalized it by the start of their senior year. Indeed, the counselor survey conducted at the beginning of the year showed that all but one student indicated an expectation and intention to enroll in a post-secondary institution the following year. Yet, historical state data on this high school tells a different story for recent graduating classes.

The rate of enrollment at an institution of higher education for graduates from this high school increased from 23 percent in 2007–08 to 31 percent in 2011–12. Interestingly, in 2007-08, 16 percent of students enrolled in community colleges and less than 10 percent of students enrolled in four-year institutions; this pattern flipped in 2011-12 with 21 percent of students enrolling in four-year institutions and less than 10 percent enrolling in community colleges. In short, a major gap exists between students' hopes and plans at start of the year and their actual outcomes. What happens during students' senior year to explain this discrepancy? In order to answer this question, this chapter explores student experiences in the post-secondary search and application process during the first half of senior year. The next chapter examines decision-

making behavior and what happens late in the senior year that may delay or alter post-secondary education decisions and enrollment for students at this school.

As discussed in the literature review, the college application process has been understudied; the limited research that exists has focused on identifying the key number of tasks or steps the process entails that will most likely result in enrollment (Avery & Kane, 2004; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Klasik, 2012). Previous research on student college choice decisions has identified the following variables as influencing a student's search process: socioeconomic status, family income, race, academic ability, higher education marketing, high school personnel including college counselors, tuition and financial aid policies, and state financial aid programs (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Dynarski, 2000; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Hossler et al., 1999; Kane, 2003; Litten, 1982; McDonough, 1997; McDonough et al., 1997). In addition to balancing all of these considerations, individuals acquire information about institutions in general and those they are considering from many different sources, including the institutions themselves, peers, parents, and high school personnel (Flint, 1992). The list of potentially influential variables is not only somewhat unwieldy, but it is also unclear to what extent it applies to the search and application process in urban schools that serve predominantly low income, students of color.

This study takes a different approach by focusing not so much on individual preferences, but on the contextual layers that shape students' perceptions of opportunity in the search and application process. I first review the contextual layers approach, noting its benefits, as well as the specific ways in which I suggest the proposed model needs to be modified. Next, I identify and discuss, in turn, key considerations and choices that students face early in the application process. For each, I discuss how different contextual factors, as well as interaction between these layers, influence students' actions and interpretations. I conclude the chapter with a

92

summary of these findings and how they extend our understanding of the college search and application process.

The Contextual Layers Approach

As discussed in Chapter 2, Perna's (2006) contextual layers model provides the basis for this analysis. In Perna's model, the contextual layers are: society, higher education, school and community, and the individual's habitus. The student is at the center of this conceptualization. Unlike other approaches, econometric models and stage processes, which presume all students have equal access to information, post-secondary options, and would make similar choices with the same information, the benefit of the contextual layers approach is that it accounts for decisions informed by the student's context while embedding the human capital econometric model within the framework.

Let me elaborate briefly, then, on each of the contextual layers that will guide the analysis throughout this chapter. The society layer is comprised of state demographic characteristics, state public policy, and the economic characteristics or environment. The higher education context captures the location, institutional characteristics, and marketing and recruitment efforts. The school and community layer includes the availability of resources, types of resources, structure of supports and barriers. And, the individual's habitus is comprised of the student's demographic characteristics, social and cultural capital.

Perna mentions a family context in the description of her proposed conceptual framework, but omits a family contextual layer in the figure of her model. Friends or peers are embedded in the student's habitus and in the school and community context, but are not explicitly identified in the model. I would argue, however, that family and peers are crucial and distinct influencers that warrant being named in the habitus and/or school layer of the model.

In this study, all the students had a family member who encouraged, developed, or accepted the student's college aspirations. As you can see in Table 5.1 on page 95, the student and their most supportive family member were closely aligned in the preferences that were most important when researching institutions. Despite that, students desired for their parents, regardless of their relationship with them, to support and be proud of them as they took this important step in their lives. It did not feel like "enough" when the support was coming from a grandparent, aunt or uncle.

Peers operated as scouts and shaped each other's perceptions of opportunities. The students at Bayside encouraged one another, shared information, and expected themselves and their peers to be successful. Describing the senior class, one of the students said, "Our class is really supportive of each other and we all want to see each other do good. And that's the big thing with the class of 2013. We not competitive to each other, we don't compete against each other, nothing like that. We all we help each other, work together." Students shared information and tips throughout the application process regarding college representative visits, college visits, and scholarships. Students, peers, and family members interacted throughout the process.

Discussion of these layers and the interactions between them will be woven throughout this chapter. The remainder of the chapter is organized in terms of the significant early decisions that students make in the search and application process. As will become clear, at least two or more contextual layers and, more often, multiple interactions across layers impacted students' actions and interpretations throughout the process. For each of the following topics below, for example, at minimum, the student and family interacted; whereas for some of the topics, the range of contextual considerations was even wider. It is important to note, however, that this division of the search and application process in terms of the following considerations and

Table 5.1: Important Factors to Students and Families

Pseudonym & Family Participant[1]	Top 3 Important Factors To Student & Family Member[2]			First and Final Application Month	Accepted at Final Decision College	Made Decision	Loan Averse	Decision
Carly Mother	Cost Cost	Uncertainty		Sept/Oct		Dec	Yes Yes	Military
Ben Mother	Campus Campus	Business Support Services	Location Location	Sept/Dec	April	April	Yes No	In-State Public
Bulldog Father	Engineering Engineering	Location Employment	Support Services	Oct/Dec	April	April	Yes Yes	In-State Research University
John Mother	Basketball Basketball	Scholarship Scholarship	Academics Academics	Sept/July	July	July	Yes Yes	Out-of-State Private HBCU
Juliette Mother	Nursing Nursing	Cost & TIP Residential	Diversity Cost	Sept/Jan	January	January	Yes Yes	Residential Community College
Kobe Mother	Football Academics	Business Football	Scholarship Scholarship	Oct/Nov	April	April	No Yes	Out-of-State Public
Sam Grandmother	Out-of-State In-State	Cost	Academics	Sept/Dec	Sept	April	No No	In-State Public
Sweet Jones Grandmother	Residential Cost & TIP[3]	Academics		Oct/Dec	April	April	Yes No	In-State Public

[1] Diondra, Manny, Jane, and LaShea are not included in this table because I was unable to hold a formal interview with a member of their family.

[2] Important factors are organized in order of importance to the participant. Diversity and location were in the top 5 for many students.

[3] The Michigan Tuition Incentive Program provides financial aid for a select group of two and four year public colleges.

decisions is offered for analytic purposes only; in reality, there was much greater overlap across categories.

The majority of students started applying to colleges in September and completed their applications by January. One student, John, was an anomaly and applied to new colleges almost every week of his senior year as he chased after an opportunity to play Division One basketball. Student preferences and priorities shifted in importance as the different contextual layers created certain opportunities and constrained others in the application process.

The following sections capture the early decisions students make in the application process when they are assembling a set of colleges to apply to and start applying to institutions. The sections follow the thought process of the majority of students in this study and high school. Students first focused on location and then turned their attention to institution type. Making a decision about institution type was often intertwined with the costs of higher education. As students narrowed in on a set of colleges, they prioritized institutional factors that were important to them. This led to identifying specific colleges to apply to and actually submitting applications. The ACT was a significant barrier that shaped perceptions of opportunity for the majority of students in this study. As discussed earlier, the process of arriving at each of these early decisions will be considered through the lens of the contextual layers that shaped opportunities.

Location

During high school, every student in this study had aspirations to attend an out-of-state college. The state's struggling economy led participants to explore higher education institutions outside of Michigan. At the start of their senior year, three-quarters of the students still expected to attend out- of-state institutions. However, less than half the students actually submitted

96

applications to out-of-state institutions, even though every student applied to at least three institutions and most applied to over five.

In this school, students built their choice sets around colleges that have name recognition and that are located out-of-state. A parent describes best how the student's create their initial lists, "Just the fact as a kid you know some schools their name is out there. That's one of the schools that if you say the name people are like okay." At this high school, the student's initial lists in September were littered with top private and public HBCU's and in and out-of-state public flagship institutions. Out-of-state colleges that Bayside alumni attended or with Division One athletic programs were of particular interest. Private Predominately White Institutions (PWI's) were omitted from all initial lists except for a student who was being recruited to play basketball and had been contacted by the coach at a handful of private liberal arts institutions. Name recognition was based on reputation within the local community, but was not necessarily related to institutional ranking or national measures of prestige.

The students perceive out-of-state colleges as being more prestigious than the institutions in Michigan and view attending one as an opportunity to escape their challenging hometown environment. One student said, "I don't know I don't like it here. It's too small. Everybody knows everybody and people just they act crazy around here for no reason. There's too much gangs and stuff." At the beginning of the year, most of the students wanted to attend an out-of-state college. Another student shared, "I want to get out of [the state] period. Particularly [hometown] but to get out of [the state] period would be great….I've been here all my life. I want to see new things. I don't want to be here no more." For the majority of their lives, Michigan and their hometown have been in significant decline. Confidence has been lost in schools, cities, and companies. After watching companies close their doors and cities be forced

into emergency financial management in order to avoid bankruptcy, residents have doubts about

all institutions. Students see college as an opportunity to have a fresh start in a more

economically stable environment.

Sam views college as an opportunity to broaden her experience and horizon. When

talking about preferences, she contrasts her ideal institution with her local community.

> A good size means to be around forty to sixty-thousand kids because [Bayside] is a small city. I want to be somewhere where it's diverse, where I'm meeting new kids, new races and new cultures. I'm being introduced to different types of things as far as food and work, their style and everything. And me being here, my school is like basically dominantly African-American school and I want to see more. I want to know more than just [Bayside]. Texas is just the place I choose to learn that there.

There are institutions in Michigan that could offer the diverse experience she desires, but at the

start of her senior year, she was unwilling to consider them as options. She decided not to

research and explore the institutions in Michigan that are most similar to her "dream colleges" in

Texas. This finding shows how the state economy and the location of the institution, an

interaction between the society and higher education contextual layers, influenced student

perception of opportunity.

By the end of October, the majority of students decided attending an in-state public

college was in their best economic interest and they were focused on institutions that had sent

representatives to meet with them. At that time, four students were still hopeful they would apply

to, get accepted, and attend an out-of-state institution. For the top students, attending an out-of-

state college regardless of the ranking of the institution equated a level of prestige. Aligned with

McDonough's (1997) findings, even if students expressed a desire to attend out-of-state

institutions, most families and students believed it was preferable to stay within driving distance

of their homes.

For most students, attending college outside of their hometown was extremely important to them. Even the students who were open to starting at a community college, prioritize community colleges in other in-state locations over their local institution. Bulldog shared how he was thinking about applying to a private community college but is not considering the local community college he already applied to; he said, "I want my degree and everything but I don't want to go to no college in [Bayside]." The local community college is his last choice.

Juliette and her mother feel the same way. Juliette's mom said,

> I want her to go off to college and I don't want her to stay home and do nothing you know. I think she would have got set in her ways if she went to [local community college] and stayed at home. It don't seem if she went to [local community college] I would have felt that she was accomplishing something which I know it is because she'd still be doing something.

Her mother feels conflicted and places a value judgment on going to the local community college because she desired for her daughter to have a residential college experience away from home. Juliette agrees, "It would still seem like high school." The local community college is her last choice.

Most of the students and parents agree saying, "It's not a bad school. I just feel like it's just too close to home." The parents and grandparents of female students were more apt to consider the local community college as a positive option and wonder why students wanted to go away. The family members of male students, except for Ben, expressed concerns about their student attending the local community college. Kobe's mother sums up the family concerns, "[Local community college], nothing is wrong with [local community college] but [local community college] is too close to home. I want him to be able to venture out; meet new people and do different things. I mean to be honest there is nothing around here for the kids to do but to get in trouble." Like some of the other parents and grandparents, it is not the institution that she

is concerned about. She desires for him to have different experiences and is concerned about his safety and surroundings if he goes to college locally. This finding contradicts Smith and Fleming (2006) where they discovered parents of male students encouraged them to start at community colleges due to fears of survival and safety. I found that the families had the same motivation, fear of survival, but believed attending a residential college away from home would be a safer option for their sons.

Ben's mother has a unique vantage point because she could activate her social capital and share her post-secondary education experiences with her son. She was the only family member encouraging a male student to consider starting at the local community college. For example, when Ben was struggling to get his ACT scores up, his mother suggested staying in the local area and starting at the community college, "Let's say if you do have to go to [local community college] first and then [local four year university] which is what I did. I went to [local community college] first and then [local four year university]. I told him how that helped me." She was able to offer a unique perspective given her experience. Every participant in the study knows people who have attended the local community college and several of the family members have taken classes there through the state's job retraining program.

Jane, who was in the top 5% of her class, expected to attend a college in Atlanta. She was confident she would be able to attend an institution in her preferred location because she was in the top of her class, hardworking, and expected enough scholarship money to attend the college of her choice. The location was the most significant factor; she considered applying to a private PWI, a private HBCU, and public institution all very different types of colleges because they were located in Atlanta. For many of the students in this high school and in this study, location

was more important than anything else an institution could offer at the start of the research and

application process.

Institution Type

The school and community played a significant role when it came to students making

decisions about the type of institution to pursue. The school counselor and college adviser felt

conflicted about students deciding to pursue the local two year institution compared to a four

year university; however, the school principal was adamant about students who have four year

opportunities taking advantage of them. The school counselor describes the conversation she has

with the principal on an ongoing basis about the opportunity to start at the local community

college over a four year institution,

> Although [the principal] doesn't like that. He thinks if you can do this, why wouldn't
> you? I say to him to me if that's my own child, would I just want them to go to the four-
> year just to go to a four-year knowing I'll have a $20,000 price tag, $40,000 after two-
> years and I'm getting the same classes. I'm still transferring because community college
> only lasts for two years.

When thinking strictly in economic terms, the best option seems simple to the school counselor.

The college adviser considers academic preparation, the economics, and the research including

his personal experience seeing peers start at community colleges and not graduate. He stated,

> It's tough because on one hand I'm worried about people going to [local community
> college]. We promote [local community college] to death but the fact is--I know this from
> experience—people who stay around and go to their community college most of them
> aren't even going to get their associate's for one reason or another. I'm conflicted with
> that thought with the fact that academically they're not prepared for a four-year at all.
> Being academically unprepared for a four-year might even be preferable to going to [the
> local community college] but then you also have to weigh paying money because at least
> at [the local community college] you're not wasting any money failing but you might
> have a better chance at other places.

These are debates that the educators in the building engage in, but they choose not to

discuss the complicated nature of this dilemma with students or their families.

Students, families, and school leadership preferred a four year university, but most were open to students starting at a two year institution. However, some students assumed that their families were only interested in the four year university experience and that constrained their options. Students like S.J. did not seriously consider community colleges because of his perceived family expectations. He explained,

> I don't have nothing against [local community college]—don't get me wrong—it's just the fact that if I was to go to [local community college], I would let my family down in a way. You know because like my grandma and my daddy is so big about me going to a university for some reason. They just want me to go to a university.

His grandmother actually shares his perspective; she wants him to graduate from a four year institution, but all she really wants is for him to be in college next year and eventually complete a bachelor's degree,

> Well ain't nothing wrong with [local community college], if he wants to go to [local community college] he can go to [local community college]. He can do the two years at [local community college] and then he maybe move to a university and do the other two. Whatever makes him happy as long as he's in school—as long as he's in school.

They both would prefer he start at a four year institution. Grandma concluded, "If he's happy in going, I'm good. I can get used to the idea of him going anywhere as long as he's in school."

More than three quarters of the senior class was eligible for the Michigan Tuition Incentive Program (TIP), a Michigan financial aid program that encourages eligible students to complete high school and provides tuition for the first two years of college and beyond. Students must meet a Medicaid eligibility history requirement, graduate from high school, and enroll in courses leading to an associate degree or certificate. The program provides two years of tuition at specific community colleges and a select group of four year institutions for eligible students. This is an example of a state policy shaping opportunity toward specific institutions and institution types; in this section, we will explore the interaction between the state financial aid

policy and the higher education context.

After researching and applying to four year colleges, Juliette learned she was TIP eligible and attended an assembly for seniors on the aid program. She shared with her mother what she learned; specifically, that TIP paid for community college so maybe she should plan to enroll at a community college after high school instead of a four-year college. After they discussed it, her mother talked to some of her co-workers to hear their thoughts,

> I always talk about her at work and I was saying where she wanted to go. We were talking about the TIP program and that's when she told me TIP paid for community college. I was like I don't think I want her to go but they [her co-workers] was like if I would have went first I would have chosen community college to build me up to not jumping and leaving home and going straight to a four-year college.

It was after this conversation that her mother decided to take her to visit the residential community college that she enrolled in. The TIP funds did not influence enrollment, but altered the institution type by dampening both the student and mother's four-year college aspirations. It was not until she spoke to her co-worker that she began opening up to the idea of Juliette starting at a community college as a good option. Juliette and her mother discussed her post-secondary plans on a regular basis, which provided them the opportunity to decide together whether a two or four year institution was the best place for her to enroll after high school.

Exploring the early decision in the application process of the type of institution to pursue shows the interplay across all the contextual layers that shapes the outcome. College costs were at the heart of this early decision, which will be explored further in the next section. The students and families struggled to understand the differences between community colleges and four year universities. Community colleges were a more acceptable option for the female participants, however, a lack of open communication and information about community colleges other than the reduced costs left students and families making decisions based almost exclusively on affordability. Regardless of the level of communication, the students and families were directly

and indirectly influencing each other and interacting with the higher education context, which shaped application behavior and early decisions in the process.

College Costs

The students' hopes and expectations at the beginning of the year was to pursue additional education, but at minimal cost to themselves and their families reflecting the econometric components of Perna's model. Most students also evaluated the military as a serious option because the military pays for additional education. Individual preferences shaped students' research, but notwithstanding stated preferences, application behavior was fairly consistent across the sample, except for John and Kobe, both of whom had unique circumstances as student athletes. Aligned with McDonough's (1997) findings, all of the students' preferences were constrained by the costs of higher education, in particular, the perceived and actual cost of tuition for out-of-state public and private institutions.

The TIP guaranteed financial aid program shaped where students applied and the type of institution they decided to attend. Research has shown that state financial aid policy can influence student college choice decisions including post-secondary destinations (Avery & Kane, 2004; Kane, 2007). The majority of participants in this study and their families entered their senior year expecting to be able to attend a higher education institution with limited to no costs. However, the participants' expectations were not aligned with their financial reality. Upon students learning what they perceived to be the exorbitant sticker price for college, participants in this study prioritized institutions that would be the lowest cost possible. This approach allowed the Michigan Tuition Incentive Program to significantly alter eligible student's choice of institution and institution type, by redirecting students to community colleges and specific four-year public institutions in Michigan.

As discussed in the last section, TIP, is a Michigan financial aid program that provides

two years of tuition for specific public institutions. Juliette's mother describes their thought

process,

> After she did her ACTs and her scores weren't high and she was talking about TIP paying
> for community colleges [tuition] the first couple years then I might as well go there so we
> don't have to spend all that money. That's why we leaned more towards the community
> college.

For Juliette, TIP redirected her from starting at a four year institution to starting at a community

college. Diondra, another student in the study, also decided to apply to the local community

college because she could use TIP to cover tuition for the first two years with the intent to

transfer in the future.

LaShea and S.J., two other students who were eligible for TIP learned in a one-on-one

conversation with the representative from the program how to leverage the funds to cover the

first two years of tuition at two different public state four-year universities. S.J. stated,

> TIP plays a big role in my situation because you know I don't know how much financial
> aid I'm going to get back. I don't know how many scholarships I'm going to win. So at
> least I know I've got two years paid for free education…That's one of the reasons why I
> do want to go [public state college] because when I wanted to go to [public state college]
> in the beginning I was like… I don't have the money for this. And then it was like TIP
> can pay for this and so I was like yeah.

TIP covers the first two years tuition at only a few four year institutions. Both students had a

moderate interest in these respective colleges until they learned that TIP's guaranteed funds

could cover the tuition for the first two years. Following that realization, both colleges rose to the

top of the student's list.

This finding expands on Kane (2007) and Abraham and Clark (2006) whose work

showed that after a new state policy program, the DC Tuition Assistance Grant, was introduced it

shaped student college choice destinations to eligible institutions. College enrollments more than

doubled for eligible DC students at public institutions in Maryland and Virginia; its biggest impact was at nonselective public four year colleges. This finding is elaborated upon with students from this study selecting the community colleges and a minimally selective four year institution. The TIP program created opportunities for students while also dampening four-year aspirations. Many students were aware they were TIP eligible, but only learned about the eligible institutions as seniors. It dramatically redirected student and family plans during their senior year by altering institution types and introducing new colleges to explore thus reshaping opportunities. This finding of how the TIP program influences the application process is a contribution to the literature highlighting how the state, economic, and policy context, the outside contextual layer, shapes opportunities and influences student college application behavior. The role of the state policy context and its interaction with students and families is significant and obvious; despite that, the higher education context and families also play an important and interactive role when it comes to making decisions about college costs.

The majority of the families expected the students to be able to get significant scholarship money and financial aid to allow them to attend the college of their choice without loans. The financial reality in the spring for most of the students at a residential four-year college was a gap of $5,000- $10,000 per year after their Pell Grant was applied. Students did not receive additional state aid and the aid offered by institutions was minimal. The cost was reduced by additional scholarship money from private local sources. Most students would receive a financial aid refund if they decided to attend a community college and knew that based on the experience of older peers and siblings. Students did not discuss this as a consideration in their choice process, but students and families did mention their knowledge of it casually in our interviews.

Tuition costs signaled to students whether or not they should consider an institution; however, this is not information that students shared with their families. Similar to the low SES students in McDonough's (1997) study, students considered costs when defining a range of institutions they would apply to; lower tuition in-state institutions were compelling to students. Students were the primary source of information about college for their families similar to Perez and McDonough's (2008) findings for Latinos/as. Students typically shared only bits and pieces of information about college resulting in families having only a partial picture of the process and consistently being several steps behind the students. The students shouldered the responsibility of figuring out the finances again confirming McDonough's work (1997).

A quarter of the family members intended to support their students financially as much as possible until they graduate from college. Even so, students like Bulldog were focused on keeping the costs as low as possible. He shared, "I know my dad said you know. Whatever I need based on how much scholarship money I'm going to get… he said whatever I get and whatever the rest I need he's gonna pay for it, but I'm trying to make it easy on him as well." Students were aware of their family's tenuous financial positions and did not want their education to be an additional burden.

Juliette's mother acknowledged that she thought it would be easier to find money to pay for college. She said, "I meant like the only thing I don't understand is what they say about scholarships. They have so much money out there and you just got to go out and get it. She's applied for scholarships but we haven't heard anything so it seems like the myth is untrue." Both the student and parent thought as soon as you apply you would know if you received the scholarship and were under the impression they just had to work hard and go after the

scholarships and there would be adequate "free money" to fund the student's education. Juliette's mother stated in frustration,

> They're all like you've got to go get it. I know you got to work for what you want but it just seems like you're working and it's [pause] I don't see nothing happening…I just thought the response would be quicker…So I've just got to sit back and wait for it to happen so maybe I'm just rushing and it's still only February. When should everything be ready for college in May?

The majority of students and parents believed as long as the student's put forth the effort and applied for scholarships and financial aid that the student should be able to find adequate "free money" to cover the expenses of a residential four-year college.

In addition to struggling to find adequate resources to pay for a four-year university, the actual costs of higher education were shocking to both the parent and student. The following was shared during an exchange between the mother and daughter:

> Mother: I mean I knew college was expensive but good Lord I didn't know.
> Juliette: It really is; I didn't think it would be that much either.
> Mother: It seemed like you'd be paying too much for college. College only should be about $2000 a year you know what I'm saying. $10 or 15,000 for what?

Between the cost, the student's ACT scores, and her TIP eligibility, the student and her mother started rethinking a four-year college and redirected their energy toward a residential community college. Students and families only really started understanding the significant costs of higher education during their senior year.

The costs of higher education is another example where all the contextual layers are interacting to shape both application behavior and student opportunity. The startling costs of higher education and the student and family desire to keep the costs as low as possible led students to explore lower tuition four-year regional institutions and community colleges in the higher education context. The TIP, state financial aid policy, again is incenting students to consider specific in-state institutions. It is the interplay across the layers that shape outcomes.

Priorities and Preferences

As discussed in the first section, location drove the initial round of research for students. After determining in-state institutions were more cost effective than Historically Black Colleges and Universities like Jackson State, Tennessee State, and Clark Atlanta University, students started learning more about in-state institutions. Students focused first on the academic programs available at various public Michigan institutions and then the cost of attending the college.

Juliette was originally interested in Jackson or Tennessee State University, but was deterred by their tuition and fees. Once she started looking at colleges in Michigan, she decided,

> [Regional Institution] 'cause they have a good Nursing thing. That was when the man came and was talking to us about… something about the nurses. He said they have a good nursing system. It's kinda close to home too. It's not that far away from home. That's another reason I want to apply everywhere here because it's close to home… not that far from home.

An institution with a nursing program became Juliette's top priority. She also realized there was a benefit to being closer to home and her mother was relieved to know she would be within driving distance even though she chose not to discourage her out-of-state dreams. The higher education context, in particular, the institutional characteristics influenced interest and application behavior.

Bayside High School emphasized career exploration over the course of high school and all the students but Carly had career interests. Adding to the research, the male students in particular always discussed college in terms of a pathway into their career of choice. S.J. shared, "I want to major in music management. If I see a school that has music management I'm going to be interested in it because of the fact I just love music so much; I feel I can make a career out of it." Ben discussing his first choice institution said, "They [college representative] were saying it's one of the top business schools. The school has been ranked in the high percentile in business so probably that one." The families of all the students were equally focused on the institutions

having "good programs" in the areas students wanted to pursue a future career in, whether that be nursing, business, criminal justice, or other academic and career interests. John's mother's comment sums up the feelings of all the families when it comes to finding a college that is a good fit, "Mainly I mean that it's somewhere that again, he wants to be and the importance of what he's majoring in; that they have a good program because I feel like if he goes somewhere that does not have a good program in what he's majoring in it is sort of a waste of time." Students and families perceive higher education to be a pathway to a career that offers financial stability and it is with this filter that they consider colleges. This finding extends Freeman's (2005) work that emphasizes the importance of the economic return on investment for African American students when they are making their college choice decisions and the desire for wealth or comfort instead of a specific occupation. The students and families in this study have identified career paths tied to higher education programs that they believe the return on investment will allow for comfort or lead to wealth.

The male students who aspired to participate in college sports discussed their plans in terms of going to college, playing a sport, and also had a course of study in mind. Kobe stated, "After high school I plan on going to college. I want to play college football at the Division One level. I want to major in Business Management." John offered a very similar response, "Well I know after high school I plan to attend a four-year university. And I plan to play college basketball at the division one level too. And in college I'll probably major in sports management. I kind of want to be like an agent or basketball coach." For both of these students athletics and academic programs were their primary preferences. They were interested in any Division One institution that could offer a full ride scholarship and provide them the opportunity to be a student athlete.

Kobe and John were both student athletes and their mothers wanted them to go to the college that was the best fit regardless of location. Even though the mothers shared this perspective with their sons, it did not mean the son's shared their perspective. John's mother like Kobe's encouraged him to apply widely, she said, "I basically told him he could go wherever he wanted to go so that would mean if he wanted to apply there, apply. I mean of course at that point in time if he applied they would let him know what he needed to be accepted there. So it was an open door policy for him to apply wherever he wanted to go." Due to their unique circumstance as student athletes, these parents and students experienced the application process differently than the other study participants.

John's mother didn't think she suggested specific colleges for her son to consider. She stated, "I, personally, haven't suggested… me or his dad. We would just like for him to get a college education. Once he gets his bachelor's degree to continue." However, she did actually suggest he apply to two institutions. John's mother stated,

> I actually encouraged him to apply [to two state public research universities] you know because I think those are good schools. What he has done and because he feels he knows the little system for basketball and he can check things and see this so he actually communicates with some people that play basketball at [those colleges]. And so he decided I won't be able to play basketball there so I don't really want to go there. I actually between the two, I actually like [state flagship college] so he went there for two weeks for a math and science program. I was like you should still apply. They had already told him that he would pretty much get a full-ride scholarship but he didn't want to do it.

This mother was unable to convince her son to apply to two institutions that she thought could be good options for him. As a top academic performer and competitive basketball player, this student prioritized and valued being able to play on the basketball team over everything else in his consideration to apply to and potentially attend an institution. College preferences are based on student interests and institutional characteristics in the higher education context. The high

school and families both interacted with the students to emphasize the importance of available academic programs connected to careers when researching and applying to colleges.

Specific Colleges and Actual Applications

This section on specific institutions and the process of applying to colleges starts by examining the role of the higher education context. Then, the interaction between the higher education and high school context is explored. I then turn to the high school itself before discussing the role of the family. I conclude this section with the significance of peers and the power of their influence.

The higher education context shapes student's initial research (Hossler et al., 1999). Confirming Hossler et al. (1999), students gather information through three types of search activities. For example, all students engaged in an attentive search paying attention to college marketing and recruitment efforts. Most students engaged in active searches by researching colleges online. Many students engaged in interactive searches when the high school collaborated with higher education by attending college representative visits, visiting colleges, attending college fairs, and connecting with individual's associated with the institution.

When engaging in an active search, students use the computers in the school library to research colleges and interact with the higher education context. Almost all students start with a Google search of the college name. Upon getting to the college website, the students' consistently looked up the institution's tuition and fees and then started exploring available academic programs. Immediately preceding or following a college representative visit, the students typically searched for more information about the college online. Interestingly, after students were accepted to the institution or a college rose in importance, they used social media including Twitter and Facebook to try to learn more about the institution from what students

perceived to be more authentic online sources. Absent from their research was the College Board

search resources and the information the federal government has been providing through various

websites including net price calculators.

The family members shared that after the students applied or were accepted to a college

they would look it up online. Even though this was a consistent pattern of support, the family

members questioned the information they found on an institution's website. Bulldog's father

said,

> Most the time when you go online they have a question and answer menu up in there. But
> most the time you just see things on there. This is what's going on at our campus.
> Basically they just… they try to reel you in at least from what I see. They showing you
> all… this student did this and our school is number one with this and every school is
> saying that. They are number one with this and that. I don't see a lot of, how can I say,
> the real underground stuff about a school.

Parents and students yearned for the "the real underground stuff" and pursued additional

approaches to learn more about the colleges.

Both parents and students asked admissions officers and representatives from university

academic programs to be connected to current students, recent graduates, and parents to hear

their perspective. Bulldog's father added,

> I want someone to tell me over the phone someone who is not trying to sell it. This is a
> good school, this is a good school; this is a good school…To hear another parent say, it
> wasn't easy…To hear a parent's hardship to help their daughter get to where she needed
> to get to that's personal to me because you don't have to share your personal information
> but you're telling me how hard it was to make sure your child got the best. The program
> was good. That's hearing it raw and uncut from a parent's perspective instead of just
> talking to a secretary. But hearing it from somebody who actually went through it rough
> but made it. That says a lot to me because I am hearing it firsthand instead of hearing bits
> and pieces.

The students and families in this study consistently used and appreciated learning from

others. They valued connecting with individual's they felt like they could trust and wanted to

know more about people's personal experiences. Families wanted to know about challenges and

students wanted to see and hear from other Black students about their experience on campus. However, John's mother's statement was in sharp contrast to the other participants saying, "Everybody has a good story, a good talk of why he should go here. We went and sat with this person who wants him to go to his school so of course they're pushing his school. They tell me when he graduates from college he'll have this, this and that…everybody has a story to sell their school." John's mother's perspective aligns with how the other students and parents felt about online materials, but the other participants trusted and valued what they learned in one-on-one conversations with individuals affiliated with the institution differently than she did.

In addition to students going online to learn about colleges, students engage in an attentive search when institutions contact them through marketing and recruitment mail pieces. Interestingly, every male student discussed receiving mail and emails from colleges, but only one female mentioned colleges sending materials. When discussing receiving pamphlets from institutions, Juliette shared, "Last year they gave us a paper we're supposed to fill out colleges we're going to attend. We put them on there and they be sending us papers." Unlike the men, she believed the colleges were contacting her because she had expressed an interest in potentially going to the institutions during her junior year. The men believed getting mail from the colleges indicated that the institution knew about them and specifically sent the email or mail to recruit them to the college. The mail pieces added chaos into the application process for the male students as they were introduced to new institutions throughout their senior year.

The male students discussed mail they received and believed athletics and specific academic programs were targeting them. Bulldog said, "I've been getting a lot of letters for football." He added, "[Regional public college] been sending me a lot of letters. They've been sending me like… I got like four letter from them. So I'm like maybe they really do… and

114

they're into sports and so maybe they really do want me." This was the same regional institution Juliette was receiving mail from. Bulldog applied to the institution and identified it as his top college at the start of the year; Juliette decided not to apply to the institution. Bulldog used mail to direct his college search process. He stated, "I'm just gonna do a lot more research on the colleges that sent me the letters. If they—if they good in my field of study then, yeah, I will apply." The letters inspired him to learn more about the institutions and to see if the academic programs fit his interests.

S.J. shared he was starting to receive letters his senior year, which he believed was due to his grades. One piece made him consider applying to a college he had never heard of,

> I got a letter um in the mail recently—and it was more of a college in Florida. They wanted me to come there and they wanted me to work um like work with the school behind music, like mixing, mastering tracks and stuff like that. So that was really big for me because that's what I want to work in… I think it's [private for-profit] University. They keep sending me all these letters so I'm considering [them].

When it came to building the list of colleges he would apply to, S.J. shared his sources of information were the high school counseling center and colleges that e-mailed him. He said, "Most of them are sent to my e-mail address; you know they find ways to reach me I guess you could say." It was validating for him to receive mail that specifically targeted an academic program tied to his career interests. He thought they knew information about his talent in addition to his interest, which was why they sought him out and sent the information to his email and house.

The families identified the mail their sons were receiving as a key source of information. For example, John's mother highlighted all the mail her son was receiving; she said, "Other than information that they've sent to us through the mail like some schools I mean the mailbox is like full every day. We get a lot of pamphlets, a lot of information and a lot

115

of programs that are available." When Kobe's mother discussed her top choice college for her son, she emphasized the contact from the institution, "I mean from the beginning from eleventh grade up, they were e-mailing." She thought the on-going correspondence was motivating and inspiring for her son, which was something she valued. Even though the institution was the furthest away, the perceived interest in him, made her think it would be the "best fit" institution for him.

Higher education directly and indirectly influenced students and families. In addition, higher education institutions collaborated with the high school and community creating opportunities and contributing to chaos in the application process. The collaboration between these layers significantly influenced the specific institutions students considered and applied to.

Students learn about colleges through implicit and explicit messages in their high school and community context (McDonough, 1997). Bayside has a developed college application culture and expectation that all students will have post-secondary options. This belief undergirds the relationships and partnerships the high school has developed with higher education institutions. For example, the high school context interacted with the state policy context when students had the opportunity to meet with a representative from TIP because the high school counselor contacted the Michigan Financial Aid Office to request a representative come to Bayside High School to speak to all the eligible students in the class.

Over 20 college representatives visited Bayside to talk to the students and share information about their respective institutions and going to college in general. A representative from a local scholarship spoke to all students in their English classes and helped them get started on the cumbersome online application during her session. Additionally, the college advisor partnered with the Bayside school counselor to bring students to a college fair at the local four

year university and to visit a regional institution about two hours away where over ten alums from the previous class enrolled. The counselor and college adviser prioritized working with higher education professionals and community organizations who wanted to see students from Bayside go to college, which ensured Bayside students had access to all the available information and the opportunity to develop relationships with people who could open doors for them in the future. This is an example of a strong high school-based network that transmits capital to the students. The explicit message all students heard was, "Go to college!" The partnerships created tremendous opportunities for students, while also contributing to what Holland (2013) defined as a "haphazard" application process.

The high school has an application culture in which all students are expected to apply, at the very least, to the local community college and local four-year university. Regardless of their specific post-secondary aspirations, all of the students applied to multiple colleges. The high school has a strong, established application culture. Every student is expected to apply to five colleges. After completing five applications students' pictures were displayed outside the counselor's suite in the main hallway. The college adviser found the college representative visits reinforced and supported the application expectation. When discussing how the high school was able to get most students to apply and to complete their applications on the early side compared to what he was hearing from his colleagues at other high schools he shared, "One thing that helped us is we're able to bring in [local two year and local four year institution] so everybody applies. Obviously that knocks out 80% of the people right there so it's really not that hard to get everybody in such a small school to get everybody else."

All students applied to the local community college and local four year university. The Bayside counselor shared her perspective on requiring all students to complete these two

applications,

> In my opinion by having them do [local two year and local four year institution] regardless of their want or desire to fill those two out. We have everyone fill those out. One, it's a community school and two, we've seen a lot of kids that have been accepted to four-year universities that have quite a bit of money coming to them that have a tragedy happen or a change of heart or something happened and so they have to have that to fall back on. I just think that's smart for anybody because you just don't know. We've had you know a lot of things happen to our kids in short periods of time where they want to stay home now or they need to stay home for something. So we do those two and then after that a lot of our kids already know where they want to apply to and they do that.

Regardless of aspirations, all students were expected to apply and most did. This is a key element of the college-going culture the high school is continuing to develop.

The majority of students applied to the colleges that visited during the representative visits and waived the application fees. The students had the opportunity to meet over twenty college representatives' at the visits scheduled throughout the fall at Bayside. The students attended to learn more about the institutions, in particular, college's costs, scholarships, academic programs, and campus life. Some students attended the visits just to get out of class. It was not unusual for anywhere between thirty to sixty seniors to attend the sessions for the in-state public institutions and all the colleges waived the application fee for students who attended the session. Starting the year, the students knew more about the public research universities than the regional institutions; the visits provided the opportunity for students to learn more about the public regional colleges across the state.

Students like Ben attended every representative visit and identified their top colleges based on what they learned from the admission's representative; in Ben's case, that the institution had a top business program. Ben often brought his applications to the visits to have the representative review it and "make sure everything is there." Ben's mother provided active support and helped Ben set up an organization system including a college notebook and folders

to help him make the most of the college representative visits and keep his application materials and notes organized.

Manny describes the typical approach most of the seniors took to apply to colleges, "First it was applying… picking schools I want to apply for; but then once they started coming here, I just applied to the ones that came here. Then I started applying to the out-of-state ones." Even when students identified colleges they wanted to apply to, it did not mean they actually started or completed the applications. Students spent significant time researching colleges they never applied to and applying to institutions that were not part of the decision-making process. Several students shared, "I didn't get to the application. I didn't get to other schools' applications. There were a lot of schools I wanted to apply to and I didn't. I did apply for Tennessee State but I just didn't pay my fee. I forgot about that." Attending the majority of college representative visits contributed to information overload and a haphazard application process, which resulted in students spending time applying to colleges that did not align with their stated interests and preferences. However, the institutions may fit the student's interests and needs and three quarters of the students enrolled in a college that sent a representative. This is the crux of the opportunity versus chaos paradox that the partnerships and college application culture fosters. Opportunities are not all created equal and can come at a cost.

The college adviser reflected on the college application culture and how he wanted to see it improved the following year,

> We can create not only a college application culture but a best fit culture in terms of like… okay, I have a 2.5 and Michigan is probably not realistic. What are my realistic options? So not everybody is trying to go to wherever and I think that happened a lot this year. People had no idea. There was no rhyme or reason to where people applied.

He elaborated, "So people know they need to apply but they don't have a very good idea of where they should be applying." This is why regardless of student interests and skills, the

student's application behavior was consistent across the study participants and the entire senior class.

Students had the opportunity to attend a college fair at a local four year institution in October. Several of the students in the study attended along with a busload of seniors from Bayside High. Even though the students had their college lists they had already added to through the representative visits, students were still searching for additional opportunities. Sam was excited to go to the college fair because, "you might get exposed to something you didn't know about or that might strike your interest and so yeah, I look at everything as an opportunity… everything." The students and school personnel focus on the upside of keeping opportunities open, while ignoring the downside of the information overload and chaos that it fosters and how it can elongate the process and decision-making timing.

At the fair, two students applied to a private PWI in a neighboring state since the representative was waiving application fees. The students did not realize it was a private institution until after they were accepted. Sam stated, "I just applied. I didn't really know much about them. When I found that they were a private school it was like oh [laughs]. It just dropped [to last on my list]." But not before she seriously considered attending the institution for multiple months since she was offered a $9,500 scholarship, and spent significant time trying to figure out how to visit the college and connecting with current students. The participants consistently shared that private colleges were "not for them" due to cost and having attended public schools their whole life. The college fair exposed students to more options and led students to apply to additional institutions, but did not necessarily lead to fruitful possibilities that were added to the student's decision-making process. Holland (2013) describes students engaging in a haphazard application process, which aptly captures the additional complexity students introduce by

attending a college fair and continuing to explore more options during their senior year.

In addition to campus representative visits, the counselor scheduled for four institutions, a regional public, a public research, a community college, and a local regional to hold on-site admissions days in the fall. The first one was held by the regional public; the college advisor shared, "The counselor at Western was extremely accommodating. He was the first one to give us all those free applications. He called our kids the next day to tell them they were in. Even now our kids will call him on their own and he talks to them. He actually picks up the phone. The rest of the counselors are difficult to get." Several study participants applied through this opportunity and all the students who applied were accepted; they knew they had a four year college option in October.

The public research institution held their on-site in November and only three students applied including LaShea. The college adviser only encouraged students to apply who he thought would be admissible and could succeed at the institution. All the students were accepted and an additional student was able to negotiate with the representative and later get admitted due to his increased ACT score and upward grade trend. The college adviser was excited about future on-site admission days and decided, "Next year I'll just say everybody [all students] needs to do this." He felt like it was a missed opportunity for the top students in the class.

TIP and the on-site admission days together had the largest impact on college application and decision-making behavior (to be discussed in Chapter 6). Between the various days, all students in the class applied to multiple institutions and learned that very day or week that they had been accepted. More than a quarter of the students in this study decided to attend a college they were accepted to on an on-site day; for all students, an institution that was not their top

choice when they first started applying in the fall. These are examples of collaborations and interactions across contextual layers that shaped application behavior and college decisions.

The high school itself and its developed application culture and counselor expectations significantly influenced the students' application behavior and approach to the application process. Both the high school counselor and college adviser actively support and encourage their students to fill out applications. A student describes the message, "Ms. [school counselor] like tells us all the time like don't just get set on one school, apply to a lot of schools. Cause I never know my mind might change in January like oh I like Western now or something so." This student actually ended up deciding to go to Western when earlier in the year she intended to go to college out- of-state. Students have heard the message loud and clear that they need several options. Sam shared, "Just in case I don't get accepted to Texas so I still need some back-up schools. I know it's always good to apply to more than one school because you don't want to do it at the last minute. Even though it might be somewhere you don't want to attend but it's always good to apply because you never know what might happen." Students applied to a range of institutions; many without a clear purpose or intent to ever consider attending.

In addition to wanting to have several options, after applying to a few colleges and hearing back, some of the students actually enjoy the application process. "I liked the experience to see if they would accept you or not based on your criteria in school. So I feel like that's good. I like the experience. I like applying. When I told you I was going to apply to 10 or 20 of them, it's just because I like applying to colleges." Students value the external validation of getting accepted. S.J. discussed applying to a range of colleges saying,

> I guess because I'm eager to see who actually wants me and who wouldn't, like if I fit the criteria for that school I guess… But I mean I still want to know if I can branch off because I might change my mind at the last minute and might not want to go to college. Or I might want to go out of state or something like that so that's why I like applying to

colleges because there are so many different colleges everywhere and they can give you so many different scholarships. You know depending on if they actually want you.

Students were often applying to institutions that were all very similar and to open enrollment or minimally selective colleges in state. This philosophy and approach to applying to institutions meant that students prolonged the amount of time they spent applying to colleges and continued to waiver between institution types; and for a few students like S.J., whether they should even go to college immediately following graduation. Some students got stuck in this stage of the process; applying to college takes time and when it is done without serious consideration, it prevents students from focusing on future steps.

The college adviser was new to his role and the school community. Reflecting on the application culture that developed this year, he plans to approach things differently next year. He stated, "My focus is going to be which I don't think I did well this year is give people a good idea of where you actually have a good chance of getting in." This may help students be more thoughtful and efficient, but students may continue to apply to colleges without a clear purpose or intent to attend. A "best fit" culture does not hinge on applying only to institutions where the probability of acceptance is high.

The interaction between the high school and higher education layer significantly influenced the application process. The limited interaction between students and families in building an initial college choice set to apply to resulted in an application process shaped by the information highlighted by the high school counselor and college adviser, in-state college representatives visiting the high school and waiving application fees, peers, and the TIP representative's presentation to the senior class. Application behavior was shaped by partnerships and collaborative efforts between the high school and higher education contexts.

Family members were actively engaged in the process and encouraged the students to pursue higher education, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter; however, the majority of family members did not suggest any specific colleges to their children or grandchildren to research or consider applying to. Students developed their own initial lists of colleges with limited input from others. Family members kept tabs on where students were applying. Ben's mother said, "I kinda left that up to him. I knew what colleges he was putting applications in." S.J's grandmother stated, "It was wherever he wanted to go and get accepted in. I wanted him as close to home as possible but not at home [laughs]." A similar sentiment was shared by Sam's grandmother, "I kinda left that up to Sam. I just wanted her to be close." Aligned with Hossler et al, every family member interviewed set expectations regarding location and proximity to home in both the application and decision-making process; most family members preferred their students attend a residential college in their community or within a two to three hour drive and the majority of students applied to and selected institutions that met that criteria showing a high level of congruence with their family's preferences. This confirms McDonough's (1997) finding that families from low SES backgrounds define proximity based on two hours of ground transportation by car or bus.

Even when family members knew of specific colleges that might have been a good fit, they did not suggest them to the students. Sam's grandmother said, "I like the [named a college] wasn't a real big school; it was kinda small and that surrounding would have been something I think would have worked for Sam." Sam's uncle went there for a year before transferring out-of-state. When asked why she didn't suggest it to Sam, she said, "My choice like I said you have to let her make some decisions. I convinced her from going to Texas because that was too far away." She prioritized setting aspirations and establishing an acceptable proximity by dissuading

Sam from a very far out-of-state college instead of utilizing her capital to encourage a specific in-state institution.

Using active support, Juliette's mother changed her daughter's educational trajectory and final decision by suggesting she research a specific residential community college that her incarcerated grandmother saw on television. After seeing the commercial, the grandmother shared the name of the college with both her daughter and granddaughter. First they looked the institution up online and the very next week the mother took the day off work to drive her daughter to go visit the college. The approach of this student and her family confirms what Freeman describes as being influenced by family members that want to see the student achieve beyond the level of other family members. This student is the first person from a very large extended family to pursue higher education. Juliette is motivated by her grandmother. She stated, "I want to be the one to show her that, that she made me become somebody even though she's not around." Having her grandmother be able to be part of her application process and path to college meant a lot to both Juliette and her mother.

However, from Juliette's mother's perspective, she did not have college experiences to share with her daughter and believed she could not really help with the application process. When talking about colleges for Juliette to consider or apply to, she said, "I really didn't recommend any because I didn't really know. We just was looking at colleges for Nursing but I really didn't know any." Due to her limited knowledge about post-secondary education, Juliette's mother like other family members in this study devalued the support she was providing as a form of capital to her daughter throughout the application process.

The importance of peer relationships cannot be overstated and should not be underestimated in the application process. Juliette was a leader in her class and influenced

several of her peers to apply to the residential community college she later enrolled in. Following

Juliette's visit to the institution, she returned to Bayside and shared her enthusiasm, pictures, and

experience with the school counselor, college adviser, and her friends. In retrospect, she wished

she had kept it to herself because at the start of the week no one at Bayside knew of the

institution, and by the end of the week 10% of the senior class had mailed in applications. One of

the students described her influence,

> The school she's going to has a good program in Nursing. And I'm proud of her; I wish
> her the best of success. People found out about the college that she's going to and they
> said that college sounds good; I want to go there. She's going there for a reason. Even
> though the college has good dorm rooms and stuff but she's going there to benefit her.
> You can't go there to try to benefit you because you want to be there with her.

Juliette's peers respect her and know she has a plan. If the college is a good fit for her, they

assume it will work for them too, especially after hearing about and seeing pictures of the new

dorms. Juliette was a scout returning to Bayside with additional information that shaped her

peers' application and decision-making. In the next chapter on decision-making, a similar pattern

unfolded with another influential peer that shaped student's decision-making process.

Carly who was only moderately invested in pursuing post-secondary education since she

planned on enlisting in the armed services stayed informed on the application process by her

friends. Any colleges her friends applied to, she also considered. She stated, "Basically if

somebody else say I applied there. I was like was it free? Yeah, it was free and so I applied." She

was accepted to all the colleges she applied. Even though, she did not have aspirations to enroll

in post-secondary education immediately following graduation, she had college options because

of the high school's college application culture and her peers' support including sharing

information about their plans.

The female students were more apt to be informed and share information during the

application process. Juliette mentioned, "My friend, she goes to Saginaw Valley and she said

they have a good Nursing system too but I have to look through it myself." Students spoke to

Bayside alums and learned about colleges and academic programs they should consider.

However, S.J. was adamant that his peers should focus on their own interests and needs.

His perspective was that,

> They'll try to see what college that kid is going to or what college the next kid is going to and try to say I'm going to go to that college. I want to go to that one; they sound cool. I'm going to go there. You've got to understand there are different colleges for different people. What if they don't have the major you want to major in?

He wanted to chart his own path and thought his peers should be doing the same thing. He added,

> I feel like some people are more based off the hype like everybody is always worried about the next person. You just worry about you; go get your education; you could be something successful. If you're going to keep trying to be in somebody's shadow, what if they don't be nothing then what are you going to do? You're not going to be nothing. That's why I really can't agree with a lot that's going on in my senior class because I see more followers than leaders.

He feared his peers might not be making the right choices for themselves or might be following

people on a path that would not lead to success. Across the senior class regardless of aspirations

and preferences, the students took a consistent approach to the application process and as will be

discussed in the following chapter, peers influenced both application behavior and post-

secondary education decision-making.

Ironically, Juliette who was mentioned earlier as a leader and influential individual in her

class, had a mother who was vocal about her not attending a college with a lot of her friends. Her

mother did not deter her from applying to any institutions, but feared if she attended a regional

college with ten or so graduates from the class before hers, she would do more socializing than

work. She said, "So I prefer her to be where I know she will not do as much socializing…I knew

most of the kids that went here were there and it would be like a little clique together and they

won't be like… Get up, Juliette and go to school. I won't be there." She anticipated a negative

effect of her daughter attending an institution with her peers.

Peers are a significant factor in college choice that may be underutilized in interventions and programming. Building on Sokatch's (2006) findings that friends' college plans are the biggest predictor for four year college enrollment for low-income urban minority students, the students in this study were greatly influenced throughout this process by their peers. People, like Juliette's mom and S.J., may even wish they were not a factor. Yet, they have the potential to have some of the most direct influence. There is tremendous opportunity to harness the power of peer and family relationships, which were not explicitly named in the original framework, to influence the specific colleges students consider and apply to instead of allowing the process to largely be shaped by happenstance and higher education and high school partnerships.

ACT

Students and families understanding of academic achievement is grounded in student success at Bayside. The ACT complicated student and family understanding of achievement in the local context and influenced student perception of opportunities shaping college application behavior. Starting in 2007, the state required and pays for every eleventh grader in Michigan to take the ACT; a significant unexpected shift from the ACT to the SAT has been made by the state legislature to be implemented in SY 15-16. Higher education institutions release percentile ACT scores for their accepted students and often share minimum scores during representative visits. High school averages are published by the state and often posted in school buildings. Students and families interact and make sense of the ACT and what it means among all the contextual layers.

Low ACT scores constrained student opportunities and complicated student and family understanding of academic achievement in context. Of the twelve students in this study, only one student took the ACT one time. Eight of the participants took the ACT three or more times in

order to improve their scores. Half of the students retook the ACT in February or later during the second half of their senior year. Student's ACT scores had a significant influence on where they decided to apply based on their perception of the likelihood of acceptance and where they were of course accepted. Most of the students believed with a seventeen or so they would be able to get into the regional public institutions that they were interested in and the college representatives confirmed this during their visits. However, when setting goals in advance of the test several students set goals of a twenty-one to a twenty-five; the high school average was a fourteen. In the hallway on the main floor there was a sign posted highlighting the goal for the year as a school average of fourteen and change, the score that would allow the school to make adequate yearly progress for the state and federal government, but a score that highlights how ill-prepared the majority of students are for college and a score that will prevent students from attending four year institutions. This corroborates Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) finding that, "Ironically, the high school contexts encouraged high college aspirations while promoting a climate of low expectations with regard to the ACT that limited students' ability to exert more individual agency in their test-taking strategies and college preparation more generally"(p.152).

Students learn about their ACT scores in the school context, but evaluate them based on their perceived likelihood of getting accepted at the institutions they are interested in. Jane who was only exploring colleges in her prime location decided to apply to both the private HBCU and the public college; but not to the private PWI due to their average ACT score being significantly higher than her score. With an ACT of twenty, she was a local striver given the average high school score of a fourteen and the top score for this academic year of a twenty-one. The private PWI conducts a holistic review process and she may have been admitted, but she self-selected out of the possibility because of her ACT score.

LaShea is the only student who took the ACT just one time. She was scheduled to take it again in December, but decided against it after getting accepted to a public research institution in November with her initial score. Prior to that whenever she researched colleges, her ACT was front of mind. LaShea stated,

> The first thing I do when I go on the website the first thing I look at is the average ACT score and the average grade point average. Um I know that some colleges balance and stuff there but um I have a three-four now which is pretty decent but um so and I only scored a seventeen on my ACT so I just look at first the colleges and how they balancing [pause] that's the first thing I look at.

She shared that she scored a seventeen, but according to her school records she only scored a fifteen. Her score did not prevent her from getting accepted to one of the two top in-state institutions, but did influence how she researched colleges.

As mentioned, Michigan is a mandatory ACT state; all juniors take the ACT in March at their respective high schools. Following the eleventh grade March ACT, students began questioning if college was for them- similar to the students in the Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) study. They wanted to go to college, but due to their low scores they were unsure if an opportunity would present itself. Throughout twelfth grade, the students reset their expectations to align with their scores and believed their ACT score was the top factor holding them back. In October, Juliette said, "My ACT scores, I've got to get them up or I won't be in no school." She took the ACT five times; her final score was acceptable to her original top choice institution, but by the time she received it she had altered her plans to attend a community college. S.J. said, "But that was another thing about it like I have a cumulative GPA of 2.7 and I scored a 14 on my ACT and so I knew the odds were against me to get into college period now." The students struggled to make sense of their scores. Sam said, "I mean if you see like most of the ACT scores, you're like… I know that person is smarter than that or you just think you're smarter than

130

that." Students believed they could do better and that the scores did not reflect their academic ability.

Repeatedly taking the ACT took a toll on students during their senior year. Sam described deciding to retake the ACT at the start of her senior year,

> I made a big decision to take the ACT again. It was a big decision because [pause] I have test anxiety or what I call test anxiety because I get really nervous on tests. I'm the type of person that says… like if I try to do something and I continue to fail, I kinda have low self-esteem or kinda give up and be like I can't really do it.

This was the third time she registered to take the ACT. She shared her experiences in eleventh grade,

> The first time I took the ACT test was in December of last year at [neighboring] High School. I got a 15. But then, they was telling us if you retake it, your score will increase. And I took it again in March and I got a 16 which I was kind of proud of. I was kinda happy that my score increased but I wasn't really satisfied with the score so I'll be taking it again on the 27th of this month. I don't know. The ACT test really just scares me because I feel like that you can't time someone's intelligence; even the greatest minds take time. And then, I really don't do well under pressure.

It took significant encouragement for Sam to register and try again. Almost every senior in the class registered to take it again in the fall; being in sync with their peers provided a level of support because everyone was engaged in the same process at the same time. Sam describes the importance of her "support team,"

> I have my moments where I doubt myself or be like okay, nothing is going to happen; I'm just going to take it and it's just going to be around the same. But I'm glad I have the counselors I do, the teachers I do, the parents, the grandparents… my support team. I'm glad I have that because if I didn't, I don't even know if I would take it again.

Her "support team" is activating and transmitting capital. Despite all she did to motivate and psych herself up for the October test, she missed it. Her mother had promised her a ride, but she was not able to deliver at the last minute the morning of the ACT; there was not enough time for

131

Sam to regroup and get a ride from her grandmother. Sam went through this process again and re-registered and retook the ACT in December.

A quarter of the students registered for an ACT exam and missed the test for various reasons including unreliable rides to the testing site at a neighboring high school. S.J. discusses missing the December ACT,

> That was horrible because if I would have [pause] if I got an 18 or 19 on the test in December, I wouldn't have to take it again and I could have had my plans for [regional state university]. But now I've got to wait for my test results to get back in another two weeks or so and I just pray to God that I did good so I can move on; if I didn't I'm going to have to take it again [sighs].

He retook the ACT in February and his top choice institution told him he needed a 17 or 18 in order to be accepted. Like most of the students S.J. struggled to make sense of the ACT. When feeling frustrated about the situation, he shared, "You know I try hard. It sucks when you try like your hardest; you can only do your best and you don't get a good grade or you don't get a good outcome out of the situation. That's the worst feeling when you try your hardest and nothing really shows for it." Re-registering, paying for the assessment, and retaking it was how students defined trying hard when it came to the ACT. Most of the students repeated the same pattern. All of the students were able to get the few additional points they needed to get accepted into their colleges of choice, but the process was difficult, painful, and discouraging for them.

Students repeatedly took the assessment with limited additional preparation between tests; the high school only provided ACT preparation for eleventh graders since AYP is based on the eleventh grade March test score. The message students heard was, "If you retake it, your score will increase." The students did not think it was a test you could really prepare for. One mother knew from experience, a form of social capital, that her son needed to learn strategies and prepare between tests if he wanted a different outcome. After doing some research, she learned she could not afford an ACT preparation class for him. She said,

132

I said did you really ask your counselor? And there wasn't any type of prep classes for them to help study for the ACT or anything. I mean I called a couple places but the cost for it was just unbearable for us for him to take an actual class to study for it. I think that's the biggest… that was the biggest barrier the ACT test.

Family members learned most of their college information through their students. Since students were struggling to understand the root causes of their low ACT scores, family members struggled to understand the meaning of the scores and encouraged their students the best ways they knew how.

Family members tried to make sense of ACT scores that seemed incongruent with what they knew about their student's academic ability and high school grades. John took the ACT three times, scoring a twenty-one each time. His goal was to score at least a twenty-five. However, through his application process and speaking to coaches, he felt, "It [ACT score] actually helped me because a twenty-one is actually high for a basketball player. When I tell schools I have twenty-one, they be like… excellent." His mother did not share this same perspective. She was vocal about her dissatisfaction with his score;

Not that it wasn't passing I just felt it should have been higher based off of his grade-wise what he's doing. As far as grade-wise I just felt he should have been higher. I won't say he didn't pass because it's high enough for him to go. He hasn't been turned down by any colleges or anything. I do know that there are other schools out there that would have requested higher ACT scores but for the ones he has applied to and even at U of M or Michigan State that would have been acceptable. It's just that he could have done better.

His score was not holding him back from the institutions he decided to apply to, but he decided against applying to elite private institutions, because he thought it would prevent him from getting accepted or getting enough scholarship money to attend the institutions. His mother felt like his family could have supported him in studying and getting better prepared for the test, and just really felt like he should have scored higher.

John's parents spoke to him following each test. His mother recounted the types of conversations they had. According to his mother, his father said,

> He was like well you can do better. It's fine. You didn't fail but you can do better. That's what we told him you can do better and so we're going to have you take the test again and take the test again. And each time we were like you can do better. What's wrong? We couldn't figure out what he was doing? Where was he going wrong at? But we did tell him each time you can do better so now we're done. I guess it's not necessary for him to take it again.

This sentiment was shared by several of the family members. However, other students had scores that they had to improve in order to get into the institutions of their choice or else they would have to reevaluate their options.

Ben shared his concerns and frustrations with his mother who was able to support him activating her social capital; she had worked with students in the past who had struggled on the ACT but still made successful transitions into various two and four year colleges. Discussing his ACT score, she said,

> So first he was kinda discouraged because his ACT scores were low and we kinda talked about that. I said everybody doesn't test well [laughs]. Some people do great on ACTs and some people don't but you can't let that get you down. Let's start looking at the options if your ACT score is going to be an issue so that's when we kinda brought in [local institution] and staying around in the [Bayside] area.

Ben's mother had more experience with the ACT than most of the other family members in this study and transmitted her social capital through conversations with her son. She encouraged him to keep his head up, continue retaking it, and that there would be options available to him regardless of his score. She added,

> But there wasn't much he really could do. He's taken the ACT four or five times; his last one he got like a 16 on. Like I told him there's really. You're not gonna get the higher score because you're not getting the information or instruction or things that are geared towards the ACT. It's still kinda going off of what you retain and put back on the second test. That's your average right now. It's not going to jump from a 13 to a 20-something. I think he struggled with understanding that but I think we're kinda past that part.

This mother and student duo is the only one where the parent's experience allowed her to add information to her child's perspective. She understood the instruction and curriculum he had access to were not preparing him for the ACT or college. All of the students had unrealistic expectations about the jump they expected to see in their scores, often starting in the mid-teens and hitting the twenty to twenty-five range. Other than the case of Ben and his mother, family members and students consistently placed the onus on the student and believed if the student studied more and tried harder there would be a different outcome.

Family members learned about the ACT from their students, consistently encouraged their students to take it again, and to try harder and study in order to increase their scores. Sam's grandmother shared,

> She wasn't happy with her scores but I told her the reason why your scores are the way they are is because you could have took 15 minutes every day and worked on your math and you could have done better. You only get what you put into it.

Sam's grandmother thought she didn't invest enough time into her preparation. Kobe's mother was surprised by his score in the teens. She didn't know much about the test, but, "I was thinking you were supposed to get a little higher than that. He was like, 'Well mom, I'll try to do better the next time.' The next time was better than the first time so I accepted that." Family members and some students believed trying harder and focusing would lead to different outcomes.

Similar to Ben and his mother, both Juliette and Bulldog and their family members believed the ACT was the biggest barrier for their students. Juliette's mom shared,

> I really didn't understand the scores. And most people were like I got an 18 or 17 and then when she got the 13, I was thinking [Juliette] you're smart. But then they told me the ACT is nothing like [pause] it's just different than school or whatever… Chris [her mother's friend] was telling me her daughter took it three times and I was like oh. When Juliette takes the ACT again she's going to get like a 21 [laughing]. You know because Juliette is smart but I don't know. I just was thinking it was like school.

She believed Juliette would score a 21 when comparing her to her friend's kids who scored a 17. After the scores came back in she said to Juliette, "Did you study? Did you do anything?" Juliette believed the ACT was going to prevent her from going to her top choice four year institution and her mother feared she wouldn't be able to go to college at all. She encouraged Juliette to study, but wasn't sure what the outcome would be if her score didn't go up. She shared,

> I just kept on saying Juliette, you've got to study. And then I'm thinking like if she don't pass she can't go to college but I didn't really know. That's before I knew your ACTs don't have to be high. I mean they have to be high to go to different places but I didn't know like at community college it really don't but you have to take the other test. So I was thinking and she was like I'm going to go to community college. And I was like no, you're going to get a high ACT and go to… but that's before I really knew about community college. But we still took the ACT again; we took it Saturday.

In the midst of this situation, Juliette shared with her mother that the TIP program paid for community colleges. Juliette knew she could pursue nursing at a community college with her current ACT score. Even after her score went up and she was admissible at her first choice four year institution, she and her mother had decided that starting at a community college for the first couple of years was a better option for Juliette.

Bulldog's father also expected him to perform better on the ACT. He went so far as to studying with him in order to help him prepare after his first test was surprisingly low. His father stated,

> The biggest challenge for school I would think would be ACT, the ACT scores. Where in short I would say that was a major issue because you know the work so I don't know how you can hold a 3.2, 3.6 in school and some of the curriculum you taking for the ACT test you get a low score on when you know the work. When he is doing the practice tests at home and he's doing the practice tests online even when I sit there and test him myself. I'm like you know this stuff then and then you go and get a low score in a certain area on the test. I don't understand that.

Bulldog took the ACT four times; it was a pain point for both him and his father. His father

added,

> That hurt a lot; when you know the work but you still did low. I couldn't get on him that he wasn't study because he was studying. I couldn't say he wasn't online because he was online almost every day doing the practice tests and he was passing them. I sat down almost a week and a half to two weeks on studying with him at the table. I just didn't… I couldn't understand it. I just have no answer for that. All of those tests that we took and he proved everything to me that he knew the material but time to take the test he did low. I just can't answer that. I don't know.

By late in his senior year, Bulldog was frustrated. He shared, "I don't really want to take it now and like get a horrible score again." He studied before each test, but started to feel like there was no real way to study for it. Up until the last test in April, he continued to review practice problems and his score improved enough to get into his top choice institution.

Manny retook the ACT in his senior year, but his high score of an 18 occurred in the eleventh grade. Unlike many of the other students, he was able to redirect his energy from the ACT to how he was going to finance college. He said, "I'm done applying to schools and now I'm just doing like scholarships and stuff and that's important. And that was about it because I was getting into the colleges that I wanted to get into with my ACT score already so I wasn't focused on the ACT no more." The ACT was still a point of focus for many students going into the second semester of their senior year and for many students it defined their application process.

Even at the end of the student's senior year, after they had decided where they were attending college the following year, students were dwelling on the ACT. Sam reflected,

> I feel the score I have now for the ACT shouldn't be; that's not where I'm at…it just limited my like college choices. And it limited the amount of money I could have gotten and the places I could go. That's why I'm thankful that I have a high GPA [pause] because tests are not for me at all. They're not. I'm not a good test taker.

The low ACT scores restricted student opportunity. Students expected their scores to increase

significantly just by retaking the assessment. They were disappointed and discouraged each

round. They knew the score was limiting their options, but did not have an understanding of how

it connected to their academic preparation for college. Most of the family members learned

everything they knew about the ACT from their students. Half the participants made their college

choice decisions while the other half continued to retake the ACT and apply to additional

colleges.

The students had the opportunity to give juniors advice about applying to colleges and

almost every student prioritized addressing the ACT. S.J. said, "So if it was my brother and sister

and they had any questions about the ACT, I mean I would just tell them to focus. Like just focus

on that like it's the end of the world you know. That's how you go in there and take that test like

it's the end of the world and your life depends on it because really it is." He also said, "Just take

it [ACT] so serious because you've got to go to college. You know like, you just got to be

somebody." Bulldog added, "Study for the [banging on table] ACT. It's a different ball game."

Both of these students took the ACT in February or April of their senior year and earned a score

that led to acceptance at their top four year institution.

Each contextual layer played a significant and important role when it came to the ACT.

The state decision to mandate the ACT for all eleventh graders and then eliminate the ACT to

switch to the SAT illustrates the power of state-level decisions to override all else at crucial

moments. Even though the quality of education at Bayside as exhibited by the average ACT had

a significant impact on student opportunity, students and families did not attribute student scores

to quality of curriculum or schooling. Students and families focused on the scores required for

acceptance based on the expectations of the higher education institutions and continued doing what they believed would lead to acceptable scores.

Summary

The contextual layers shape students' perceptions of opportunity in the search and application process. The state economy and higher education context influence location. Type of institution to pursue is influenced by all the contextual layers and students often received mixed messages even from the same layer regarding community colleges compared to four year institutions and dismissed private colleges outright due to perceived costs. Student and family desire to minimize tuition fees led students to lower tuition regional institutions, community colleges, and TIP eligible institutions. The TIP program, a state policy, led students to redirect their path from regional four year colleges to community colleges and specific TIP-eligible four year institutions.

Students and families seek institutional characteristics that align with their priorities and preferences; in particular, they seek academic programs that are aligned to a career and will lead to financial stability. Students interact with higher education through online research and mail; recruitment mail significantly shaped application behavior and the perceptions of opportunity for the male participants and their families. A high school college application coupled with college representative visits impacted application behavior.

The limited interaction between students and families in building an initial college choice set to apply to resulted in an application process shaped by the information highlighted by the school counselor and college adviser, in-state college representatives visiting the high school and waiving application fees, peers, and the TIP representative's presentation to the senior class.

Application behavior was shaped by partnerships and collaborative efforts between the high

school and higher education contexts including visits to an institution and attending a college

fair. Peers scouted out institutions and shared information that influenced application behavior.

Few students had anyone suggest they consider specific institutions for specific reasons. The

ACT cut across every contextual layer and significantly shaped student and family perception of

opportunity and the college application process.

Chapter 6

Decision-making

This chapter examines decision-making behavior and its connection to post-secondary education aspirations and the college research process. Previous research has focused on college choice decisions in isolation as an individual stage instead of considering the stages together. The following factors have been found to be correlated with student college choice decisions: family SES (including parents' education), parental encouragement, student academic ability and achievement, race/ethnicity, high school, local colleges, prestige, economic expectations, and financial factors (tuition, costs, state and institution financial aid programs) (Desjardins, 2002; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, Musoba, Simmons, & Chung, 2002). While these variables provide insight into the student college choice process for some students, there is still a gap in our understanding of how these variables influence the application process in urban schools that serve predominantly low income students of color. Thematic findings from this study build on existing research and reveal that participants perceive higher education as the preferred path to career and life satisfaction due to the opportunities and financial stability individuals expect from earning a degree. Students make decisions in the research process by evaluating multiple opportunities and throughout, they seek trusted and reliable sources of information in order to make their decisions.

Findings from this study make an important contribution to the literature on African American students' post-secondary education planning and decision-making. In this chapter, I review participants' own descriptions of how they rely on peers and others as trusted information

sources when making education investment decisions. I conclude with a summary of the findings and a discussion of how they extend our understanding of the college decision-making process.

Higher Education as a Pathway to Financial Stability and Happiness

Hossler and Gallaghers's model (1987) generally recognizes that families play an important role in students' decision-making process, and specifically suggests that parents are more involved in the early stage of developing aspirations than in later stages such as searching for options or influencing the final decision. Freeman (2005) expands the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model to highlight other important factors including family and kinship, school characteristics and student cultural characteristics, all of which influence a student's "predetermination." Freeman adopts this term instead of "predisposition," noting that "environmental circumstances often have much to do with whether students choose higher education"(2005, pp. 110–111). The three specific family and kinship factors identified that influence African American students to attend college are: family expectation, encouragement to go beyond the family, and student self-motivation.

For African American students, academic performance, economic expectations, family members including siblings who attended college and extended family who did not attend college all had a positive effect on student aspirations (Freeman, 1997, 2005). Interestingly, the effect of academic performance is less significant for African American students. However, students' perceptions of economic return on investment plays an important role in their postsecondary education decisions. High school climate and school racial composition shape students' postsecondary plans (Freeman, 2005). This section of the chapter confirms and expands upon Freeman's findings.

Participants place a premium value on education. They believe it will lead to a career that provides economic stability and happiness for both the individual student and their family. Higher education is the preferred pathway and perceived as the best option to a secure future. Students desire something different for themselves, their families, and their community. They want to be able to give back to their community and family by assisting financially and being a positive role model for their siblings. Family members emphasize the importance of continuing one's education; they value attending college without placing much importance on *which* college. In this study, there was only one instance in which neither the student nor her mother were convinced that enrolling in higher education immediately following high school was the only path to stability. In this case, both the student and parent believed the military provided a pathway that better aligned with their values and needs.

Most of the participants had aspired to attend higher education since elementary or middle school. For the male students, regardless of sports participation, their interest in college often stemmed from college sports. Kobe captures the sentiment: "I always wanted to go to college. I used to watch college sports and I just couldn't wait to get there. I still can't wait to get there." Early experiences like this inspired students to start developing their educational aspirations. In high school, students' aspirations became tied to their future success. As Bulldog explained, "I want my future to be educated. I feel like if you don't have education, you don't have nothing." It is this belief that motivates students and families, and undergirds their commitment to education.

Every family member expected their child to be "doing something" after graduation. Family members viewed a number of possible paths as acceptable, including: part-time classes at the local community college, full-time classes at the local community college, attending a two-

year residential college, attending a four-year college at home or away, and enlisting in the military. Regardless of their individual aspirations, every student in this study actively engaged in the post-secondary planning process by researching and applying to multiple colleges.

Students and family members considered college necessary to "get an edge in life." S.J's grandmother said, "He's looking forward. We're both looking forward to him going to college this year because that's a must. Because life… he can't get nowhere without it. I don't want him struggling like I'm struggling. He has a better chance." This perspective was shared by most of the participants. Family and student aspirations were congruent and centered on attending an institution of higher education immediately following high school graduation.

Family members described themselves as "pushing with both hands and both feet" to get students to go to college. They expressed the view that there is "[n]othing but to go to school…that's why I tell [Kobe] it's a big push to get you to college because there's nothing here." Family members often cited their past histories of working together in order to achieve. When someone needs money, everyone chips in to help. Students were used to finding odd jobs like tutoring and collecting bottles and scrap metal when their families need help. But even with everyone working together, families also talked about struggle—but this struggle only made higher education seem even more important. As one mother said, "You don't even have a choice; you have to go to school. You have to work. There're no free-bees because we all need to work together to make it. Times are hard now and I can't do it by myself." Students have heard this message and are trying everything they can to get their families into a better situation; college is seen as the solution. They believe in their ability to deliver, but at times are overwhelmed by all that is riding on their success.

Students want to be able to take care of themselves and their families. They believe this is the key to happiness. As Kobe put it, "If I do what I got to do, graduate high school, go to college and graduate college; I should be all right." He explains that if he is happy, everyone else will be too.

Family members want students to have a purpose in life, to strive for something, and to be able to maintain their household. But more than anything, they want students "to follow their own dream, make a path in life" and avoid intervening too much as they do not see this as likely to produce a better outcome. Even though she is one of the few parents with college experience, John's mother captured the feeling of the group when she said, "I would like to see him do what makes him happy. I mean it's not my choice. I've been to college so I want him to do what he wants to do. I just want him to go to college and graduate and make something out of himself *but it has to be his decision*." Whether they encouraged education or the military, all the parents and grandparents emphasized the importance of students making their own decisions and selecting the right pathway for them. S.J.'s grandmother summed it up: "I want him to do whatever he wants and whatever makes him happy, and then that'll make me happy." They believe that students selecting their own path will lead to greater success than pushing them to follow anyone else's journey.

Students and families see higher education as directly connected to finding and forging a career. The high school provides students with opportunities annually to learn more about careers and uses methods to ensure students understand the education required to reach their goals. LaShea shared her perspective comparing a job to a career, and described the encouragement she receives from her school and family:

> You know do something that you want to do. Do something that you can make a career out of cause you can stay in Bayside and get a job but do something that you want to do

because a job and a career are two totally different things. A career is doing something that you want to do and something that you love to do. A job is just mandatory you just gotta do it. So they just encourage me to do what you love to do. Do what makes you happy.

The students and families seek careers that will lead to financial stability and happiness. Freeman (2005) found that African American students focused on economic expectations and comfort or wealth when making college choice decisions. In this study, I found a similar focus among students and families, but not just for the sake of economic comfort or wealth for its own sake. Instead, students and families saw college as providing the pathway to a career that would provide both economic stability and happiness. Future happiness was a focus of all study participants and has not been discussed in the college choice literature.

Families cited evidence they had already interpreted as proving that education can provide both stability and advancement. S.J's grandmother described her niece's career trajectory:

She worked ever since she was sixteen years old but she stayed in school. She kept that school going and then when she got out of those small… those hourly jobs or got her career going in school she got a good paying job. And if she gets laid off today she's got something else to offer somebody else. And you can't get nowhere without a college education. Nowhere!

Bayside residents have watched the local manufacturing base deteriorate. In the past, local families were able to rely on stable local employment without pursuing post-secondary education. However, individuals with additional education have fared better in terms of retaining their employment or finding new opportunities following lay-off notices. Families' desire the economic and financial stability they experienced when manufacturing was booming and are hopeful that higher education will deliver.

Only one student in the study, Carly, had a parent who did not influence her child toward college immediately following high school. Her mother stated she was "open to college," but she said she considered many pathways as viable. As Carly's mother put it:

> I wanted her to consider all her alternatives. So we sat down. We talked about it. We considered college. We considered just going to a training getting a training or just doing something. But my kids know you have to go to school and you have to have a job. So they're you know they are really aware of what they're expected of.

Carly and her mother were not convinced that higher education was the only or best path to economic stability. Carly understood the expectations and that college was one of many options, but decided she was interested in enlisting in the armed services as a preferred path to economic stability. Still, even though both Carly and her mother believe the military is the best place for her to get started, they both also expect that additional schooling in the future will be necessary in order for her to pursue a career that she loves. Carly's mother describes the anticipated pathway:

> Well I know she'll be in the military at least for five years. After that I think she'll already… within that time she'll find herself. And then I think she'll you know go to school and do what it is that she actually would love to do for the rest of her days on this earth.

Unlike the other students in this study, Carly is uncertain about her interests and what she might want to pursue as a career. She believes along with her mother that she will develop discipline over time and find a career she is passionate about in the military. When that happens, she will be ready to enroll in college in order to acquire the credentials necessary to achieve her career goals.

Students are motivated to make their parents proud and to be in a position to give back to their family and community. They all aspire "to make a difference in my community." They want "[t]o be someone that the people that are still going here [Bayside High] could look up to."

They talk about wanting to "be able to give back to the community, like help kids out." They want to support the youth sports leagues and expect to be able to help others. The students aspire to share their stories and to "let people know that even if life is a struggle, you can make it through." This goal of being a positive role model was extremely important to the students with younger siblings in this study. They want their younger siblings to know that they can have a different life. They hope that by doing well in school and going to college themselves, their younger siblings will watch and "want to do the same thing." As one student explained, this aspiration "motivate[s] me a lot to do the right thing."

Many of the students watched their parents and their own older siblings struggle and talked about wanting to take a different path. Students shared: "I want to focus on school first and get myself together. I don't want to be like all the people in my family." For Juliette, she described wanting to prove to her grandmother "that she made me become somebody." Most of the students in this study are motivated by this desire for different outcomes and opportunities than those of their family members and believe that education is the answer. LaShea captured the sentiment of the students when she discussed her sister and mother:

> My older sister, well, her dropping out of high school and then having a baby at a young age and stuff like that and I see her struggle, I don't want to be like my sister. I don't want to be nothing like my sister. I don't want to struggle the way I see my sister struggling. You know I don't want to see, I don't want to struggle the way I see my mom struggle, where she gotta just work a job just because she needs the money. And I know it ain't something she likes doing.

The students want careers that they love or at least like and to be financially stable. Having witnessed their family members' challenges, they aspire towards lives that are not always a struggle.

Because of this, it was also important to students that they be able to see themselves as different than their families—not in the sense of trying to distance themselves emotionally from

148

their families, but as having the potential to arrive at different outcomes. They are focused on education and hard work and believe in their ability to change their situation. LaShea shared, "I see them and I just see like me I'm nothing like that. I just I refuse to let myself get that lazy because I know I don't want to be here. And yeah sometimes I just feel like college is the only way to get away. So go to school, work hard, act like you got some sense, and get out." This is the belief that drives most students towards higher education. Students want better opportunities and to be able to take care of themselves and they use their family and community as motivation, even as a "negative" example if necessary. Sam explained:

> I just remind myself that this is not a place I want to be. If you don't do this you're going to be here. If I'm being lazy I tell myself you don't want it like you say you do. I have to put myself down, bring myself to like reality so I can get what I want to get to. You have to work hard to get what you want. And this is not what I want… my neighborhood is not what I want. I don't want to be dependent on anybody but me. I tell myself that every day.

Sam adds:

> My environment pushes me to work harder and do better because every day I wake up and I hear something on the news about somebody being killed or being incarcerated or something like that. This is not. That's not how I want to live my everyday life. I want bigger and better things. I want to live better. I want to be in a nice, safe neighborhood where I know I'm safe. If I have a family or kids, I know they're safe. So it's like a reminder. It's like my city is like someone pushing me, behind me pushing me to, towards doing better. Every day is like a reminder.

Students want to be self-sufficient and able to decide what they do and where they live. They want to take their lives in a different direction and believe education and hard work will get them where they want to go. They use their fear of failure and even their own surroundings and community as a source of motivation.

What does success look like? Like their families, students equate success with doing something that makes them happy. They believe getting to and graduating from college is a

necessary step along their pathway to success and happiness. Bulldog captures the students'

perspective:

> Success when you know you're successful… some people say I've been to college. A lot of people can say they've been to college but my thing is what do you plan to do when you leave college? You've got that degree so do something with it. I'll know I'm successful if I'm working in my field. If I'm happy with my career, if I'm working in my career and I'm happy with it, I'll consider myself successful because I came a long way.

While the college choice literature focuses on the decisions students make and the immediate

outcome, participants in this study revealed that aspirations have little to do with institutions and

everything to do with happiness, career, and life satisfaction. They focus on higher education

because they see it as a necessary means to get there.

Economic returns and financial stability: Perceptions of costs and loans

Economists and college choice researchers suggest that people decide to attend college by

evaluating the perceived expected benefits and costs of all their possible options (Becker, 1962,

1993; Paulsen, 2001); an individual makes a decision to pursue postsecondary education or

makes a human capital investment decision if the utility of the expected benefits outweighs the

expected costs (Becker, 1993; Hossler et al., 1989; Manski & Wise, 1983; Perna, 2000).

Measures of social and cultural capital have been used to reflect differences in expectations,

preferences, and certainty about education investment decisions (Perna, 2000; 2006). Research

has also shown that habitus shapes and informs college affordability decisions for low-income

African American students and families (McDonough & Calderone, 2006). This section confirms

the extant research and expands our understanding of how students and families make sense of

borrowing to invest in post-secondary education.

Students and families are focused on the economic returns and financial stability

attending college will provide their families. This is the lens they use when considering college

costs and whether or not borrowing to fund schooling is an acceptable option. As suggested by

the literature, the students and families in this study constantly sought to evaluate whether the financial pay-off would outweigh the costs. All participants were focused on keeping the costs of higher education to a minimum, especially the students. When it came to the question of borrowing, however, participants fell into one of two camps: they either believed in the payoff of the education investment and simply expected loans to be a necessary part of the funding equation, or they were loan averse and prepared to alter their plans significantly in order to reduce costs.

Some grandparents described their students as being in precarious financial situations and expressed the sentiment that "if you've got to get a loan then do a loan." They were encouraging the student to take out a loan and viewed the continuation of education as the top priority. S.J.'s grandmother said, "I know out of four years we're going to have to take out a loan somewhere. We have to do that, the way he's got to get through." She was one of the few participants who expected loans to be a necessary part of the funding package; as she put it:

> I want him to succeed. I want him to grow up and get out of school and get him a job so he can be a force in society. And I don't want him to worry about the money; let me worry about the money. I'm used to worrying [laughter]. I don't want him to get discouraged over money. And saying that that's why I can't go because of the money. You go to school and then we'll worry about the money when you get out... let me worry about it and you just go to school and do what you got to do.

Her thoughts on this matter were shared by two other parents. But despite his grandmother's perspective, S.J. himself was extremely loan averse and avoided discussing this much with his family. This became an example of a missed opportunity for a family to activate its social capital and support the student's process.

As a college educated professional, Ben's mother evaluated the return on investment using her own college and employment experiences. She was more comfortable with Ben

151

borrowing for his education than any of the other parents and also believed he could afford to borrow more and still be able to pay off his loans if he completed his business degree. She stated:

> I think the cost at Western is pretty good even with the $10,000 a year. I'm making $40,000 and I kind of look at the cost of what my loans were when I was only there for two years. It seems pretty… you know real reasonable…I think it's reasonable the amount that he's at. I mean of course if he wanted to go into Law or something like that you would expect the cost to be a lot higher so I guess I'm looking at… the field he's going in seems manageable. You know it seems reasonable. When you look at what the outcome could possibly be or whatever I think it seems reasonable. Of course if he was at a college that costs the same amount of trying to be a doctor, I'd be like that's unreasonable because you're just getting a business degree. I probably would say that's unreasonable. I think that… I think it's reasonable for the degree he's going for.

She evaluated the cost of his degree against potential future earnings for his field of study and made comparisons to other professional degree programs. Her personal history and experience helping students apply to college gave her a unique lens, different from that of the other family members in this study. Even so, her son was also extremely loan averse and focused on attending a college where he did not need to borrow or where he could keep his loan amount as low as possible. This is an example of a time when social capital could have been transmitted through a conversation about college costs and loans; like the conversations she had with her son about the ACT discussed in Chapter 5.

The majority of families thought their student could either complete their education at their college of choice without loans or, if that was not possible, that they should attend a two- or four-year institution where that could be possible. Unfortunately, this was not the financial reality for most four-year institutions in- or out-of-state. As a result, TIP—the guaranteed tuition aid for eligible students at community colleges and select four-year institutions—significantly altered students' choice of institution and institution type. For both Diondra and Juliette, they applied and intended to start at a four-year university at the start of their senior year, but before

the end of the first semester, TIP redirected them both to start at two-year institutions instead, with the intent to transfer to a four-year university in the future.

Families believed that given their student's academic ability and talent, they would be awarded significant scholarship money. For the athletes, a "full-ride scholarship" was the expectation. As John's mother shared, "It's just our concern is making sure he goes somewhere that he wants to be in that everything is paid for which is less burden on us." Kobe's mother had a slightly more nuanced thought process that recognized that taking out a loan might become necessary but was to be avoided if possible:

> I'm always pressuring him you know to find one that is a full-ride or half of a ride. Because if you know you don't have it… there're a lot of people who've got a lot of loans and all that extra stuff…I try to let Kobe know if you don't have to borrow, try not to unless it's really, really necessary.

In Carly's case, her mother was adamant about her children not taking out loans. She shared:

> Well as far as loans I don't want them taking out any loans I don't want them to get out of school and be stuck with you know bills. So I'll pay for the tuition and everything and in truth it might take them a longer time to get their education but as long as their taking one or two classes I'm a happy camper.

Even though she expressed a serious interest in the armed services, Carly also applied and was accepted with significant scholarship money to several regional institutions. Nonetheless, Carly's mother still encouraged her to join the military, gain some life experiences, and attend college later through the GI bill.

Even families who were open to borrowing remained concerned about students being saddled with debt upon graduation. Because so much emphasis was put on the economic payoff and financial stability offered by higher education, families did not want students to end up with careers and lives that were diminished by long-term, significant debt. Bulldog's father was open to borrowing, but he had a goal and plan in place to make sure everything would be paid back

before his son graduates. He stated:

> I didn't want Bulldog to be graduating from college in debt. That was a major key issue for me. … Mine and his plan was to make sure we had anything he had owed from college from scholarships paid off before you graduated. The main goal is not to be on the state or the government anything when it is time for you to graduate…I don't want you starting your work life after college in debt. Now you've got a large college bill you have to pay.

Family members and students also expressed concerns regarding the stability of financial aid. During the presidential election, students talked about fearing that if President Obama was not re-elected they would lose access to financial aid. With the neighboring school district closing down in the spring term, residents were wondering what would be next. Sam's grandmother captured this concern:

> [Sam] wants to be a judge. I explained to her that's a lot of school. And with not only my situation but the whole economy is jacked-up so. You have to just take… to me I take life one day at a time because you never know what tomorrow's going to bring. You have to look at [neighboring town]. They don't have any money. We're living deep in the last days so it's gonna be just what the Bible says. It's critical time. People are getting these grants and loans right now but if the government decides that next week it is cut out, only kids that are going to school if they can afford it and then that's the way it's got to be.

The instability in the local community and the rhetoric of national politics left students and families feeling vulnerable and questioning whether students would have adequate finances to enroll and stay in college. Students and families all knew of instances and many had personal experiences in which finances did not turn out as expected.

Juliette's mother had numerous people warn her to make sure she understood the finances and to not be surprised when additional expenses surfaced. She explained her anxiety to try to stay on top of the situation:

> Once she gets the money and all that then I will need help because a lot of people say make sure you have this and this because once we went to school we found out they didn't pay for so-and-so and now we owe such-and-such. I just hope nothing like that happens…That's why I'm trying to get everything done ahead of time so I can make

sure; I don't want to wait till the end and be rushing. I want to get it out of the way so I can make sure everything is okay.

Most of the students and families expressed similar concerns that contributed to their focus on finances and their uncertain feelings surrounding financial aid. In particular, the female students and their families felt the need to make their college decisions early in order to put a strong transition plan in place and be in a position to address any obstacles that arise.

Students and families expected to be able to identify affordable college options based on their own definition of affordability, confirming McDonough and Calderone's (2006) findings. Families and students were often surprised to learn that they might need to borrow or attend a different type of institution in order to meet their affordability expectations. The families who were loan averse did not expect borrowing to be necessary, especially due to what they perceived as their student's unique talent or circumstance. Participants were concerned about having adequate finances, as well as being overwhelmed by debt.

College decision-making

Finances played an outsized role in the decision-making process. Across the board, students selected the most affordable institution based on the institution type they aspired to attend immediately following graduation (i.e., community college or four-year institution). Students' decision-making fell into two categories or themes: they either made their college decision based on research conducted during the application process, or they applied to multiple colleges and then evaluated after acceptance, looking for which was the "best option"—a process that still often left students with little choice. For the majority of students, it was constraints rather than preferences that ultimately shaped their post-secondary education decision-making behavior.

155

Table 6.1 provides a snapshot of each student's aspirations, decision, and key decision-making factors. In the next section, I explore the decision-making approach of students. As noted above, participants fell into two categories: "searchers," who made their college decisions in the search process, and "evaluators," who made their decisions after they were accepted to multiple institutions. The importance of college costs is highlighted by the number of students who made decisions based on either the cost or the institution being TIP-eligible.

"Searchers": Search-driven decision-making.

"Searchers" were active in the research process and determined where they intended to go before they submitted their application. Four students, one third of the sample, made decisions by January and they were all young women. The rest of the students made their decisions between April and July, with half of them deciding in April.

Most of the female students and their mothers felt an urgent need to put a plan in place early in the senior year for following high school graduation. This urgency was shared by the male foster youth in this study; he was also a searcher, but unable to make his decision until later in the year. These students had an independent streak; they all took full responsibility for the process, including figuring out their college finances. Their families were supportive, but not necessarily as actively involved on a daily or weekly basis as in the case of the "evaluators," who will be discussed later.

Carly made the choice early that she would enlist in the military instead of attending an institution of higher education immediately following high school graduation. She was the only student in this study who did not have a family member who exclusively encouraged and developed postsecondary education aspirations and she is the only student who decided to pursue

Table 6.1: College Decision-making Factors

Pseudonym	Gender	Searcher vs. Evaluator	TIP[1] eligible	Aspirations Career or Education[2]	Before Senior Year	Start of Senior Year	Decision[3]	Decision Factor/ Constraint	Intent to Transfer	Transferred
Carly	F	S	No[4]	Military	Military	Military	Military	Cost	Yes	
Ben	M	E	No[5]	Business	Out-of-State	In-State[6]	In-State	ACT Cost	No	Community College
Bulldog	M	E	Yes	Engineer	In-State	In-State Regional	In-State Research	Academic Program	No	No
John	M	E	Yes	Basketball Business	Division 1	Division 1	Private[7] HBCU	Basketball	Yes	Community College
Juliette	F	S	Yes	Doctor or Nurse	Out-of-State HBCU	In-State	Residential Community College	ACT Cost TIP	Maybe	?
Kobe	M	E	Yes	Business Football	Division 1	Division 1	Out-of-State[8]	Cost Football	No	Maybe
Sam	F	E	No[9]	Law	Out-of-State	Out-of-State	In-State	ACT Cost	No	Yes
Sweet Jones (S.J.)	M	S	Yes	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain	In-State	ACT TIP	No	Maybe
Diondra	F	S	Yes	Business	Out-of State	In-State	Community College	TIP	Yes	?
Jane	F	E	Yes	Medicine	Out-of-State	Out-of-State	In-State	Cost	Yes	?
LaShea	F	S	Yes	Residential College	Out-of-State	Out-of-State	In-State Research	TIP	No	Yes
Manny	M	E	No	Division 1	Out-of-State HBCU	Out-of-State	In-State		No	Community College

[1] Tuition Incentive Program (TIP) provides tuition for 2 years at state community colleges and a small group of public 4-year institutions for eligible students. Unless otherwise noted, TIP eligible students were also Pell Grant recipients.

[2] Students' education aspirations were linked to career and future financial stability

[3] Unless otherwise noted, the student selected a public regional institution.

[4] Only student in the study who was not Pell eligible.

[5] Pell recipient but not TIP-eligible.

6 In-State is defined as a four-year residential institution. All students expected to attend 4-year residential colleges.

7 Out-of-State

8 Division 1 Institution, but he did not participate in athletics.

9 Pell recipient but not TIP eligible.

an alternative pathway to higher education. She planned to enlist in the armed services following graduation with the intention of enrolling in college in the future. It was important to this student and her mother that she do "something."

The women who made their decisions early were all first-generation students who were using TIP, guaranteed tuition aid, to fund their first two years of college. Two of the women and their mothers made their decision early in order to have enough time to put a transition plan in place. Both of these women and their mothers determined it would be best to start at a community college using TIP funds to cover tuition for the first two years. As Diondra explained, her mother "told [me] that she'd feel comfortable with me doing [local community college] for two years and then transferring. Because I'm eligible for TIP and she said she knows she'd be able to help me more versus me just after graduation going straight to a university." Diondra was already considering starting at the local community college, even though she had already applied to several regional universities. She decided to start at the community college because it was important to her to make a responsible decision and be able to take care of things on her own. She was very focused on finances; as she put it:

> Anyway to save. Saving is important to me right now. You just never know what could happen. You never know what you may need or what kind of something is going to get thrown at you where you have to come across and pay for something. Anything you could save is better.

Diondra knew that TIP paid for a few four-year institutions, but based on her mother's work schedule and her friends' experiences in college, she thought she might need emotional and academic support from her mother, something her mother felt she would be in a better position to provide in the future. Both of these women and their mothers had almost an identical decision-making process once they determined that starting at community college using TIP funds was in their best interest.

When it came to making a decision during the search process, only one student and two parents visited the institution to learn more and get a feel for it. One week after learning about a new college to apply to, Juliette and her mother took a three-hour road trip to visit the two-year residential community college she would eventually decide to attend. Juliette's mother said, "I just needed to go; I just didn't want to send her somewhere that I didn't know how it was. I just had to see it for myself to make sure that I liked it. I mean you know she's going there but if I don't like it [laughs] she's not going." The student had already visited a few campuses, but this was her mother's first time visiting a campus with her daughter. Talking about her impression, she said,

> I've never been to like a college away so it was nice. I enjoyed the campus and the security because there's so much going on. So I like the security how you've got to buzz in and someone is always supposed to be at the front desk to come in. The buildings weren't that far apart but they still had a little walk but it wasn't far away...It just seems as if I'm going to college because I never went you know.

All of the family members discussed campus security and student safety after visiting colleges. There was a significant distinction for this mother and the other family members about what it meant to attend a "college away" or a residential campus. The campus they visited was a two-year community college with dorms for a small percentage of the student population. You may remember that this mother and daughter were adamant that the local community college was their last choice. This mother had taken more than a full year of credits at the local community college and had unsuccessfully tried online courses too. Living on campus and away from home regardless of institution type was highly valued by this student and parent and the majority of people in this study equated a residential college experience with prestige. The student and mother submitted her enrollment deposit at the end of their visit day. During the visit, the student connected with an admissions representative whom she called on a regular basis on her cell

phone for the rest of her senior year. This visit solidified her plans and decision. As discussed in Chapter 5, it also led to additional peers applying and deciding to attend this institution.

LaShea and S.J. also planned to use TIP to fund their first two years of college, but expected to start at a four-year institution. Through research, S.J. identified his first choice college, and was committed to enrolling there by November. However, it took until May for him to receive his acceptance to this institution, because he had to increase his ACT score to be admissible and have his admission application re-reviewed with the higher score. LaShea, in contrast, made her decision early, but it was to attend the most prestigious college to which she had applied. Through her research, she learned of a loophole of sorts by entering the university through a specific school that allowed her to use TIP funds to provide tuition for her first two years at this four-year institution. By applying during an on-site application day with a representative from the institution, she was able to find out the same day she applied that she was accepted and then able to decide that same day that she would attend that institution. Figuring out her plans early was important to her because, as noted in Table 4.1, she did not have active family support or encouragement. Her mother expected her to pursue post-secondary education, but wanted her to start at the local community college.

For these "searchers," the application process resulted in the decision. Parents suggested military and community college to students; students suggested community college and specific colleges as options to their families. These students owned the process from start to finish with varied levels of support from their families. The "searchers" decisions were shaped by the TIP guaranteed aid funds, which would fall under the society contextual layer as a state financial aid program.

"Evaluators": Post-acceptance decision-making.

The "evaluators" applied to colleges widely. These were the students who were focused on seizing every opportunity and applying to every institution that offered a fee waiver at the college fair and college representative visits. These students approached deciding where to attend college from two ends of the spectrum. Kobe captured the perspective shared by Jane and John as well: "Applying ain't doing nothing but putting your information down there. Getting accepted and asking yourself…do you really want to go to the school and how much is it going to cost is the big thing." He added, "I'm not going to say the rest of your life but this is the beginning of the rest of your life. It's a tough decision." On the other end of the spectrum, Ben captured his perspective and that of Manny and Sam as well, regarding how to decide which college to attend: "I don't really think it matters as much as long as I go to college. I don't think it really… I mean it matters but at the end of the day, it's still a college. You could still get--well depending on what college it is--your degree or whatever major you want." All of these students aspired and expected to enroll in a four-year residential college. They all evaluated multiple institutions to which they were accepted and received financial aid packages. Even though the students offered these two different takes on the decision, as noted above, they remained consistent in that approach as they went on to evaluate their various options.

Evaluators patiently waited to hear from all the colleges to which they applied. More than a quarter of the participants were still awaiting acceptance letters to what had become their top choice four-year institutions in April, in contrast to the "searchers," all of whom had already made their decisions months before. The male evaluators all had a family member who was actively encouraging and providing a range of active support in their college decision-making process. In contrast to Smith and Fleming's findings (2006) that African American families had differential expectations for sons based on fears for their survival, resulting in two-year college

enrollment, the families of these young men saw a residential college experience as a way out of the local community, which, in their opinion, was more treacherous for men than women. Survival related fears lead these young men to favor four-year college enrollment. Four of the male students retook the ACT between December and April and re-submitted those new scores to their top choice colleges, which then accepted them.

College Visits Triggered Decisions: Peers and Parents as Scouts.

All students and families desired to visit the institutions before they made decisions, which confirms McDonough (1997) findings about the importance of colleges visits regardless of income level; however, visiting colleges was not possible for many students and families in this study. For some evaluators, college visits were a key part of the decision-making process. Online research and initial calls were followed up by college visits for some families, typically after students were accepted in the spring. College visits led to students making decisions. Visiting institutions was one way families could actively support their children in the college choice process. Four participants made decisions without visiting the institution until the summer after their senior year for orientation or were unable to see the college until they were actually dropped off there in the fall. But not visiting the college in advance of the decision was not an indication of the level of active support and involvement of the family member. All of the students and most of the family members desired to visit the institutions before a decision was made, but access to a reliable vehicle, gas money, and time, often made it impossible.

Bulldog's father first visited the college without his son and requested to be connected to parents of current students as well as alumni in order to learn about their experience at the institution, in the engineering program, and to inquire about their employment opportunities after graduation. He described his approach of active support:

162

We have been in very close contact with them there and I went down on my own without my son just to check out the engineering program and it has been pretty good. I reached out to some other parents who have had their children graduate from there in that particular program and two of the students I talked to that went there got really good jobs now and they striving pretty good.

He wanted an even fuller picture of the program and prioritized contacting recent graduates. He was pleased to hear from alumni "not only that they got jobs but they love the jobs that they're into and that was a plus for me. Okay this is a program my son can get into. That said a lot to me." After he gathered all of this information he then scheduled a visit to go back to the college with his son and it was after that visit that his son decided to enroll in the institution.

One student's college visit inspired him to attend the institution and led several of his peers, including two in this study, to attend the institution also. Manny was accepted to the institution he decided to attend in October. He did not take the acceptance offer seriously until he was invited to compete in a scholarship competition at the university in the spring. His mom actively supported him by dropping everything to take him and they both participated in special programming. He was awarded a $1,000 scholarship for showing up to compete and left the visit saying, "It makes me more interested in it now because I've seen it for myself. I actually know… well I don't know people but I've talked to people who go there now who gave me true feedback on what [public state college] is like." True feedback was the authentic information he needed to make his decision. Upon returning to his high school and sharing this experience with his peers, several additional students including two participants in this study decided to attend the college too.

According to Sam, talking to Manny, her good friend, "Made me consider it even more. I liked what he told me. I would rather hear it from somebody that I know personally…Talk to someone who I actually know, actually trust." Manny shared details about the campus and

because the students had visited colleges together through school before, when "he said the dorm rooms was bigger than we had seen before," the students had a shared understanding of what that meant. For the students who were unable to visit the college on their own, Manny's visit provided them an authentic and trusted source. The two study participants who also enrolled in this college made their decision and sent their enrollment deposits without visiting the institution.

Ben's mother felt like she needed to know more about where she was sending her son. She said, "I'd want to know where he'd be, what the environment is like and what services they have and those types of things so I'd have a better understanding. I didn't just want to send him somewhere I know nothing about." Even though they visited several colleges together. Ben ultimately made his decision to attend a particular institution before they were able to visit it. They had planned a visit, but it was delayed due to car troubles and the expense of gas for the approximately two-hour drive.

The role of college visits has received little attention in the college choice literature. McDonough (1997) found that high SES students and families spoke of visiting multiple colleges and participating in very structured, formal visits; the low SES students in her study mentioned wanting to visit in order to facilitate their decisions, but their approach to visiting was more informal and occurred less frequently. This study helps to expand the literature by revealing how significant college visits were whenever students were able to make them. The students acted as scouts and influenced both their peers' application behavior and decisions. College visits in this study illustrate the interaction between the family and peer context and the higher education context in shaping college decision. For all the students, the colleges they ended up visiting and/or seriously considering were not even really on their radar until the second semester of their senior year. Aligned with McDonough's work, students discussed wanting to

164

visit before making a decision, but despite the level of priority given to visiting, it simply did not happen for over a quarter of the participants.

The students with unique circumstances (i.e., a football player, a top academic performer in the top 5% of the class, and a basketball player who was also in the top 5% of the class) all made their decisions late because they were holding out hope that a "better" college or scholarship opportunity would materialize. According to Hamrich and Hossler (1995) students who are actively engaged in the process are more likely to be satisfied with the college they attend. However, this was not the case for the students with unique circumstances who all believed they deserved a better opportunity. Two of the students decided before they even stepped foot on campus for the fall that they would transfer. For each of these students, one factor guided their application process and one factor forced their decision. Even though the students had several options, their decision was constrained and not informed by their preferences.

For Jane, location was the primary factor shaping her college preferences. Upon getting accepted at the private HBCU in her preferred location, she shared that it was her first choice and she planned to attend the institution. A month later, she declared she would instead attend the public college where she received a partial tuition scholarship in that same location. It took until the final week of May for Jane to accept she could not afford to attend either institution. Ultimately, it came down to the enrollment deposit that she had been counting on her father to provide. When he was unable to do so, she reluctantly determined that an in-state college was the best option and that she would transfer following her first year. After sharing her decision with a supportive teacher, she asked, "Are you still proud of me?" In terms of ranking and prestige, the in and out-of-state public institutions she was considering were comparable, but attending a

college out-of-state was seen as more prestigious by not only Jane, but also other students in this study.

Like Jane, John's decision-making was dominated at first by one factor: his ability to play Division One basketball on an athletic scholarship. John applied to new college every week, even after making more than one college choice decision. In the printed graduation program and local newspaper, it stated that John would attend a private liberal arts college in Michigan. But immediately following graduation, he rethought his decision and decided to attend orientation at an in-state public college in late June; he then reversed course yet again when he applied to and enrolled in July at an out-of-state private Historically Black College or University (HBCU) that was a 10-hour drive away. As a top academic performer, John had multiple options that would result in little to no out-of-pocket expenses for him and his family. However, being able to play basketball was the most important factor to John and he specifically wanted to attend a college on an athletic scholarship. He had talked to the coaches at both of the in-state institutions he originally selected, but was not confident he would have the opportunity to play on the team.

Similar to John, Kobe was focused on whether he would be able to play football at the institution of his choice. At the start of the senior year, both of these students and families expected a full-ride athletic scholarship. As the year progressed without a formal offer from a Division One college, the students silently struggled to try to find a solution on their own, even though they were in a social capital rich high school network and had family members who would have wanted to help. Kobe captured both students' perspective when he said: "I'd take a free education over anything." Even though both young men had a lot of people in their corners, they both chose not to talk to anyone about their situations. Kobe said, "I don't expect nothing from nobody. I got to get this for myself." He started thinking it would be easier if football was

166

not part of the equation and considered reclassifying and doing his senior year again at a prep

school. In February as he continued to struggle, he shared his perspective:

> Without having to play football I wouldn't have as much worries as I do right now. I'd
> just have to worry about if I have enough money for college, scholarships and then I'd
> just go to school. Now, I got to see like what I'm… what school I'm going to go to?
> What school will let me play? What school will pay for me?

He thought it would be easier to make the decision if he took football out of the equation. In the

spring, he enrolled in a public out-of-state institution about two and a half hours away on a

partial tuition scholarship that required him to take out a loan and where he did not play football

his first year. At graduation, his mother still believed he was receiving a "full-ride" scholarship

from the institution and expected him to be on the football team. Kobe chose not to share the

details of his situation with his mother; he did not want his mother to worry and believed it was

his job to shoulder the responsibility and figure things out on his own. He did not want to be seen

as someone who needed help.

Active engagement in the process and length of time to decision, did not result in

consistent satisfaction with available options. The students who made decisions by the end of

April had a higher level of satisfaction with their choice; both students who made decisions after

April made their decision with the intent to transfer and still intended to transfer following their

first semester.

Summary

Participants seek happiness. They believe higher education is a means to career and life

satisfaction through the financial stability the degree will offer. Education decisions and the

perception of loans are based on expectations and the projected return on the investment.

Families expect students to make their own decisions, but expect students to decide to go to

college. Both the community and siblings are sources of motivation for the students. Guaranteed

sources of aid like TIP and trusted and reliable information sources influence decisions. Peers operate as scouts by visiting colleges and then sharing their experiences with their peers, thus providing the latter with an authentic source of information. Students make decisions before they apply to institutions and after being accepted; but even when students have multiple options, they still end up making decisions that are more often constrained by limiting factors instead of informed by preferences.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This study sought to increase our understanding of the college application and decision-making process for high achieving, low-income African American students and their families in an urban school committed to supporting access to post-secondary education. It is a response to Freeman's (2005) call for research into African American families' perception of their influence on the college choice for their children, and for a better understanding of how schools actively channel students to participate in higher education. Generally, previous research on college choice decisions and school-based support focused on majority populations (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). In addition, most research on college choice uses quantitative methods to focus on each individual stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice process, instead of considering the relationship among the stages. This study used qualitative methods to investigate the college application and decision-making process as it unfolded in context during a group of students' senior year. The findings suggest modifications to both Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model and Perna's (2006) proposed framework for studying college choice. In addition, they have implications for state policy makers, for how schools work with students and families, for how counselors and advisers are prepared to work with students and families, and for how higher education institutions recruit students.

This study sheds light on college application behavior, a key step in the college choice process that has been understudied. The study makes a significant contribution to the literature on Black students' college choice and the role high school collaborations play in the application

and decision-making process. It illuminates our understanding of how students and families value higher education, research options, apply to colleges, and make decisions in context.

Discussion of Findings

Results from this study identified interactions across key contextual layers that shaped opportunities and influenced the application and decision-making process for low-income, African American high school seniors and their families in Michigan. Social and cultural capital influenced all aspects of the application and decision-making process from aspirations through the college choice. These findings illustrate the importance of understanding how and when students and families activate capital and make sense of the opportunities presented from the state, higher education institutions, and their high school and community context.

I found that high-achieving, African-American students in a well-intentioned urban high school committed to increased access to post-secondary education utilized their schools' network to help them with their college application and decision-making process. In particular, the school indirectly supported all students through its college application culture and collaborations with higher education institutions and state financial aid policy programs. The school is doing significantly more than ever before to ensure their students have post-secondary options. However, the low ACT scores underscore the importance of the school continuing to raise academic standards and guarantee that all their students have access to a college preparatory curriculum.

The school transmitted social capital by informing students about the process for pursuing a postsecondary education (McDonough, 1997). The college adviser and counselor provided the most information about college directly and indirectly to students and families through the partnerships they developed. However, by embracing a college for all agenda, their

commitment to increased access led to a college application culture and college advising that lacked nuance, but did result in more students having postsecondary options. For students and families this meant, more students applying and attending two and four year colleges than ever before. However, it also meant that students applied to and decided to attend colleges that may not be the best fit given their individual skills and abilities; as evidenced by almost the entire class taking a consistent approach to the application process and applying to many of the same institutions. The students this approach limits most are those with higher academic achievement and unique talents, which contributes to what higher education researchers have identified as undermatching (Bowen et al., 2009, Roderick et al., 2009, Rodriquez, 2015), the decision to attend an institution that is not matched to the student's academic ability.

Families also transmitted social and cultural capital associated with college going to the students (Perna, 2006). Family members who had college experiences shared their knowledge of the process, thus supplementing their students' cultural knowledge (Perna, 2006). Families without college experiences transferred cultural capital through the encouragement they provided to pursue additional education by sharing with their children the high value they placed on higher education (Ceja, 2006; McDonough, 1997). In addition, peers emerged as transmitters of cultural capital by sharing high educational aspirations for their graduating class. Peers were also transmitters of social capital by communicating their plans and information about college, including scouting out colleges they visited and sharing what they learned with their classmates. Students and families were committed to the pursuit of higher education because they believe it is the best pathway to career satisfaction and economic stability, which will result in happiness and the ability to give back to the community and their family.

During the research process, students learned and their decisions were influenced the most by the high school's partnership with college representatives who visited the high school, and by the state's guaranteed aid program, TIP, for eligible individuals. These presentations, coupled with the school's robust application culture, led students to apply to colleges—in many cases, institutions that did not necessarily fit the students' original preferences, revealing the power of such inputs to redirect students to specific institutions and institution types. Due to TIP, students with four year college plans applied and enrolled in two year institutions, which unfortunately, may inadvertently derail students' four year plans; the combined community college graduation and transfer rate in Michigan is an amorphous number ranging from 12.6% according to The Chronicle of Higher Education College Completion microsite to a high of over 50% on the Michigan Government Dashboard. Unfortunately, many students who start at community college with the intent to transfer do not actually make that transition. An unintended consequence of the TIP aid is it may be funneling students into two year institutions who may otherwise thrive in a four year college.

The higher education institutions and high school used a wide range of strategies to get students to apply and enroll, providing opportunity with the potential for unintended consequences. For example, the combination of the high school encouraging students to apply widely and the fee waivers from institutions helped colleges increase their rate of applications while also potentially decreasing their acceptance rate an indicator used in college ranking systems. At the same time, for some students this created opportunity; however, for others, it may have led to information overload or distracted them from prioritizing institutions and opportunities that were a better fit. In addition, just because colleges actively recruit students to get them to enroll does not mean they will provide the same level of support or commitment to

172

ensuring those same students graduate. Examining the six-year graduation rates for black students at the in-state public institutions students decided to attend exposes significantly different outcomes among institutions; one student enrolled in a college with a 9.2% graduation rate, the lowest in the state, while another student enrolled in a college with a 60% six-year graduation rate, among the highest in the state. The regional institutions were respectively in the 33-43% range. This is not information that was highlighted by the high school or higher education institutions, nor did I observe students interact or acknowledge it throughout their application and decision-making process. College representative visits and on-site admissions days had powerful effects; K-12 educators should keep this in mind and make sure the colleges they are collaborating with are institutions that will serve their students well.

College application behavior was influenced by factors such as location, institution type, cost, academic program, ACT expectations, and peers and family input. In addition, students and families used campus visits, recruitment materials, and the Internet as sources of information to learn more about colleges. When it came to selecting a college to attend, students relied on their peers as trusted information sources and considered distance from home, institution type, and academic programs tied to their career through the lens of making an education investment decision that would lead to financial stability. When making a decision, students, families, and peers, focused primarily on the key variables of: institution type, location, academic program, college costs and financial aid.

The factors identified in the paragraph above are not new contributions to the college choice research. However, the positive role of peers and families cannot be overstated. Building on Perez and McDonough's (2008) findings that Latinas/os rely heavily on family and friends, so did the African American students in this study. Aligned with Ceja's (2006) findings, families

173

provided students with emotional encouragement that motivated students and helped them persevere through the process, but they also had limited insightful information specifically about college to share. African American students in this study, like the Chicanas in Ceja's (2006), were tasked with both learning about the process for themselves while concurrently familiarizing their families with it; family members were only as informed as the students and students determined what they decided to share. Low-income, first-generation parents do not have the college knowledge to share with their children; while families with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to talk to their children about the specifics of college (Stage & Hossler, 1989). Families encourage students the best way they know how and encouragement should not be devalued; the family support and commitment to their students' success could provide an avenue for collaborations that better support students in the process.

Students and families sought out authentic sources of information they could trust. Sokatch (2006) found friends are the biggest predictor of four-year college enrollment for low-income urban minority students and an even stronger predictor for this group of students than they are for a comparative sample of all U.S. high school graduates using NELS:88 data. Elaborating on this finding, peer influence significantly shaped application and decision-making behavior through encouragement of college aspirations and plans and information sharing particularly following college visits.

The role of peers is important and has been underconceptualized in the literature. Based on Sokatch's (2006) findings, peers are even more important for this specific student population. Findings from this dissertation study suggest the significance for this population may be because students have fewer access points to college knowledge from authentic, trustworthy sources of information. The higher education research has held tightly to an econometric conceptualization

of the college choice process and finding or collecting data to examine peer effects can be challenging. Models including Perna's (2006) grounded in an econometric conceptualization limit the scope of the research findings while minimizing the role of other important influences. The amount of time I spent collecting data in this high school and following the path the students took is what allowed me to see the significant peer effects. Since students desired to visit campuses and it was not always possible, peers in this context who actually visited colleges and shared their experiences were very influential. A greater conceptualization of how students, families, and peers interact throughout the process could provide additional opportunities and access points for support.

This study drew upon elements of three conceptual frameworks: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model; Freeman's (2005) expanded version of Hossler and Gallagher, examining the college choice process for African American students; and Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model for studying student college choice. Generally, the models were valuable in exploring and describing the college application and decision-making process for high-achieving, low-income, African American students in an urban high school committed to increased post-secondary education access. Findings demonstrate that aspects of the state, school and community context, and cultural and social capital are useful in explaining the decisions students made. However, findings suggest a modification is necessary to both Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model and Perna's (2006) model.

Study findings contradict that students progressed through a three-stage process. Some students did; however, many students did not. Two students searched and applied to colleges without aspiring to attend a higher education institution. Several students made a college choice decision and then returned to the search to apply to different colleges and select an alternative

institution for attendance. Many students were accepted into four-year institutions and reevaluated if the military or a certificate program was a better path. A quarter of students made decisions when researching colleges, especially when guaranteed aid was part of the equation. The application and decision-making process proved to be iterative and interactive, as Figure 2.2 hypothesized. Despite that, the decision-making proved to be more constrained than the original reconceptualization suggested. Figure 7.1 captures the constraints with the blue triangle that narrows to a point or, in this case, a constrained college decision for many students.

Figure 7.1: Hossler and Gallagher Reconceptualized
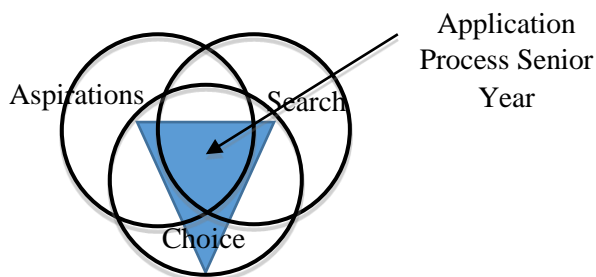
Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual framework assumes individuals' college choice decisions are shaped by contextual layers. In Perna's model, contextual layers represent society (i.e., social, economic, and policy factors), the higher education context (i.e., location, institutional characteristics, marketing, and recruitment), and the school and community context (i.e., availability of resources, types of resources, structure of supports and barriers) and the individual's habitus (i.e., student's demographic characteristics, demand and expected benefits, social and cultural capital). Peers and family are not explicitly named in this model. Perna alludes to the direct and indirect influence of the family and it could be argued that they are represented in the students' habitus, however, findings from this study suggest that both the family and peers should be named in this framework.

Describing the framework, Perna states that the model:

176

assumes that, although college choice is ultimately based on a comparison of the benefits and costs of enrolling, assessments of the benefits and costs are shaped not only by the demand for higher education and supply of resources to pay the costs but also by an individual's *habitus* and directly and indirectly, by the family, school, and community context, higher education context, and social and economic policy context. (Perna, 2006, p. 119).

An individual's *habitus* and social and cultural capital are all shaped by family and peers. In terms of college application and decision-making behavior, *habitus*, captures students values and beliefs that shape aspirations, plans, and influence decision-making. Social and cultural capital is transmitted through exchanges with families and peers. Access to trusted sources of information and encouragement transmitted through family and peers were integral in the process. Explicitly naming family and peers in the model provides an opportunity to acknowledge and elevate their importance in the process which has significant implications for future research, as well as, as implications for practice.

Cultural capital shapes both aspirations and decision-making as both stages are grounded in an understanding of higher education as a pathway to financial stability. Social capital influences the application and decision-making process in the form of trusted, reliable, and authentic information sources and networks. Students and families in this study recognized the importance of social capital based on their desire to give back to both their family and community. Other research sometimes assumes that underrepresented student populations are involved in networks that do not possess valued capital; however, findings from this study reveal that the low-income, African American students in this study are involved in capital rich networks in their school, community, and family. Many of the resources students receive from their family are intangible and, in turn, hard to measure by researchers and even overlooked by the family members themselves. However, this study shows that families contributed support and knowledge that led students to expect to attend higher education and encouraged them through

177

the application and decision-making process. Table 7.1 captures the interconnected nature of the stages that led to education investment decisions.

Table 7.1. Summary of Thematic Findings: College Decision-making

Predisposition Aspirations	Search	College Choice Decision-making

• Higher education path to career that leads to life satisfaction and happiness
   o Give back to community and family
   o Community and siblings are motivators
	• Research led to decision to apply or enroll
	   o College visits triggered a decision
	   o Guaranteed aid: TIP
	   o Females more likely to make a decision to enroll during the research process
		• Evaluate multiple options
		   o College visits after admission triggered a decision
		      ▪ Peers as scouts
		   o Economic returns and financial stability shape perceptions of costs and loans
		   o Males more likely to be evaluators and make decisions after multiple acceptance offers

Summary

Limited research has been devoted to the role of low-income African American students and families in the college choice literature; however, in this study, the student's families directly and indirectly influenced all aspects of the application and decision-making process. Families set expectations and encouraged their students. Students and families believed higher education was the best path to career and life satisfaction, and in turn, happiness. Students aspired to higher education in order to become financially independent and able to give back to their community and family; they were motivated by a desire to become role models to their siblings and younger students in their neighborhood.

A key step in accessing higher education is actually applying to colleges. There has been a tremendous emphasis on developing a college-going culture in high schools, but limited qualitative research on student application behavior. The quantitative research on application

behavior has emphasized undermatch for low-income students (Bowen, et al., 2009; Roderick, et al., 2009) and the power of high school feeder networks to private colleges (Wozniak & Engberg, 2007). Studying application behavior is challenging; ELS was the first national dataset to collect application behavior and collecting data in schools is time intensive, complicated because students are under 18 years old and require a parent's consent, and can be costly. The relationships I built with the student participants and the access the school allowed provided a window into the application behavior and experiences of low-income African American high school seniors in a school that wants all students to have postsecondary education options; a study site and topic that has yet to be explored in the college choice literature.

In this school, a college application culture created numerous opportunities, although it also contributed to a somewhat haphazard application process that saw students applying widely without a clear purpose. Which institutions students considered for application and attendance were heavily influenced by factors including peer input, college representative visits, and state guaranteed aid program, TIP. On-site admissions days and fee waivers during representative visits shaped both application behavior and decision-making. In a state with a struggling economy, students' desired to pursue out-of-state institutions as a launch pad to start their life in a more economically stable environment. The disjuncture between these aspirations and financial realities became clear, however, over the course of senior year as students learned that in-state institutions were a more affordable alternative and applied accordingly.

Institution type and cost had a significant influence on where students applied and enrolled because students and their families wanted to make an educational investment decision that would to lead to financial stability—an aspiration that shaped student and family perceptions of loans in particular. Students and families were focused on academic programs tied to careers.

Trusted information sources, costs and financial aid shaped students' decision-making. The ACT was another significant barrier that influenced student perception of their options and shaped the application and decision-making process.

Male and female students took different approaches to the application and decision-making process, which resulted in different outcomes. Female students made decisions based on research and were highly influenced by the state guaranteed aid program, TIP. For some students this program redirected them to two-year institutions or specific four-year colleges. Male students' college research was often guided by higher education recruitment mail, which was a key information source for the student and their family. With the support and encouragement of their families, male students often continued to retake the ACT late into their senior year, a process that provided them the opportunity to evaluate multiple options and decide to attend a four-year university. The male students and their families appeared to be more comfortable allowing the process to unfold over time and continued to explore opportunities in contrast to the female students and their families who wanted everything to be finalized. The female students valued advanced planning and certainty, which resulted in female students making decisions earlier and at times opting to attend two year institutions instead of continuing to pursue four year opportunities.

College visits led to students making decisions when researching institutions and evaluating different options. Peers operated as scouts returning back to their high school and community to share what they learned about the institution they visited and influencing other students' decisions. College representative visits to the high school and student visits to colleges influenced decisions in both the application and decision-making process. When evaluating four-

year options, students and families were focused on financial stability upon graduation and considered costs and loans through that lens.

Students were in a capital-rich environment based on their family, peer, and school networks. However, there were missed opportunities for families to activate their capital or for members of the school network to transmit cultural capital to students and families focused on the quality of opportunities. Families often devalued and minimized their role due to their limited personal experience with higher education. Student athletes experienced the process differently than their non-athlete peers; this, in particular, was a situation where students and families could have benefited from more open communication and tapping into school and local capital networks.

Implications for Practice

This study broadens our understanding of the college application and decision-making process for low-income, African American students in an urban high school committed to access to post-secondary education. Findings from this study have implications for both policy and practice. They can assist policy and financial aid stakeholders in designing programs and services to improve college access and enrollment for low-income, African American students. Practitioners including high school educators, college recruiters, and college access program providers can use these findings to inform how they collaborate with each other and support students and families. In this section are recommendations for how high schools, higher education institutions, and the state can better work with and support students and families in acquiring college knowledge that leads to more students applying to colleges that are a good match and enrolling in institutions where they will thrive. In order to increase college access and

enrollment directly from high school, it is imperative that we document and use the information we know will support this transition.

State financial aid policy and programs have the potential to direct students to specific institution types and institutions, particularly when students have access to guaranteed aid. The findings of this study reveal students being redirected to two-year institutions and specific four-year institutions. This finding has significant implications for the American's College Promise proposal announced by President Obama on January, 9th 2015. The program is designed to make two years of community college free for students; like the TIP aid, this may redirect students who would otherwise thrive in four year institutions into two year colleges. As federal and state policy programs are being developed or reevaluated, the intended and unintended consequences need to be considered and revisited throughout implementation. In the case of the TIP funds, students would have benefitted from learning more about their access to the guaranteed aid and eligible institutions earlier in high school. In addition, the students in this school were lucky to be able to have the representative come out and present to the class; this is not something that occurred at all schools and there appears to be inconsistent access to information about the program across the state. For more students to benefit from this program, consistent access to information earlier in high school would help all students and families.

The students in this study were ill-prepared for the ACT and as seniors did not have access to any additional ACT preparation. If all eleventh grade students are going to be evaluated by the same standardized assessment, it is only fair if the students all have access to a high quality college preparatory curriculum. In addition, high school seniors deserve support in continuing to prepare for college admissions tests. What may compound the issue of lack of test preparation is that Michigan plans to switch to the SAT in SY 2015-16.

State policy has tremendous power to shape student experience, as can be seen by the shift in Michigan from all eleventh graders taking the ACT to the SAT exam. It is obvious significantly more work needs to be done, but high schools in Michigan have been working for years to develop ACT preparation classes and to better align curriculum in earlier grades. To make an abrupt switch to the SAT without lead time creates a significant burden for the schools who serve the most vulnerable students. There is a tremendous opportunity for the College Board and the state to provide resources and to take advantage of this transition to improve the quality of high school curriculum and instruction all students have access to in Michigan. It is imperative that policy makers thoughtfully evaluate the impact of their decisions and examine whether actual implementation of the program or policy will produce different outcomes and experiences based on income status or race.

In addition to the state providing additional support for college admissions tests, the high school also has a responsibility to prepare students. It should be noted that this was not a study of academic preparation for college. However, low school ACT scores significantly shaped the college application and decision-making process for most students and families in this study. The high school was invested in students pursuing higher education, yet it did not seem to connect this investment with the ACT specifically. In addition to investing in college counseling and expecting all students to apply to multiple institutions, the school should consider additional ways they can support students' academic preparation and success on the ACT. Students and families could benefit from clarity on what the scores reflect and what actions they can take to better academically prepare for the test and college. Students applying and enrolling in colleges they are ill-prepared to succeed at need to know this information and have a developed plan of attack for utilizing campus support services if they are going to be successful in college.

Colleges also have an opportunity to leverage their interactions with students and families. Visiting colleges triggered decisions during both the research and college decision-making process. Students spoke about the power of visiting colleges earlier in their lives when they attended camps and spent time on various campuses. There appears to be a tremendous opportunity for higher education institutions to help more students and families visit their campuses. All the colleges students enrolled in required a car to get to the campus community and barriers related to cost and access to reliable transportation limited too many students and families' ability to get to the campus. Offering a bus or van service throughout the year for scheduled visits from schools or city centers would allow more students and families the opportunity to visit the college(s) they are considering and thus make a more informed decision regarding "fit."

When students and families visit campuses, higher education institutions should make the most of those opportunities. For example, Western Michigan University used a guaranteed $1,000 scholarship to lure parents and students to campus. The formal and structured visit they planned was very different from the typical experiences students and families had on campus visit days. Upon their arrival, students competed in an additional scholarship competition and both students and parents participated in tours and programming to learn more about the institution. The institution made the most of this interaction. However, this is an example of a time where providing transportation or helping students to coordinate with their nearby peers might have enabled more students to benefit from this great opportunity. In a sense, institutions are simply lucky that students are choosing themselves to report back to their peers. Instead, colleges and high schools should seize this opportunity to develop more intentional programming and explicitly encourage attendees to act as ambassadors for the institutions.

High schools could benefit greatly from harnessing the power of peer influence. This could be as simple as supporting peer collaboration on college planning, designating peer leaders, or designing small group college advising sessions for friends or toward specific institution types. The work of College Summit, a non-profit college outreach organization, could provide an example of a school-based peer initiative. Peer leadership is at the core of their model, which identifies influential students who receive intensive college knowledge training including how to apply and how to pay and then are expected to share their enthusiasm and information back with their classmates.

Findings show that students and their families are the most influential people in the decision-making process; the school's counselor and college adviser are most influential in the application process, as a result of their collaborations with higher education institutions. Acknowledging the important role of families and designing programming for students and families to learn together could result in everyone being better informed and more knowledgeable about college, both expanding thinking while increasing college opportunities. Families want to be better informed and able to support their children.

One idea for increasing access to higher education is broadening the scope of college representative visits and college visits which may support greater recruitment of low-income African American students while also providing an opportunity for families to learn alongside their children. Several colleges held on-site admission days that led to students applying and enrolling. This is a practice that additional higher education institutions may want to consider utilizing. These on-site days were held in partnership with the school counselor and college adviser. There is an opportunity to leverage these days and college representative visits by

inviting families to learn about the institution with their student or to hold a separate parent session immediately before or after the student session.

This study has demonstrated the power of robust relationships between high schools and higher education institutions and a developed college application culture. However, it also revealed unintended consequences and unexpected challenges. Applying to colleges and having college options did not mean all students would decide to enroll. Providing students with access to information and encouraging them to take advantage of all opportunities resulted in some students prolonging their application and decision-making process and investing significant amounts of time and energy applying to colleges that were not necessarily well-matched to the student's ability.

All students would benefit from a college adviser spending time helping them identify a list of specific colleges to research based on interests and academic qualifications. A high school like this one could support students and families in evaluating which opportunities are worth pursuing and which are not by making sure that the differences among institutions and options is clear, highlighting that there is a range of quality in opportunities, and that there are variables other than cost that may be more important in shaping their decision.

Finally, the state could simplify the college application process and time invested by creating a common application for the public colleges in Michigan. The MI College Access Portal was modeled off of the College Foundation of North Carolina website, a website where North Carolina students can apply to all institutions in the state. If the colleges would agree to use it, college advisers could direct students to the site and students could complete one application and apply to multiple public state institutions saving significant time and energy to be

focused on scholarships, applications to out-of-state or private institutions, and their senior year coursework.

Programs that prepare school counselors and college advisers need to ensure they are ready to support students and families to access and succeed in higher education. In elementary school, counselors need to nurture student and family aspirations and inform them about the importance of academic preparation and the costs of higher education. During this time, the foundation is being laid for students to work hard, start developing study skills, and to know their academic standing so it can be built upon in middle school. In middle school, counselors need to work with students and families so they understand the choices among high schools and the different types of higher education institutions. In high school, in addition to supporting students in the application process, counselors and college advisers need to be knowledgeable about a range of institutions, know their students and families well enough to make recommendations, and help students find their purpose for pursuing higher education. For counselors who work with low- and middle-income families, they need to be well versed in financial aid and college costs and be prepared to have financial conversations with students and families. Finally, students and families need to understand their academic credentials (i.e., school grades, ACT/SAT scores, and college placement exam scores) and what the transition to college level coursework entails. For students to be successful in college, social and emotional development and support are also necessary in addition to the academic preparation.

Of course, having said all this, it's important also to acknowledge that most school counselors already have too much on their plate. If we are going to expect counselors and college advisers to be able to support students and families in this important, potentially life-altering decision, they need to have the time and resources to do so and the professional development that

empowers them to do it well. The amount and quality of support students receive across the country varies significantly, often based on school budget resources shaped by family income. Helping students complete application paperwork is a key step, but should only occur after students have thoughtfully developed a list of colleges to which they want to apply, with the support of a counselor and input from their families.

Counselors and college advisers are able to expose their students to colleges through college representative visits, college fairs, and college visits. As mentioned above, inviting families to these interactions could provide an opportunity for students and families to learn side-by-side with the support of the high school. However, just partnering and setting up visits may result in students engaging in a haphazard process. Counselors need to frame the purpose of engaging in these activities to students and families, and provide advice and guidelines regarding how to make the most of these opportunities based on each individual's situation. This is one area where counselors can help students better understand that every opportunity may not be a good option for them and assist students in prioritizing options that may be a good fit based on their interests and talents. This is of particular importance in supporting high-achieving students to attend institutions that match their academic ability to minimize the likelihood of undermatching. Additionally, colleges are employing a host of tactics to encourage students to apply and to enroll at their institutions; high schools should frame the visits and consider highlighting additional information that may be relevant to students including: graduation and transfer rates, success of high school alumni at that institution, and in the case of this school and others like it, graduation rates for Black students.

Students and families are focused on academic programs tied to careers that will lead to life and career satisfaction and happiness. They are focused on more than just the economic

return on investment. Higher education institutions should consider this when messaging and recruiting students and high school educators should keep this in mind when working with students and families. Students and families want to be able to give back to their community and family. This is an opportunity to develop and activate capital. Schools and higher education can use this desire while students are in college and after they graduate by having current college students and recent alumni join the college representative visits, campus visits, or provide other opportunities for these individuals to share their experiences with high school students from their community.

Findings suggest that male and female students and their families approach both the application process and, in turn, the decision-making process differently. This understanding should influence how high school counselors and college advisers work with students and their families. Educators can assist students and families to identify the ways they may be creating or constraining opportunity throughout the process. It is important for students and families to be aware that women may be more likely to make plans and decisions early, potentially cutting off opportunities that could be a better fit. Conversely, higher education institutions might want to think further about how they communicate with students via representative visits and direct mailing, considering the influence of letters on the young men and their families in this study. A next step for colleges may be examining marketing and recruitment tactics to determine if they are leading to different application and enrollment behavior for prospective male and female students.

Finally, there is an opportunity for high schools and families to work together to better support students. Family members often devalued their involvement in the process when and if they had not been to college themselves and desired to be more knowledgeable about college.

However, families offered significant encouragement, support, and information. There is an opportunity for schools to provide additional college programming for families in addition to the typical financial aid night. Working together will ensure that, even in the case of students who are fairly independent and on top of the whole application process, they still have access to the support and encouragement of their families. This will help students feel less alone in the process while lightening the student burden of informing their families about everything in the process along the way.

At this school, adding a two-on-one meeting with the student, a family member, and the counselor, in the spring of 11th grade and during 2nd semester of 12th grade could provide the opportunity to ensure everyone has access to important information, is on the same page, or acknowledge that there are some competing priorities. This would allow for the counselor or college adviser to discuss the following topics with both the student and family member: the student's academic preparation including ACT/SAT scores and recommended action steps, postsecondary options focusing on fit, ways families can provide support, college finances, and other relevant topics to any of the participants. In this study there were instances in which students suffered silently when there was capital they could have activated, but did not or were unable to for a variety of reasons. The school working together with the student and family could provide a broader network of support and all parties could potentially identify capital to be activated or help trigger it when necessary.

Future Research

To address the persistent post-secondary enrollment gap based on race, income, and gender, it is imperative that we document the factors that enable access to college and enrollment directly from high school. From this study, a few areas emerge as next steps in researching

190

student application behavior and college decision-making. A high leverage area to explore that is of particular importance for higher education is the role of the college representative visit, on-site admissions days, and college visits for all students. In addition, the colleges were using a range of strategies to get students to apply, visit their campus, and enroll; better understanding how colleges are engaging families in addition to the student could provide insight into practices worth sharing and missed opportunities in student recruitment efforts.

The literature consistently brings up the shortage of counselors and extremely high student-to-counselor ratios. However, at this school there was a high school counselor and college adviser supporting seniors through this process and collaborating extensively with outside partners. A quantitative study of school-based college advisers across the country may illuminate some bright spots to learn from and highlight the disparities across states, communities, and schools. A deeper understanding of the practices of college advisers in different types of high schools focused on initial college lists and the college application process could improve the likelihood students attend a well-matched institution or make an informed decision to attend an institution that is not a great match. This could illuminate additional reasons students chose to attend a college that based on the numbers is not a great fit.

Findings from this study show that students and families perceived the decision to enroll in higher education as a career and life decision as opposed to an education decision, meaning they had an instrumental orientation as opposed to an intellectual orientation toward postsecondary education that was guiding their process. Participants decided to pursue additional education in order to obtain a career that would give them financial stability and the opportunity to be a role model within their community. They were chasing after happiness. Knowing this, it may be worthwhile for future scholars to consider a theoretical framework that focuses on how

individuals make career choices and/or to consider the factors that lead to high levels of life satisfaction and happiness.

One strength of this study is that it captured the processes in "real-time," as they unfolded over the course of an academic year. Formal data collection ended when students graduated from high school; however, through informal correspondence with students and the counselor, I learned about students transferring from four year colleges to two year institutions to play on the basketball team, two students transferring due to pregnancies, and speculation that other students had transferred, were taking a break, or had dropped out. A longitudinal study design that captures multiple years would allow for better integrated theories that connect access to college and success within it—a paradigm shift that has been advocated for by foundations, college access organizations, and the U.S. Federal Government. A study that follows students through enrollment and explores their persistence and pathway towards graduation could illuminate how the application and decision-making process contribute to retention and success in college. A study like this would take multiple years of data collection, which has the potential to be challenging and expensive. Remaining in contact with students over a long period of time during their late teens and early twenties, a transitional period to begin with, is complicated.

College advising is providing additional active support to get students to college. More students than ever before are accessing higher education, but college success for low-income students has changed depressingly little (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). In this study, it was clear the adviser was encouraging students to apply to college, but that students could benefit from more support identifying specific colleges to pursue. Identifying high schools and colleges that serve low income students particularly well could provide insight into practices worth sharing. It is

imperative that we better understand both what colleges are doing to retain the students they are actively recruiting, and how institutions are supporting students to increase college completion.

Through TIP, students in Michigan are being directed to specific four-year and two-year institutions. Given the size of this program, the state should be researching student success at each of these institutions. Examining both how students are faring in terms of completion and transfer and how institutions are supporting students after they enroll is an important next step considering the significant financial investment. The findings could provide an opportunity to incentivize student success and share practices that are leading to academic progress and degree completion with other institutions in the state. It also will provide an opportunity to learn more about the demographics of program participants and explore if the program is resulting in more students getting postsecondary credentials as designed, potentially contributing to greater income inequality and institutional stratification in Michigan, or having some other outcome.

Findings from the two athletes suggest that their process is unique. There is limited research on recruitment, athletes, and admissions and the most widely cited article found that non-athletic related factors were just as important to students as athletic related factors (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen & Palmer, 2003) when choosing a college. This is a topic that would benefit from a mixed methods study that could compare across sports for both male and female participants and conduct in-depth interviews to illuminate the student and family experience, particularly for male student athletes aspiring to play Division One football or basketball. One area that is of particular interest based on the student athletes in this study is the openness of students and families to consider almost any location and institution, which is dramatically different than the typical high school senior. A second topic that could be illuminating is an examination of the recruitment experience for top recruits compared to

students who are great local athletes that aspire to play in college, but are not on the radar of college coaches.

I used a qualitative study design to understand the process from the participants' perspective in order to generate theory. As such, the findings in this study should be considered "working hypotheses" (Merriam, 2009, p. 225) that "reflect situation-specific conditions in a particular context" (Merriam, 2009, p. 225). A next step could be designing a mixed-methods approach that uses a large, random sample and then identifies a "small, nonrandom, purposeful sample" (Merriam, 2009, p. 224) for in-depth interviews. This combined approach could provide powerful evidence to inform conclusions and recommendations for broad impact.

This study reveals the college choice process is not linear and highlights how the process may be different from the college choice literature on the dominant culture for low-income, African American students in an urban high school committed to access to higher education. I provide insights into how specific factors (e.g., families, peers, higher education institutions, school counselors, student preferences, and TIP) influenced application behavior and decision-making. The findings from this study are contextual. Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers may find the results and conclusions compelling and applicable to institutions and students and families with similar characteristics (Merriam, 2009), but when making decisions about how to apply the findings, they should take the various contextual layers into account— namely, the state policy context, the higher education context, the school and community context, and the students' habitus including family and peers (Perna, 2006).

The importance of incorporating peers and family explicitly into the framework is to lead to further research studies into the role of these influential individuals. Researchers need to better understand the peer effects in different contexts and with different student populations. Better

understanding how peers influence each other in the college choice process could inform targeted interventions and programming. There is an opportunity to better understand family college knowledge, both strengths and gaps, for first-generation college students, so high schools and colleges and public policy can ensure students and families are provided access to the most pertinent information.

Finally, this study and the research it is built on have shown that there is not a universal model that explains the college choice process for all students. However, I wonder to what extent the findings are exclusively related to student's racial/ethnic background. It is conceivable that thematic evidence and key factors are relevant to students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds, especially for low-income and first-generation students and families. In addition, college advising programs similar to the one at this school have started working in rural schools and communities, which may mean the findings could extend beyond urban high schools. Future research should explore college advising and college application behavior for all student groups, which would clarify the role of race in the college application process.

Ultimately, it is clear that students and families value education and that school-based college advising creates tremendous opportunities by collaborating with and supporting students and families in the college application process. It is my hope that findings from this study lead to future research on school-based college advising and the experiences of students and families who are historically underrepresented in higher education to make sure more students have access to higher education and are successful when they get there. Finally, I hope state policy makers, higher education institutions, and school-based educators use this research to reinforce their current practices or thoughtfully adapt their approach to improve educational and life outcomes for all students and their families.

Appendices

Appendix A   Data Collection (Topics & Timing)

Formal semi-structured interviews were scheduled around 3 key points in the college choice process during SY 2012-2013. All the formal interviews included the entire college access and choice process by covering aspirations, research, and decision-making.

Interview #1: Beginning of senior year: Aspirations and their initial choice set.
Observations and monitoring: Searching, building, and refining their choice set.
Interview #2: Applying to schools and managing the process.
Final Interview #3: Applying for financial aid and making a decision.
September - December 2012:

   I. Counselor and Principal identified eligible students based on selection criteria.
  II. Met students and built sample.
 III. Interview 1
      a. Discussed aspirations; career and education interests, initial school list. Perception of school-based resources and other college planning resources. Explored research to date and initial choice set.
      b. Learned how students managed/experienced/perceived the application process.
 IV. Observations/Check-In
      a. Met 2-4 times/month to discuss their progress and thought process.
      b. In-school observations of students in the college counseling office and other areas in the school where students engaged in college planning.
      c. Additional areas where students engaged and researched schools including college representative visits, college visits, and at a college fair.
  V. Learned about school-based advising resources
      a. Interviewed school personnel
      b. Observed the postsecondary planning areas
      c. Collected available print materials

VI. External Influencers: Identified people who were important in the student's planning and decision-making process.

January-June 2013:

    I. Individual Interview #2 Choice Sets
- a. Why students applied to each school?
- b. How they managed the application process, applying for funding (financial aid & scholarships)?
- c. Ranking for their schools and why including perceived costs.
- d. Identified people who were important in the student's planning and decision-making process.

    II. Interviewed family and school personnel who were identified as important influencers to the student.

    III. Interview 3: Final decisions
- a. How and why they came to their decision?

Appendix B   Data Collection Instruments

Student Informant Demographic Survey

Name_____

Male _____   Female _____   Age_____

Please Circle

Has your mom attended… No college   Some College   Has a 2-year or 4-year degree

If some college or completed a degree, where? _____

Other (explain)_____

Has anyone else in your immediate family attended college?   Yes   No

If yes, who? _____

Where? _____

What do you plan to do after high school? Place an "X" next to anything you are considering.
Place a star to the left of any items below that you are unfamiliar with or if you do not know the
difference between the various options.

Employment _____

Military _____

Postsecondary Education _____(Additional education after high school)

      Community College _____

         Certificate Program _____

         Associate's Degree (2-year)_____

      College or University (4-year) Bachelor's Degree _____

Next year, do you plan to live in the State of Michigan?   Yes   No

Next year, do you plan to live on a college campus in the State of Michigan?   Yes   No

Next year, do you plan to live in a state other than Michigan?   Yes   No

If yes, any ideas where? _____

Next year, do you plan to live on a college campus outside of Michigan?   Yes   No

If yes, any schools in mind? _____

Other plans (Please explain)

_____

_____

Anything else you want to share here

_____

_____

Interview 1 & Summer Pilot Protocol (60-75 minutes):

Explore aspirations and predisposition
  What do you think you want to do after school? Why?
  How long have you been interested in pursuing this path?
  How have you learned about this area?

Career and education interests
  What type of education do you think you need for your desired career?
  What type of education/training do you plan to pursue?
  What do you know about this already? How have you learned about it?
  What are you still looking to figure out? How do you plan to learn more about this area?

Initial school list
  Tell me a little bit about the options you think you want to pursue.
  What schools are you thinking about applying to? Why?
  How did you learn about each school?

Right now, what are your biggest concerns about your future? General concerns?

Perception of options
  What do you consider to be a good option for you? What paths are ideal?
  Any paths you would feel disappointed to pursue?
  What do your parents, friends, teachers, others – consider as good options for you?
  How do you know?

Perception of school-based resources and other college planning resources
  Who in your school do you talk to about college?
  What resources in your school are available to help you figure this all out?
  What resources do you use in your school when it comes to college or life planning?
  Is there anything else you wish you had to help?

Discuss research thus far, initial choice set.
  How do you go about researching and learning about opportunities?
  Where do you turn when you are looking for information? How do you use technology?
  What access do you have to computers at school? At home? Elsewhere?
  Probes: College visits? Recruiters at school? People as resources?

Strengths/Weaknesses
  What do you consider your strengths? Academics? Outside of academics?
  Are there any activities that you participated in to develop your strengths?
  What areas do you consider your weaknesses? Areas you think you need to improve.
  Do these influence your planning process? Or the areas you are considering pursuing?

Tell me about an important decision you have made.

>Probes: What were your options? How did you perceive and weigh your options? How did you make your decision? How did you feel afterwards? In hindsight, do you think you made the best decision for you? Why? How do you know?

Postsecondary Planning Resources and Activities

>Who is supporting you or are you working with on your postsecondary planning? How? Who do you think you will rely on most?
>
>Probe: Parents/siblings/family, peers, educators, others.
>
>What types of things do they say to you? How important is their advice?
>
>What types of activities do you do with them?
>
>If you use resources outside of your school, what are they?
>
>Tell me about the colleges you have visited, who did you go there with?
>
>Tell me about any career/college fairs you have attended, anything stick with you from these trips?
>
>Have you attended any summer programs or classes that helped shape your future interests?
>
>Do you participate in any extracurricular activities? Tell me about them. How did you get involved?
>
>Anything else I should know about that has shaped how you think about your future?
>
>What does success me to you?
>
>How do you feel about the available support for your postsecondary planning? At school? In other locations? Do you feel prepared to start planning for your future? What resources do you plan to use? What concerns do you have? Why?

Check-Ins and Observations

Designed a process for at least two check-ins per month meeting with students' during their elective classes.

Three guiding questions for the check ins and observations:
- What actions did you take and resources did you use?
- How are the students using and perceiving the available support?
- How are students responding to obstacles and opportunities?

What did you do last week related to your future planning? Who did you talk to or work with last week? What do you intend to do this week? Who do you intend to talk to or work with this week? Any major changes in your plans or what you are considering? Anything else you want to share or think I should know?

In-school observations of students in the college counseling office and/or other areas in the school or community where they were engaged in college planning. This included college representative visits, visiting a campus, attending a college fair, etc.

Focus of observations: researching and completing materials.
How students use technology when researching?
What resources do students use?
How do students access support?

School Personnel Interviews

The emphasis of this study is on the process, barriers, and valued opportunities and outcomes that students, families, and educators including college advisers perceive as acceptable and desireable.

What are greatest strengths of the students and a Bayside education?

What do you think is the greatest challenge to the student's future from this HS?
Probe: Is this true of the students in the top of the class? Is this true of other high school students?

What do you see as barriers to the student's success?

How/what if anything does the school do to address these barriers?

Describe the postsecondary pathways you think are valued by the school? By you?
        Probe: What about the students? What about the educators in the building? The families?

How would you define success for a SHS student after completing high school?

Describe the ways you know the school supports student's in postsecondary planning?
        Probe: What resources are available? What else do you think students could use?
Are there any aspects of your curriculum or teaching that support postsecondary planning?

How do you support your student's postsecondary plans?
        Probe: How does this differ for student's based on their academic achievement?

What factors do you think influence the student's postsecondary plans?

Do you ever encourage students to consider specific schools? If so, which ones. Why?

Have you ever helped a student make a decision as to which college to attend? If so, describe the conversation/process you went through with the student.

If your own child attended BHS, what advice would you give them about college? What would be your greatest concern for them as an BHS student? What would be your greatest concerns about their life after hs? What additional resources or services would you seek outside of the school? Why? What would you tell them was the strength of the school and what they should take advantage of while a student at SHS?

_____ student shared you have been very influential and helped him/her with postsecondary planning. Tell me about that. Do you do the same thing for other students? Why this student? Are there any aspects of your curriculum that support postsecondary planning? Describe them.

Educator Informant Demographic Survey

Where are you from? _____

Race/Ethnicity _____

Male _____ Female _____ Years at HS_____

Years as an educator _____Subject _____ Grade(s) _____

Where did you attend college?_____

What is your highest degree? B.A. _____ B.S._____M.A._____Other_____

Are you a first generation college student? _____

How would you characterize your SES when you were in HS? _____

Were you Pell Grant eligible when you went to college? _____

How did you pay for school? _____

Anything else you want to share here

_____

_____

What % of seniors are college ready? _____2 year_____ 4 year _____

What % enroll in a 4 year college_____ 2 year_____DO NOT enroll_____

What % of seniors are accepted to a 4 year college?_____

_____% enroll but DO NOT attend their school in the fall immediately following graduation.

Interview 2 Protocol

The interview started with any changes in plans from the first interview related to the students': aspirations/predisposition, career/education interests, school list, resources used for planning, etc. I used the data from the first interview and our check-ins to select the most relevant questions for each student from the list below.

- How have you been managing the process?
- How do you stay organized? What resources do you use to stay organized?
- How do you determine which schools to keep on your list and which schools to drop?
- Describe your experience with the application process.
- How do you perceive your options? What's your ideal situation? How do you see things playing out?
- What schools did you apply to? Why?
- Rank your schools based on your interest. Why/How did you decide on this order? What's the cost for each of these schools?
- Who are you working with on your college planning?
- How do you learn about options? Where do you get your information? What information do you seek out? Why is that information important to you?
- What has been your greatest challenge(s) so far?
- What has gone particularly well for you?
- What school-based resources have you been using that you have found to be particularly helpful?
- What other resources are you using that have been helpful?
- Talk to me about applying for financial aid. What has been your experience so far?
- What about scholarships?
- What do you know about available aid from the schools you applied to? Rank your schools based on costs.
- Tell me about the Promise scholarship.
- Have you completed your FAFSA? Describe what you know about the FAFSA.
- Is there anything you think you could use or need that you do not have easy access to?
- Has there been anything that has been particularly surprising to you?
- Other areas in general where you are engaged in college planning
- Who has been important in your planning process?
- Who will be important in your decision-making process? How will they be involved with your decision? Probe: peers, family, school personnel, others.
- How do you plan to make your decision? What will you base your decision on?
- What else should I know about your experience with this process?

External Influencer Protocol

I have asked you to talk to me because _____ student has identified you as particularly important in his/her college planning process. He/She will be making a decision soon (or recently made a decision), and I am interested in hearing your perspective on their options and how you have been supporting them through this process.

Support
- Describe how you have been supporting the student.
  - Probe: specific activities (ie. college visits, college/career fairs, internships, conversations about the future, etc)? What types of things do you say to the student? Why have you gotten involved in working with the student? Did the student ask for your help? How do you use technology with the student?

Valued Opportunities
- How would you define success for this student?
- What would you find disappointing?
  - Probe: differences in academic programs, differences in institutions considered.

Barriers
- What do you see as this student's greatest barrier in postsecondary planning? In the future?
- How do you support the student when he/she faces barriers?

Student Needs
- Describe the student's greatest needs.
- Describe the student's strengths.
- When you think about this student's future, what are your concerns? Why?
- Describe the life you imagine for the student in 5 years? 10 years?

School-based resources
- What school-based resources have you or the student used in future planning? Anything been particularly helpful?
- Are there times when you felt the school should be providing additional information? Describe them to me.

Knowledge of student's higher education options

Knowledge of Financial Aid, Saginaw Promise, other financial opportunities

Other resources you have been accessing
- Are there any other resources you have been using to support the student? Describe them. How did you learn about them? Who did you use as resources or sources of information? Describe your use of technology in general. How about when working with the student?

Family Member/Influential Individual Survey

Where are you from? _____

Race/Ethnicity _____
Male _____ Female _____ \
How do you know the student? _____
What is your relationship with the student? _____
How long have you been supporting the student in figuring out his/her future plans? _____
What type of work do you do? _____
Describe your use of technology (computer, internet, other)

_____

_____

Anything else you want to share?

_____

_____

Did you attend college? _____Where? _____
What is your highest degree? HS ____A.A.____B.A. _____B.S.____M.A._____Other_____
What is your spouse's highest degree? HS____A.A____B.A____B.S.____M.A.____Other____
Are you a first generation college student? _____
How would you characterize your economic status when you were in HS?
_____
Were you Pell Grant eligible when you went to college? _____
How did you pay for school? _____
Anything else you want to share here

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Interview 3 Protocol

Please share with me your final decision.

How did you come to this decision?
        Probe: Factors of consideration, options considered, strategy used for decision-making

Who was involved in your decision? How were they involved?

What factors did you consider when making the decision?

Why did you select this option?

What was the most challenging part of this process?

What obstacles did you face?

What resources did you use for support?

What resources could you have benefited from?

What are you most concerned about?

What are you excited about?

Do you see this as a good option for you?
        Would this be a good option for other students at your school? For a sibling?

Any regrets? Any questions?

Appendix C   Consent and Assent Forms

Assent Form

<u>Assent to Participate in a Research Study (14-17 year olds)</u>
POSTSECONDARY PLANNING PROCESS: LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Principal Investigator: Kim Callahan Lijana, Doctoral Candidate, University of Michigan
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Deborah F. Carter, CSHPE, University of Michigan

Kim Callahan Lijana invites you to participate in a research study about the postsecondary planning process.

Expectations
If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in 3 audio-taped interviews. The interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. In addition, you will be asked to check-in weekly regarding your postsecondary planning process and share what you have done the past week and what you plan to do during that week for the duration of your senior year. The check-ins can be in-person (1 day a week at school), over email, or over the phone.

Benefits
Although you may not directly benefit from participating in this study, others may benefit because the study will allow for documentation and analysis of the student transition from your high school to what they plan and actually pursue upon graduation. Having to check-in weekly and reflect on your progress may help keep you organized and focused on your life after high school.

Risks
There are no risks associated with this study because the data collection is completely anonymous and the topic is not sensitive.

Compensation
You will receive $10 per interview.

Storage and future use of data
To keep your information safe, the researchers will not attach your name to any data; a study number will be used instead.

Confidentiality
I plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you. To keep your information safe, the audiotape of your interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet. The researcher(s) will enter study data on a computer that is password-protected. To

protect confidentiality, your real name will not be used in the written copy of the discussion. The researcher plans to keep this study data to use for future research about postsecondary planning.

There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly, including the University of Michigan. Also, if you tell me something that makes me believe that you or others have been or may be physically harmed, I may report that information to the appropriate agencies.

Voluntary nature of the study
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may also choose to not answer a question for any reason.

Contact information
If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling or your compensation for participating, you may contact Kim Callahan Lijana, klijana@umich.edu and Dr. Deborah F. Carter, faculty advisor, dfcarter@umich.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences, 540 E Liberty, Ste 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 936-0933 **[or toll free, (866) 936-0933]**, irbhsbs@umich.edu.

Assent
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

I agree to have my interview audiotaped.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Guardian Active Permission Form

[Date]
[Address]

Dear Guardian:

Kim Callahan Lijana, Ph.D. student, of the University of Michigan, School of Education invites your child to participate in a research study entitled *Postsecondary Planning Process: Life after High School.* You and your child are being contacted because your child is a high-achiever starting his/her senior year at Saginaw high school.

I would like to talk with your child about his or her postsecondary planning process. The purpose of this study is to better understand the student's planning process at Saginaw High School and to identify ways to provide students at Saginaw High School with better support services. I plan to ask 10 students from the senior class at Saginaw High School to participate in this study. This is a dissertation study in fulfillment of completion of my doctoral degree at the University of Michigan.

If you agree, your child will talk to an interviewer about topics such as career goals, education plans, steps they are pursuing to achieve their goals, and individuals who are supportive in the student's planning process. An interviewer will come to your child's high school to conduct 3 interviews throughout the school year at a time convenient for your child. Each interview is expected to take about 60 minutes to complete. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-taped. Your child will be paid $10 for completing each interview.

In addition, your child will be asked to check-in weekly regarding his or her postsecondary planning process and share what he or she has done in the past week and what he or she plans to do during that week for the duration of his or her senior year. The check-ins can be in-person (1 day a week at school), over email, or over the phone. Observations of the student engaged in the postsecondary planning process (ie. going to a job/college fair, filling out applications, working on college planning in a school class, etc.) may be used to supplement the interviews. In addition, if the student identifies an individual who is particularly influential, this person will be contacted and asked to participate in an interview for the study.

While your child may not directly benefit from participating in this study, others may benefit because the study will allow for documentation and analysis of the student planning process at Saginaw High School. Having to check-in weekly and reflect on his or her progress may help keep your student organize and focus on life after high school. I hope that this study will contribute to the improvement of postsecondary planning services in the Saginaw School District.

I plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you, your child or anyone important in your child's postsecondary planning process. To keep this information safe, the audiotape of your child's interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet. The researcher will enter study data on a computer that is password-

protected. To protect confidentiality, your child's real name and the names of any family members will not be used in the written copy of the discussion. The researcher(s) plan to keep this study data indefinitely for future research about the postsecondary planning process.

There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information your child provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure that the research is done safely and properly, including the University of Michigan. Also, if your child tells me something in the interview that makes me believe that your child or others have been or may be physically harmed, I may report that information to the appropriate agencies.

If you have questions about this research, including questions about the 3 interviews, weekly check-ins, observations or about your child's payment for participating, you may contact Kim Callahan Lijana, klijana@umich.edu and Dr. Deborah F. Carter, faculty advisor, dfcarter@umich.edu. You can also reach Kim Callahan Lijana at 202-725-7871.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences, 540 E Liberty, Ste 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 936-0933 **[or toll free, (866) 936-0933]**, irbhsbs@umich.edu.

Sincerely,

Kim Callahan Lijana, Doctoral Candidate
University of Michigan
School of Education
601 E. University
Ann Arbor. MI 48104

Guardian Permission

By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child, _____ to be part of the study entitled *Postsecondary Planning Process: Life After High School*. Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you allow your child to be part of the study, you may change your mind and withdraw your approval at any time. Your child may choose not to be part of the study, even if you agree, and may refuse to answer an interview question or stop participating at any time.

You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that the questions you have asked about the study have been answered and that you understand what your child will be asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

I give my permission for my child to participate in this study.

_____ _____
Signature   Date

I give my permission for the interview with my child to be audiotaped.

_____ _____
Signature   Date

Passive Guardian Permission

[Date]
[Address]

Dear Guardian:

Kim Callahan Lijana, Ph.D. student, of the University of Michigan, School of Education invites your child to participate in a research study entitled *Postsecondary Planning Process: Life after High School.* You and your child are being contacted because your child is a high-achiever starting his/her senior year at _____ high school.

I would like to talk with your child about his or her postsecondary planning process. The purpose of this study is to better understand the student's planning process at _____ high school and to identify ways to provide students at _____ high school with better support services. I plan to ask 20 students from the senior class at _____ high school to participate in this study. This is a dissertation study in fulfillment of completion of my doctoral degree at the University of Michigan.

If you agree, your child will talk to an interviewer about topics such as career goals, education plans, steps they are pursuing to achieve their goals, and individuals who are supportive in the student's planning process. An interviewer will come to your child's high school to conduct 3 interviews at a time convenient for your child. Each interview is expected to take about 60 minutes to complete. With your permission, the interviews will be audiotaped. Your child will be paid $10 for completing each interview.

In addition, your child will be asked to check-in weekly regarding his or her postsecondary planning process and share what he or she has done in the past week and what he or she plans to do during that week for the duration of his/her senior year. The check-ins can be in-person (1 day a week at school), over email, or over the phone. Observations of the student engaged in the postsecondary planning process (ie. going to a job/college fair, filling out applications, working on college planning in a school class, etc.) may be used to supplement the interviews. In addition, if the student identifies an individual who is particularly influential, this person will be contacted and asked to participate in an interview for the study.

While your child may not directly benefit from participating in this study, others may benefit because the study will allow for documentation and analysis of the student planning process at _____ high school. Having to check-in weekly and reflect on his or her progress may help keep the student organized and focused on life after high school. I hope that this study will contribute to the improvement of postsecondary planning services in the Saginaw School District.

I plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you, your child or anyone important in your child's postsecondary planning process. To keep this information safe, the audiotape of your child's interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet. The researcher will enter study data on a computer that is password-protected. To protect confidentiality, your child's real name and the names of any family

213

members will not be used in the written copy of the discussion. The researchers plan to keep this study data indefinitely for future research about the postsecondary planning process.

There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information your child provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure that the research is done safely and properly, including the University of Michigan. Also, if your child tells me something in the interview that makes me believe that your child or others have been or may be physically harmed, I may report that information to the appropriate agencies.

If you have questions about this research, including questions about the 3 interviews, weekly check-ins, observations or about your child's payment for participating, you may contact Kim Callahan Lijana, klijana@umich.edu and Dr. Deborah F. Carter, faculty advisor, dfcarter@umich.edu. You can also reach Kim Callahan Lijana at _____ phone number.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences, 540 E Liberty, Ste 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 936-0933 **[or toll free, (866) 936-0933]**, irbhsbs@umich.edu.

Sincerely,

Kim Callahan Lijana, Doctoral Candidate
University of Michigan
School of Education
601 E. University
Ann Arbor. MI 48104

Guardian Permission

Please sign and return this form to the researcher only if permission to participate in the study is DENIED. By signing this document, you are NOT allowing your child, _____ to be part of the study entitled *Postsecondary Planning Process: Life After High School*. If no letter is returned, you are consenting to ALLOW your student to participate in this study.

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you allow your child to be part of the study, you may change your mind and withdraw your approval at any time. Your child may choose not to be part of the study, even if you agree, and may refuse to answer an interview question or stop participating at any time.

You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that the questions you have asked about the study have been answered and that you understand what your child will be asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

I DO NOT give my permission for my child to participate in this study.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

I DO NOT give my permission for the interview with my child to be audiotaped.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Consent Form

<u>**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**</u>
POSTSECONDARY PLANNING PROCESS: LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Principal Investigator: Kim Callahan Lijana, Doctoral Candidate, University of Michigan
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Deborah F. Carter, CSHPE, University of Michigan

Kim Callahan Lijana invites you to participate in a research study about the postsecondary planning process. You have been contacted because a student at _____ high school has identified you as important and influential in his or her postsecondary planning process.

Expectations
If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to participate in 1-2 audiotaped interviews. The interviews will take approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreed upon time and location that is convenient for you.

Benefits
Although you may not directly benefit from being in this study, others may benefit because the study will allow for documentation and analysis of the student postsecondary planning process and the role of influential people in student's lives, like yourself. I hope that this study will contribute to the improvement of postsecondary planning services in the Saginaw School District.

Risks
There are no risks associated with this study because the data collection is completely anonymous and the topic is not sensitive.

Compensation
You will receive $15 per interview.

Storage and future use of data
To keep your information safe, the researchers will not attach your name to any data; a study number will be used instead.

Confidentiality
I plan to publish the results of this study, but will not include any information that would identify you or the student. To keep your information safe, the audiotape of your interview will be placed in a locked file cabinet. The researchers will enter study data on a computer that is password-protected. To protect confidentiality, your real name and the student's name will not be used in the written copy of the discussion. The researcher plans to keep this study data to use for future research about postsecondary planning.

There are some reasons why people other than the researchers may need to see information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for

making sure the research is done safely and properly, including the University of Michigan.

Voluntary nature of the study
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may also choose to not answer a question for any reason.

Contact information
If you have questions about this research, including questions about scheduling or your compensation for participating, you may contact Kim Callahan Lijana, klijana@umich.edu and Dr. Deborah F. Carter, faculty advisor, dfcarter@umich.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences, 540 E Liberty, Ste 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 936-0933 **[or toll free, (866) 936-0933]**, irbhsbs@umich.edu.

Consent
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in the study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records and one copy will be kept with the study records. Be sure that questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

I agree to participate in the study.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

I agree to have my interview audiotaped.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

References

Abraham, K. G., & Clark, M. A. (2006). Financial aid and students' college decisions: Evidence

from the District of Columbia tuition assistance grant program. *Journal of Human

Resources, 41*(3), 578-610.

Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the tool box: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and

bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and

Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

Adelman, C. (2006). *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion From High School

Through College.* Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.

Agarwal, R., Animesh, A., and Prasad, K. (2009). Research Note --- Social Interactions and the

"Digital Divide": Explaining Variations in Internet Use. *Information Systems Research,

20*(2), 277-294.

Alfonso, M. (2006). The impact of community college attendance on baccalaureate attainment.

Research in Higher Education, 47(8), 873-903

Astin, A. W. (1993). *What matters in college?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Avery, C., & Kane, T. J. (2004). Student perceptions of college opportunities. The Boston

COACH program. In *College choices: The economics of where to go, when to go, and how

to pay for it* (pp. 355-394). University of Chicago Press.

Baker, T. L., & Velez, W. (1996) Access to and opportunity in postsecondary education in the

United States: A review. *Sociology of Education,* extra issue, 82-101.

Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2005). The graduation gap: Using promoting power to examine the

number and characteristics of high schools with high and low graduation rates in the

nation and each state. *Center for Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) Policy Brief (January). Baltimore: CSOS*.

Bandura, A. (1995). *Self-efficacy in changing societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bastedo, M. & Jaquette, O. (2011). Running in place: Low-income students and the dynamics of higher education stratification. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 33(3):* 318-339.

Baum, S., Ma, J., & Payea, K. (2013). Education pays 2013. *College Board.* Retrieved December, 29, 2013.

Becker, G.S. (1993). *Human capital: A theoretical and empirical analysis with special reference to education (3rd edition)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Becker, G.S. (1962). Investment in human capital: A theoretical analysis. *Journal of Political Economy 70(5):* 9–49.

Berkner, L.K., He, S., and Forrest Cataldi, E. (2002). *Descriptive Summary of 1995–96 Beginning Postsecondary Students Six Years Later* (NCES 2003–151). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Bers, T. H. (2005). Parents of traditionally aged community college students: Communication and choice. *Research in Higher Education, 46*(4), 413-436.

Bers, T. H., & Galowich, P. M. (2002). Using survey and focus group research to learn about parents' roles in the community college choice process. *Community College Review, 29*(A), 67-81.

Bettinger, E. P., Long, B. T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012). The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the

H&R Block Fafsa Experiment*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*,*127*(3), 1205-1242.

Blau, P. & Duncan, O.D. (1967*). The American occupational structure*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In J. Karabel & A. H. Halsey (Eds.), *Power and ideology in education* (pp. 487-511). New York: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J.G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood Press.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society, and culture* (1990 ed.). London; Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Bowen, H.R. (1997). *Investment in learning: The individual and social value of American higher education.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Bowen, W. G. & Bok, D. (1998). *The shape of the river: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bowen, W.G., Chingos, M.M., & McPherson M.S. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (2002). Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited*. Sociology of Education.* 75, 1, 1-18.

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic life*. New York: Basic Books - Part II: Education and the structure of economic life (pp. 53-150).

Bowman, P.J. & St. John, E. (2012). *Diversity, Merit, and Higher Education: A Comprehensive Agenda for the 21st Century* (Readings on Equal Education, Vol. 25). New York: AMS Press.

Bozick, R., and Lauff, E. (2007). *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002): A First Look at the Initial Postsecondary Experiences of the Sophomore Class of 2002 (NCES 2008-308).* National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

Buchmann, C., DiPrete, T. A., & McDaniel, A. (2008). Gender inequalities in education. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *34*, 319-337.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Current Population Survey.* U.S. Department of Labor.

Cabrera, A.F., and La Nasa, S.M. (2001). On the path to college: Three critical tasks facing America's disadvantaged. *Research in Higher Education, 42,* 119–149.

Cabrera, A.F., and La Nasa, S.M. (2000). Three critical tasks America's disadvantaged face on their path to college. In A.F. Cabrera and S.M. La Nasa (eds.), *Understanding the college choice of disadvantaged students* (Vol. 107, pp. 23–29). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cahalan, M., & Perna, L. W. (2015). *Indicators of higher education equity in the United States: 45-Year trend report.*

Carnevale, A. P., & Desrochers, D. M. (2003). *Standards for what? The economics roots of K-16 Reform.* Princeton, N.J. Educational Testing Service.

Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2010). *Help wanted: Projections of job and education requirements through 2018*. Lumina Foundation.

Carnevale, A.P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020.* Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2013.

Ceja, M. (2006). Understanding the role of parents and siblings as information sources in the college choice process of Chicana students. *Journal of College Student Development*, *47*(1), 87-104.

Chapman, D.W. (1981). A model of student college choice. *The Journal of Higher Education, 52(5)*, 490–505.

Choy, S. (2001). *Students whose parents did not go to college: Postsecondary access, persistence, and attainment.* U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2002). *The American community college* (4th ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Coleman, J. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*, pp. S95-S120.

The College Board. (2011). *Home page*. Retrieved from http://www.collegeboard.org/

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2007). *The basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Deil-Amen, R. & Tevis, T. L. (2010). Circumscribed agency the relevance of standardized

    college exams for low SES high school students. *The Review of Higher Education, 33*(2),

    141-175.

DesJardins, S. L. (2002). An analytic strategy to assist institutional recruitment and marketing

    efforts. *Research in Higher Education, 43*(5), 531-553.

Dika, S.L., and Singh, K. (2002). Applications of social capital in educational literature:

    A critical synthesis. *Review of Educational Research, 7*2, 31–60.

DiMaggio, P., and Mohr, J. (1985). Cultural capital, educational attainment, and marital

    selection. *American Journal of Sociology, 90,* 1231–1261.

Dynarski, S. (2000). Hope for whom? Financial aid for the middle class and its impact on college

    attendance. *National Tax Journal, 53*(3), 629-661.

Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). *Moving beyond access: College success for low-income,*

    first generation students. Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of

    Opportunity in Higher Education.

Epstein, D. (2011). *Measuring inequity in school funding*. Center for American Progress.

    Washington, D.C.

Erickson, F. (1986). Culture difference and science education. *The Urban Review*, *18*(2), 117-

    124.

Farmer-Hinton, R. L. (2008). Social capital and college planning: Students of color using school

    networks for support and guidance. *Education and Urban Society, 41(1),* 127-157.

Flint, T. A. (1992). Parental and planning influences on the formation of student college choice

    sets. *Research in Higher Education, 33*, 689-708.

Freeman, K. (1999). The race factor in African Americans' college choice. *Urban Education, 34(1)*, 4-25.

Freeman, K. (1997). Increasing African Americans' participation in higher education: African American high-school students' perspectives. *The Journal of Higher Education, 68*(5), 523–550.

Freeman, K. (2005). *African Americans and college choice: The influence of family and school*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Frost, M. B. (2007). Texas students' college expectations: Does high school racial composition matter? *Sociology of Education, 80*, 43-66.

Goldsmith, P. A. (2004). Schools' racial mix, students' optimism, and the Black-White and Latino-White achievement gaps. *Sociology of Education, 77*, 121-147.

Grubb, N. W. (1991). *The long-run effects of proprietary schools on wages and earnings: Implications for federal policy*. Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley, School of Education.

Gullatt, Y., & Jan, W. (2003). How do pre-collegiate academic outreach programs impact college-going among underrepresented students. *Retrieved June*, *15*, 2008.

Hamrick, F., & Hossler, D. (1995). Active and passive searching in postsecondary educational decision making. *Review of Higher Education*, *19*, 179-198.

Hamrick, F. A., & Hossler, D. (1996). Diverse information-gathering methods in postsecondary decision-making. *Review of Higher Education, 19*(2), 179-98.

Hearn, J.C. (1988). Attendance at higher-cost colleges: Ascribed, socioeconomic, and academic influences on student enrollment patterns. *Economics of Education Review, 7*, 65–76.

Hearn, J.C. (1991). Academic and nonacademic influences on the college destinations of 1980 high school graduates. *Sociology of Education, 64*, 158-171.

Heller, D.E. (1997). Student price response in higher education: An update to Leslie and Brinkman. *The Journal of Higher Education 68*: 624–659.

Holland, M. M. (2014). Navigating the Road to College: Race and Class Variation in the College Application Process. *Sociology Compass*, *8*(10), 1191-1205.

Holland, Megan M. 2013. *'Unequal Playing Fields, Same Game: The College Application Process for Students at Diverse High Schools.'* Doctoral Dissertation, Department of Sociology Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three phase model and the implications for policy makers. *College and University, 2(3)*, 207-221.

Hossler, D., Braxton, J., & Coopersmith, G. (1989). Understanding student college choice. In J. Smart (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research Vol. 5*, pp. 231-238. New York: Agathon Press.

Hossler, D., Schmit, J., & Vesper, N. (1999). *Going to college: How social, economic, and educational factors influence the decisions students make*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Horvat, E.M. (2001). Understanding equity and access in higher education: The potential contribution of Pierre Bourdieu. In J.C. Smart (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (Vol. 16, pp. 158–171). New York: Agathon Press.

Hurtado, S., Inkelas, K.K., Briggs, C., and Rhee, B.S. (1997). Differences in college access and choice among racial/ethnic groups: Identifying continuing barriers. *Research in Higher Education, 38(1),* 43–75.

225

Ingels, S.J., & Dalton, B. (2013). *High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS:09) First Follow-up: A First Look at Fall 2009 Ninth Graders in 2012 (NCES 2014-360).* U.S Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved April 1, 2015 from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch.

Jackson, G. A. (1982). Public efficiency and private choice in higher education. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 4*(2), 377-447.

Joshi, P. V., Beck, K. A., & Nsiah, C. (2009). Student characteristics affecting the decision to enroll in a community college: Economic rationale and empirical evidence. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 33*(10), 805-822.

Kane, T. J. (2003). A quasi-experimental estimate of the impact of financial aid on college-going. *National Bureau of Economic Research,* Working paper #9703.

Kane, T. J. (1995). *Rising public college tuition and college entry: How well do public subsidies promote access to college?* (No. w5164). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Kane, T.J. (1999). *The Price of Admission: Rethinking How Americans Pay for College.* Brookings Institution Press (with Russell Sage Foundation), Washington, DC.

Kane, T. J. (2007). Evaluating the impact of the DC tuition assistance grant program. *Journal of Human Resources*, *42*(3), 555-582.

Klasik, D. (2012). Common Choices: The Effect of the Common Application on Students' College Enrollment and Success. In *Annual Meeting of the Association for Education Finance and Policy, Boston, MA*.

Kurlaender, M. (2006). Choosing community college: Factors affecting Latino college choice. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 133*, 7-16.

Lamont, M., and Lareau, A. (1988). Cultural capital: Allusions, gaps and glissandos in

recent theoretical developments. *Sociological Theory, 6*, 153–168.

Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: class, race, and family life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lareau, A. (1987). Social class differences in family-school relationships: The importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education, 60,* 73-85.

Lareau, A. & Horvat, E.M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education, 72,* 37-53.

Lareau, A. (2002). Invisible inequality: Social class and childrearing in Black families and White families. *American Sociological Review, 67,* 747-776.

Lee, V. E.. & Ekstrom, R. B. (1987). Student access to guidance counseling in high school. *American Educational Research Journal, 24,* 287-310.

Leslie, L. L., & Brinkman, P. T. (1988). *The economic value of higher education*. New York: American Council on Education, MacMillian Publishing Company.

Letawsky, N. R., Schneider, R. G., Pedersen, P. M., & Palmer, C. J. (2003). Factors influencing the college selection process of student-athletes: Are their factors similar to non-athletes. *College Student Journal*, *37*(4), 604.

Lin, N. (2001). *Social capital: A theory of social structure and action*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Litten, L. H. (1982). Different strokes in the applicant pool: Some refinements in a model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education, 53(4),* 383-402.

Long, M. C. (2004). College applications and the effect of affirmative action. *Journal of Econometrics, 121*, 319-342.

Long, B. T., & Kurlaender, M. (2009). Do community colleges provide a viable pathway to a

    baccalaureate degree? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *31*(1), 30-53.

Manski, C.F., and Wise, D. (1983). *College choice in America*. Cambridge: Harvard

    University Press.

Maxwell, J. A. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. *Harvard Educational*

    Review, 62(3), 279-300.

Mazzeo, C. (2010). College Prep for All? What We've Learned from Chicago's Efforts. Policy

    Brief. *Consortium on Chicago School Research*.

McDonough, P. M. (1998). Structuring college opportunities: A cross-case analysis of

    organizational cultures, climates, and habiti. In C.A. Torres and T. R. Mitchell (Eds.),

    Sociology of education: Emerging perspectives (pp.181-224). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

McDonough, P. M. (1994). Buying and selling higher education. The social construction of the

    college applicant. *Journal of Higher Education, 65*, 427-446.

McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure*

    Opportunity. Albany: State University of New York Press.

McDonough, P. M. (2005). *Counseling and college counseling in America's high schools.* Report

    from the National Association for College Admission and Counseling. Retrieved May 10,

    2008 from http://www.pathwaystocollege.net.

McDonough, P. M. (2004). *The school-to-college transition: Challenges and prospects*.

    American Council on Education, Center for Policy Analysis.

McDonough, P. (2005). Counseling matters: Knowledge, assistance, and organizational

    commitment in college preparation. In W. G. Tierney, Z. B. Corwin & J. E.

    Colyar (Eds.), *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach* (pp. 69

88). Albany: State University of New York Press.

McDonough, P. M., & Antonio, A. L., & Trent, J. W. (1997). Black students, Black colleges: An African American college choice model. *Journal for a Just and Caring Education, 3*(1), 9-36.

McDonough, P. M., & Calderone, S. M. (2006). The meaning of money: Perceptual differences between college counselors and low-income families. American Behavioral Scientist, 49(12), 1703-1718.

McPherson, M. S., & Schapiro, M. O. (1994). *College choice and family income: Changes over time in the higher education destinations of students from different income backgrounds.* Unpublished Paper. Retrieved from Eric: Nov. 28, 2007.

Mendez, J. (2003). *How students understand financial aid: A qualitative study of the college choice process* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (AAT 3110533)

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education: Revised and expanded form case study research in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S.B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merton, R. K. (Ed.). (1968). *Social theory and social structure*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Monroe, A. M. (2002). Factors affecting transfer decisions, *Community College Enterprise, 8*(2), 19-40.

Morrow, V. (1999). Conceptualising social capital in relation to the well-being of children and young people: A critical review. *Sociological Review, 47(4)*, 744–765.

Nieto, S. (1992). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. New York: Longman.

Nettles, M. T., & Perna L. W. (1997). *The African American education data book: Higher education and adult education* (Vol. 1). Fairfax, VA: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute.

Nolfi, G. J., Fuller, W. C., Corazzini, A. J., Epstein, W. H., Freeman, R. B., Manski, C. F., Nelson, V. I., & Wise, D. A. (1978). *Experiences of recent high-school graduates: The transition to work or postsecondary education*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Nora, A. (2004). The role of habitus and cultural capital in choosing a college, transitioning from high school to higher education and persisting in college among minority and nonminority students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 3(2),* 180–208.

Nunez, A., & Cuccaro-Alamin, S. (1998). *First-generation students: Undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education* (NCES Publication No. 98082). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.

O'Connor, C. (2000). Dreamkeeping in the inner city: Diminishing the divide between aspirations and expectations. In S. Danziger & A. C. Lin (Eds.), *Coping with poverty: The social contexts of neighborhood, work, and family in the African American community* (pp.105-140). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Orfield, G., & Lee, C. (2007). Historic Reversals, Accelerating Resegregation, and the Need for New Integration Strategies. *Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles*.

Orfield, G., & Paul, F. (1993). *High Hopes, Long Odds: A Major Report on Hoosier Teens and the American Dream*. Indianapolis: Indiana Youth Institute.

Orfield, G., Mitzel, H., Austin, T., Bentley, R., Bice, D., Dwyer, M. (1984). *The Chicago study of access and choice in higher education* (Report prepared for the Illinois Senate Committee on Higher Education). Chicago: Illinois Senate Committee.

Ortiz, A. M. (2003). The ethnographic interview. *Research in the college context: Approaches and methods*, 35-48.

Pascarella, E. & Terenzini, P. (1991). *How college affects students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Press.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Paulsen, M. B. (1990*). College choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 6. Washington, DC: The George Washington University.

Paulsen, M.B. (2001). The economics of human capital and investment in higher education. In M.B. Paulsen and J.C. Smart (eds.), *The finance of higher education: Theory, research, policy, and practice* (pp. 55–94). New York: Agathon Press.

Paulsen, M.B., and St. John, E.P. (2002). Social class and college costs: Examining the financial nexus between college choice and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 73(2),* 189–236.

Perez, P. A., & McDonough, P. M. (2008). Understanding Latina and Latino college choice: A social capital and chain migration analysis. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*.

Perna, L.W. (2000). Differences in the decision to enroll in college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education, 71(2),* 117-141.

Perna, L.W. (2000). Racial and ethnic groups differences in college enrollment decisions. *New*

Directions for Institutional Research, *107,* 65–83.

Perna, L. W. (2002). Pre-college outreach programs: Characteristics of programs serving

historically underrepresented groups of students. *Journal of College Student Development,*

43(1), 64-83.

Perna, L. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In J. Smart

(ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (Vol. XXI, pp. 99-157). New

York: Agathon Press.

Perna, L. W., Rowan-Kenyon, H. T., Thomas, S. L., Bell, A., Anderson, R., & Li, C.

(2008). The role of college counseling in shaping college opportunity: Variations across

high schools. *The Review of Higher Education, 31(2)*, 131–159.

Perna, L.W., & Titus, M. (2005). The relationship between parental involvement as social capital

and college enrollment: An examination of racial/ethnic group differences. *The Journal of*

Higher Education, 76(5), 485–518.

Perna, L. W., & Swail, W. S. (2001). Pre-college outreach and early intervention programs: An

approach to achieving equal educational opportunity. *Thought and Action, 17(1),* 99-110.

Plank, S.B., & Jordan, W.J. (2001). Effects of information, guidance, and actions on

postsecondary destinations: A study of talent loss. *American Educational Research Journal*

38(4): 947–979.

Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual*

Review of Sociology, 24, 1–24.

Portes, A. (2000). The two meanings of social capital. *Sociological Forum 15(1)*, 1-12.

Prescott, B. T., & Bransberger, P. (2012). Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High

School Graduates. *Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*.

Pryor, J. H., Hurtado, S., Saenz, V. B., Korn, J. S., Korn, Santos, J. L., & Korn, W. S. (2006). *The American freshman: National norms for fall 2006* (Research Summary). Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.

Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Coca, V., & Moeller, E. (2009). From high school to the future: Making hard work pay off. *Consortium on Chicago School Research.*

Roderick, M., Coca, V., & Nagaoka, J. (2011). Potholes on the road to college. *Sociology of Education, 84*(3), 178-211. doi: 10.1177/0038040711411280

Rodriguez, A. "Unpacking the Black Box: Estimating the High School-Level Effects of Undermatching Among Underrepresented Students" (2013). *Publicly Accessible Penn Dissertations.* Paper 794.http://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/794

Rooney, G. (2008). *Low-income, first-generation, African American and Latino students' perceptions of influencing factors on their successful path to enrollment in a four year college* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (AAT 3307619)

Ross, T., Kena, G., Rathbun, A., KewalRamani, A., Zhang, J., Kristapovich, P., and Manning, E. (2012). *Higher Education: Gaps in Access and Persistence Study* (NCES 2012-046). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

St. John, E. P. (1990). Price response in enrollment decisions: An analysis of the high school and beyond sophomore cohort. *Research in Higher Education, 31(2),* 161-176.

St. John, E. P. (1991). The impact of student financial aid: A review of recent research. *Journal of Student Financial Aid, 21(1),* 18-32.

St. John, E. P. (2002). The access challenge: Rethinking the causes of the opportunity gap. *Policy Issue Report # 2002-1*. Indiana Education Policy Center, Bloomington, IN.

St. John, E. P. (2004) Public policy and research on college access: Lessons learned from NCES research and state evaluation studies. In E. P. St. John (ed.), *Public policy and college access: Investigating the federal and state roles in equalizing postsecondary opportunity* (pp.181-196). New York: AMS Press, Inc.

St. John, E.P., Bigelow, V., Lijana, K.C., & Masse, J. (2015). *Left behind: Urban high schools and the failure of market reform.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.

St. John, E.P., and Asker, E.H. (2001). The role of finances in student choice: A review of theory and research. In M.B. Paulsen and J.C. Smart (eds.), *The finance of higher education: Theory, research, policy, and practice* (pp. 419–438). New York: Agathon Press.

St. John, E.P., and Paulsen, M.B. (2001). The finance of higher education: Implications for theory, research, policy, and practice. In M.B. Paulsen and J.C. Smart (eds.), *The finance of higher education: Theory, research, policy, and practice* (pp. 545–568). New York: Agathon Press.

St. John, E.P., Musoba, G.D., and Chung, C.G. (2004). Academic access: The impact of state education policies. In E.P. St. John (ed.), *Public policy and college access: Investigating the federal and state roles in equalizing postsecondary opportunity* (pp. 131–152). New York: AMS Press, Inc.

St. John, E.P., Paulsen, M.B., and Carter, D.F. (2005). Diversity, college costs, and postsecondary opportunity: An examination of the financial nexus between college choice and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76(5),* 545–569.

St. John, E.P., and Noell, J. (1989). The effects of student financial aid on access to

    higher education: An analysis of progress with special consideration of minority

    enrollments. *Research in Higher Education, 30*, 563–581.

Saenz, V. B., Hurtado, S., Barrera, D., Wolf, D., & Yeung, F. (2007). *First in my family:*

    A profile of first-generation college students at four-year institutions since

    1971. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.

Santiago, D. A. (2007). *Choosing Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs): A closer look at Latino*

    students' college choices. Report for Excellencia in Education, Washington, DC.

Sewell, W.H., Haller, Archibald O., Portes, A. (1994) The educational and early

    occupational attainment process. In D. B. Grusky (Ed.) *Social stratification in*

    sociological perspective (pp. 336-346). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Sherwin, J. (2012). Make Me a Match: Helping Low-Income and First-Generation Students

    Make Good College Choices. Policy Brief. *MDRC*.

Smith, M. J., & Fleming, M. K. (2006). African American parents in the search stage of college

    choice: Unintentional contributions to the female to male college enrollment gap. *Urban*

    Education, 41(1), 71-100.

Smith, J., Pender, M., & Howell, J. (2012). The full extent of student-college undermatch.

    Economics of Education Review, 32, 247–261. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.11.001.

Snyder, T.D., and Dillow, S.A. (2013). *Digest of Education Statistics 2012* (NCES 2014-015).

    National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department

    of Education. Washington, DC.

Sokatch, A. (2006). Peer influences on the college-going decisions of low socioeconomic status

    urban youth. *Education and Urban Society*, *39*(1), 128-146.

Somers, P., Haines, K., Keene, B., Bauer, J., Pfeiffer, M., McCluskey, J., Settle, J., & Sparks, B. (2006). Towards a theory of choice for community college students. Community College *Journal of Research & Practice, 30*(1), 53-67.

Stage, F. K., & Hossler, D. (1989). Differences in family influences on college attendance plans for male and female ninth graders. *Research in Higher Education*, *30*(3), 301-315.

Stake, R. E. (2005). The Sage handbook of qualitative research. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, 443-466.

State Higher Education Executive Officers. (2010). State Higher Education Finance. Retrieved from http://www.sheeo.org/finance/shef/SHEF_FY10.pdf

Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stokes, T., & Somers, P. (2004). *Two-year college choice: A national study*. Unpublished paper. Retrieved from ERIC: Nov. 28, 2007.

Symonds, W., Schwartz, R., and Ferguson, R. (2011). Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st century. Report Issued by the *Pathways to Prosperity Project*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Talavera-Bustillos, V. H. (1998). *Chicana college choice and resistance: An exploratory study of first-generation Chicana college students* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses database. (AAT 9906220)

Terenishi, R.T., Ceja, M., Antonio, A. L., Allen, W. R. & McDonough, P. M. (2004). The college-choice process for Asian Pacific Americans: Ethnicity and socioeconomic class in context. *Review of Higher Education, 27(4),* 427-551.

Terenzini, P.T., Cabrera, A.F., and Bernal, E.M. (2001). *Swimming Against the Tide: The Poor in American Higher Education*. Report No. 2001-1. New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board.

Tierney, W. G. (2002). Parents and families in precollege preparation: The lack of connection between research and practice. *Educational Policy, 16(4)*, 80-91.

Tierney, W. G., & Auerbach, S. (2005). Toward developing an untapped resource: The role of families in college preparation. In W.G. Tierney, Z.B. Corwin, and J.E. Colyar (eds.), *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach* (pp. 29-48). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Tierney, W. G., & Venegas, K. M. (2009). Finding money on the table: Information, financial aid, and access to college. *Journal of Higher Education, 80(4),* 363-388.

Tinto, V. (1975). The distributive effects of public junior college availability. *Research in Higher Education, 3*, 261-274.

Tomas Rivera Policy Institute at University of Southern California. (2004). *Caught in the financial aid information divide: A national survey of Latino perspectives on financial aid.* Reston, VA: The Sallie Mae Fund.

Trent, W., Orr, M.T, Ranis, S., & Holdaway, J. (2007). Transition to college: Lessons from the disciplines. *Teachers College Record, 109(10*), 2207-2221. Retrieved June 5, 2010 from http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=12594

U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 1967-2012.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2007-2011.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2008-2012.

U.S. Department of Education. (2014). Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011-12.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2012* (NCES 2014-015), Chapter 3.

U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, First Follow-Up Restricted Use File

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Public Elementary and Secondary School Student Enrollment and Staff Counts from the Common Core of Data: School Year 2010-2011, First Look.

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies.* New York: Simon and Shuster.

Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zeidner, T. (2006). Information and access: Modeling the nexus of the academic preparation and financial aid literature, *Peabody Journal of Education, 81(4)*, 118-138.