"It's the Perfect Baby Step": African American Students' Community College Choice
and Transfer to Four-Year Colleges and Universities

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this and future intellectual pursuits to my loving wife,

best friend, and life partner Maria Christine P. Morrice; my grandmother

Carmen I. Gittens; grandfather Santiago Morrice; mother Dr. Ana C. Morrice;

father Aris Latham; brother Orisa S. Morrice, and all our forgotten ancestors

who lost their lives and voices building the Panama Canal. The historical

antecedents of their strength and perseverance continue to guide me and

serve as the cornerstone for my intellectual and professional endeavors.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Figures

List of Tables

Table

List of Appendices

Appendices

List of Abbreviations

CCC	California Community College
CSU	California State University
CSUBH	California State University, Bontrager Hills
CSUMC	California State University, Middle California
FAFSA	Free Application for Federal Student Aid
GPA	Grade Point Average
HBCU	Historically Black College or University
PWI	Predominantly White Institution
SPSU	San Parnard State University
SU	Selgman University
TAG	Guaranteed Transfer Agreement
UC	University of California
UCSP	University of California, San Parnard
UCSW	University of California, South West
UDC	University of Downtown California
UP	University of Perris
USP	University of San Parnard

Abstract

Community colleges offer students an alternate pathway for baccalaureate degree attainment. Statistical data has shown that degree-seeking students can use community colleges to facilitate transfer to four-year institutions. Transfer rates from community colleges to four-year institutions are between 25% and 40%. Community college enrollment is rising and more students are choosing these institutions as their postsecondary entry point. Community colleges are especially popular among African American students. While increased postsecondary participation is encouraging, African American students in California are more likely to choose community colleges than students from other racial groups. In addition, African American community college students have lower four-year transfer rates than their White peers.

Quantitative studies have addressed the college choice and upward transfer process of community college students. However, gaps are present: an examination of African American students' college choice processes and the use of qualitative methods. I addressed these gaps in this study. This investigation answered four pertinent questions: Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community college, what factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to, what role do community colleges play in preparing baccalaureate degree seeking African American students for their transition to four-year institutions, and how do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions?

African American students revealed that organizational, social and cultural, and individual and psychological variables, influenced their community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Participants discussed that community colleges act as preparatory spaces that allowed students additional time to finalize their academic and professional plans, and prepare for transfer to four-year institutions. Students also revealed that finances, proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines influenced students' decision to attend community college and their formation of potential four-year transfer destinations. Participants also revealed that major and career choices influenced their formation of four-year transfer choice sets. Findings also revealed that students' academic performance didn't match their perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. Participants also discussed that enrolling in community college increased students' perceptions of their ability to succeed at four-year institutions (college self-efficacy).

Chapter I

Introduction

Choosing a college in the 21st century is a complex endeavor. Students' college

choice decisions are no longer guided by finding a life partner, religion, or the influence

of relatives (Castle, 1938; Comfort, 1925; Corey, 1936; Reeves, 1932; Reinhardt, 1938;

Ripperger, 1933). Today, prospective college students are more instrumental in their

selection of a college and have numerous options in the postsecondary marketplace.

From community colleges to technical for-profit universities, public master's level

institutions, and highly selective private four-year universities, it is clear that students

have a variety of institutional types to choose from. With over 3,000 higher education

institutions in the postsecondary landscape, it is not surprising that student anxiety about

the college choice process has reached a fevered pitch (Walpole, McDonough, Bauer,

Gibson, Kanyi, & Toliver, 2005). Selecting a college is an important and life altering

decision, and increased scrutiny over college choice outcomes has placed strain on

prospective college students' and their families. Absent from this discussion are the

many ways in which psychological variables influence decision-making and the plausible

extension of these variables on college choice research.

The decision to attend college and the selection of an institution is perhaps the

most important social and economic decision an individual can make. College graduates

have higher lifetime earnings, longer life expectancy, commit fewer crimes, and have

higher levels of civic engagement (Baum & Payea, 2004; Hill & Hoffman, 2005).

College[1] choice research seeks to understand the choices students make as they map their

path to postsecondary education. Research in this area focuses on the traditional pathway

of high school-to-college access; and variables that influence the decision to attend

college, the search for colleges, and the selection of a college. Research has found that

student enrollment in college is inevitably related to financial standing and racial

background. Students from high-income families are more likely to attend college and

more likely to attend highly selective institutions than students from low-income families

(Carnevale & Rose, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). In addition,

African American students are less likely to attend college than their White counterparts,

and those who do attend college are more likely to attend less selective institutions

(Bennett & Xie, 2000; Hearn, 1984, 1990). Despite increases in college enrollment,

African American students still do not attend college at the same rate as their White

peers, yet they tend to have higher academic aspirations than other racial groups

(Ellwood & Kane, 2000; Hearn, 1991). The "Black-White" gap in college enrollment

continues to persist, as 35% of African American students attend college while 44% of

White students attend college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

In the last 25 years, college choice research has expanded its scope to include

community colleges. These institutions represent a segment of postsecondary education

that provides students with an alternative path to baccalaureate degree completion.

Originally established by William Rainey Harper as "junior colleges" or six-year high

schools, these institutions were erected under the premise of providing faculty with more

time to devote to their research interests (Witt, Wattenberg, Gollatscheck, & Suppiger,

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[1] Throughout this dissertation **college** refers to four-year colleges and universities. This distinction must be made as I discuss both four-year and two-year colleges.

1994). By bracketing the initial two years of a traditional four-year education, these institutional types separated the universities' upper and lower divisions into junior colleges and university colleges respectively. Founders posited that when students transferred into the upper division they would be better prepared for the social and academic rigors of college. The first public junior college was founded in Joilet, Illinois in 1901 and offered post-diploma courses and a two-year curriculum. Junior college students would complete a prescribed course of study before transferring to the University of Chicago; University of Illinois; Urbana-Champaign, or Northwestern University. After transferring from junior college students would be classified as juniors in academic standing (Witt et al., 1994).

The historical antecedents of the junior college established the transfer function of these unique institutions. Founded as bridges to four-year institutions, junior college students regularly sought to prepare for upper division coursework (and eventual baccalaureate degree attainment) by attending a junior college for two years after the completion of high school. Early junior colleges were highly regarded and offered a rigorous curriculum that prepared students for a seamless transition into upper division coursework at four-year institutions. The transitory role of junior colleges was an important factor in their early success. The increased role of junior colleges prompted the President's Commission on Higher Education (1947) to coin the term "community college" to reflect their role in serving the needs of the broader community (United States, 1948). Often referenced as the new land grant institution, the community college has been classified as an academic institution that truly serves the public and is widely known as the common-man university (Palinchak, 1973).

Baccalaureate degree seeking students who choose to attend community college can transfer to a four-year college or university after completing the requisite coursework. While research on community college choice and transfer is not as robust as traditional four-year college choice outcomes, previous research has found that finances, geography, parents, academic performance, high school climate and counselors, influence students' decision to attend a community college (Bers & Galowich, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006; Somers, Haines, Keene, Bauer, Pfeiffer, McCluskey, Settle, & Sparks, 2006; Stokes & Somers, 2004). The road to baccalaureate degree completion for community college students also involves transfer to a traditional four-year college or university. Research on community college transfer tends to focus on students' successful transfer to a four-year college and few studies have investigated variables that influence students' selection of a four-year transfer institution. Research on transfer has found that socioeconomic status, academic aspirations, self-concept, employment, enrollment status, academic preparation and performance, and vocational education, all play a role in students' transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Hagedorn, Moon, Cypers, Maxwell, & Lester, 2006; Holmstrom & Bisconti, 1974; Kinnick & Kemper, 1988; Kraemer, 1995; Lee & Frank, 1990; Roksa, 2006; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010; Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wang, 2010).

The growing body of educational research on community college choice and transfer can be linked to disparities in four-year college choice outcomes. In addition, the influx of underrepresented students on community college campuses has changed the scope of community college choice and transfer outcomes. Specifically, an increase of

African American community college students during the last 25 years has played a role in sustaining Black-White college enrollment gaps (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). Currently over 50% of African American students in postsecondary education are enrolled in community colleges, while only 40% of their White peers select this institutional type as their point of entry. This equates to roughly one million African American students enrolled in 1,200 plus community colleges across the country. We must note that community colleges serve different student populations, and not all students are seeking transfer to a four-year college or university. However, of those African American students enrolled in community colleges, 35% - 50% have four-year transfer aspirations and are seeking a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008).

African American students who attend community colleges, and have four-year transfer aspirations, may encounter challenges with this pathway. While transfer rates to four-year institutions are 25% - 40% for White students, this percentage is lower for African American students (Hagedorn et al., 2006; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Roska & Calcagno, 2010). African American students who are successful in the transfer process have an additional impediment, as they are less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than African American students who entered a four-year institution directly from high school (Berkner, He, Mason, & Wheeless, 2007; Dougherty, 1994). Low-income community college students endure further impediments, as increased access to higher education has been accompanied by rising inequality (Altbach, 2010). The purchasing power of student financial aid, coupled with rising low-income enrollment in community colleges; and lower persistence rates, have left students with a powerful battle cry in their quest for a baccalaureate degree (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2010).

African American participation in postsecondary education is encouraging; however, some researchers argue that enrollment gains at the community college level are evidence of sustained inequality in higher education (Astin, 1983; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Karabel, 1972). Long-standing educational debates have questioned the role of community colleges (Dougherty, 1994). Opponents of these institutions have argued that community colleges are organizational structures that "cool" the academic ambitions of under-prepared students and reproduce social inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Clark, 1960a, 1960b; Dougherty, 1994). On the other hand, proponents have argued that community colleges serve a vital role for some student populations (Dougherty, 1994; Griffith & Connor, 1994). Recently, scholars have embraced both sides of this debate and posit that community colleges provide opportunities for some students, while also sustaining inequality for others (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). Theoretical approaches anchor the community college debate, but the practical importance of these institutions is rarely in contention. Community colleges serve a wide variety of functions in the educational marketplace and their importance in the economic development of this country is well documented (Griffith & Connor, 1994; White House, 2010; Witt et al., 1994).

In practice, the concentration of African American students at the lowest end of the higher education pyramid is cause for concern. Community college students from all racial groups tend to have high dropout and moderate transfer rates, and these statistics are lower for African American students (Cohen & Brawer, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Driscoll, 2007; Grubb, 1993). Educational disparities in California further highlight these concerns. Currently, 70% of African American students are enrolled in community colleges, while 60% of White students choose this educational pathway (California

Postsecondary Education Commission, 2009). Given the number of African American students enrolled in California community colleges, and evidence of lower transfer rates, it is evident that inequities are present in community college outcomes. With 110 community colleges offering transfer preparation to four-year institutions, the community college pathway to the baccalaureate is widely promoted in the state of California. However, given the outlook for African American community college students, it is possible this institutional type may not be an optimum path for baccalaureate degree completion.

Research on students' community college choice and four-year transfer decisions is still in its infancy. Evidence of this is demonstrated by the lack of research on the educational choices of underrepresented students. There is also a gap in the use of psychological constructs to understand the complexity of students' postsecondary choices. In particular, there are many unanswered questions about African American community college students' pathway to the baccalaureate and the choices that lead to their enrollment in traditional four-year institutions. This study addressed these concerns by using self-efficacy to investigate African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. This study addressed the following research questions:

A. Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community college?

What factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to (e.g., four-year transfer choice set)?

B. What role do community colleges play in preparing baccalaureate degree seeking African American students for their transition to four-year institutions?

How do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions?

Purpose of the Study

This study utilized qualitative methods to examine African American students' community college choice and transfer to four-year institutions. The purpose of this study was three fold. First, this examination sought to add to the college choice literature on community college choice and transfer. Previous research on community college choice and transfer primarily used quantitative methods to investigate students' decisions. The use of qualitative methods in four-year college choice research led to improvements in our ability to contextualize students' decisions, and this study has a similar influence on community college choice and transfer research. Second, this study sought to strengthen the quality of community college research by using a theoretical construct to examine community college choice and transfer. Current research in this area of inquiry is devoid of such theoretical application. Specifically, this study examined how students' experiences in community college influenced their perceptions of self-efficacy. In addition, this study sought to identify organizational, social and cultural, and individual and psychological factors that influenced African American students' community college choice and the formation of their four-year transfer choice sets.

Third and most important, this study sought to shed further light on gaps in Black-White college choice outcomes, and specifically at the community college level. Previous college choice research focused on gaps in four-year college choice outcomes. By examining the experiences of African American students, this study sought to bridge gaps in our comprehension of **community college choice** and **four-year transfer** outcomes. Through the lived experiences of these students, this study serves as a foundation for future research on African American community college students.

Statement of the Problem

Throughout all levels of the educational enterprise there is evidence of unequal student outcomes (Dimaggio, 1982; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McDonough, 1997). Current educational discourse is similar to that of decades past: how do we provide equal access to the social, cultural, economic and intellectual byproducts associated with baccalaureate degree attainment? Racial and socioeconomic disparities in college choice outcomes are well documented, but there is a paucity of research investigating similar gaps in African American community college choice and transfer. This is surprising, given that research has demonstrated African American students are less likely to enroll in college than their White counterparts, and if they do enroll in college they are concentrated in community colleges (Perna, 2000).

In California, community colleges have become the institution of choice for African American students. Currently, 70% of African American students who pursue postsecondary education in California select community colleges as their point of entry. When compared to 60% of their White peers – this gap is cause for concern. Attending a community college and seeking transfer to a four-year institution is an alternate pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment. Baccalaureate degree seeking community college students face a difficult challenge, as transfer rates hover around 25% - 40% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). However, African American students are further disadvantaged, as they have lower transfer rates than their White peers (Hagedorn et al., 2006; Roska & Calcagno, 2010). And African American students who succeed in the transfer process are less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than their peers who attended a four-year institution after high school (Berkner, et al., 2007; Dougherty, 1994).

Significance of the Problem

The American educational system is often regarded as an accessible opportunity structure for those seeking upward social mobility (Reese, 2005). Furthermore, individuals from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds have the ability to pursue educational endeavors that will improve their social and economic status. Despite these claims, African Americans have historically endured substantial barriers in the educational enterprise, and fare lower than their White peers on a variety of educational markers (Brown, 2003). For decades, African American access to postsecondary education remained at the forefront of educational discourse, and the topic is just as germane today. The promotion of equal opportunity through public higher education continues to erode for all student populations (Mumper, 2003). Discourse regarding equal opportunity is an appropriate topic for African American students, as their enrollment in community colleges (less selective and more affordable institutional types) continues to increase (Cohen & Brawer, 2002).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided the impetus for colleges and universities to incorporate affirmative action into their admission practices (Mumper, 2003). The following 50 years focused on policy initiatives to ameliorate inequality and level the playing field for African Americans to gain admission to selective institutions (Bowen & Bok, 1998). While these efforts are noteworthy and merit interest and resources, perhaps the more pressing concern for social equality is addressing the high level of African American enrollment in community colleges. There is no segment of the access debate that warrants exclusion; however, it is essential that we reconsider the important role of community colleges in providing access to the baccalaureate.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Literature discussed in this chapter provides a background on four-year college choice research, an overview of the problem under investigation, and a review of the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study. This chapter begins with a review of research on college choice for the general student population. It is important to have baseline knowledge of four-year college choice outcomes before proceeding to a review of literature on the problem under investigation. In the following section, I review research on four-year college choice for African American students. A review of African American four-year college choice outcomes is also important, as the literature base on African American community college choice and four-year transfer is negligible.

After reviewing background literature for the study, I discuss research that provides an overview of the problem: community college choice and four-year transfer. A comprehensive understanding of these two college choice processes is needed, as research on African Americans and community colleges focuses on retention and academic achievement. Community college pathways to the baccalaureate are central to this investigation, and in this section I review research on students' initial decision to attend community college. Additionally, I review literature on variables that influence community college students' transfer to four-year colleges and universities. I conclude this section with a review of self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy. In the following

section, I introduce an integrated conceptual framework for African American community college choice and four-year transfer. I conclude this chapter by proposing that self-efficacy can be used to understand African American students' perceptions of their ability to transfer and succeed at four-year institutions.

This study of community college choice and four-year transfer in the African American student population is an important contribution to the field. Previous research on community college choice and transfer identified a number of organizational, social and cultural, and individual factors that influence these processes. Thematic findings from this investigation revealed that psychological variables should also be considered in students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. The addition of self-efficacy to the college choice decision matrix allows researchers and practitioners to consider how this important construct can influence student decisions in less affluent educational spaces.

College choice, community college choice, and community college transfer can be bracketed under the broader category of students' post-high school educational decisions. The development of research on community college choice and transfer research is minimal and this area of inquiry has remained stagnant over the last decade. Meanwhile, four-year college choice research has made several groundbreaking advancements. Therefore, it is helpful to review previous research on four-year college choice before proceeding with literature relevant to the problem under investigation. A review of the approaches, findings, and gaps in four-year college choice research will provide much needed background before I proceed to a discussion of community college choice and four-year transfer.

College Choice

Choice can be broadly defined as an act or instance of choosing a course of action (choice, 2008). Implicit in the term college choice is the notion that individuals make choices about college, and a cursory review of choice in decision-making will endow the reader with a foundation from which a discussion of college choice will ensue. Choice can be examined from a variety of theoretical viewpoints and numerous variables influence the choices that individuals make throughout their lifetime. College choice research seeks to unpack the myriad of variables that influence the choices students make as they navigate their way to higher education. Students engender their road to college as early as the seventh grade, when references to a college education are commonplace (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). The developmental process by which a student ultimately attends college is commonly referred to as college choice in educational research (Freeman, 2005; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994). While other researchers have made attempts to "re-brand" the term college choice, this widely used moniker has cemented itself as the referent tagline for how students decide to attend college, search for and apply to colleges, and ultimately select a college to attend (Hearn, 1991; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997).

College choice research is approached from several prominent theoretical frameworks: economic, sociological, and social-psychological. These frameworks are rooted in theoretical traditions about how society at large operates or merges intellectual traditions to inform a broader understanding of college choice. Economic frameworks utilize econometric models and human capital theory to assert the notion that students' decision to attend a college is based on their evaluation of perceived benefits associated

13

with attending a specific institution. Specifically, students consider the costs associated with attending a college and calculate whether the benefits of an institution outweigh the benefits of alternative educational or workforce options. Sociological frameworks approach college choice from the theoretical lens of sociology and investigate how status attainment, social and cultural capital, and habitus, influence students college choices. These constructs focus on how students' individual and family background characteristics influence their college choices. Social-psychological frameworks investigate college choice by examining institutional and individual psychological factors that influence student decisions.

In terms of college choice research, several prominent theoretical constructs are employed by the afore-mentioned frameworks: human capital theory, status attainment theory, social and cultural capital, and habitus. Human capital theory is derived from economic perspectives of rational choice theory and posits that individuals make educational choices akin to financial investments. Individuals must consider the cost of their investment based on future earnings, prior to deciding to invest the time, money, and labor into acquiring an education. The individual action of investing in education provides for the acquisition of additional skills, and in theory increases individuals' potential earnings after degree completion. Thus, students analyze the costs and benefits associated with a particular level of educational attainment (or vocational training) and proceed to choose the option that yields the highest economic returns (Becker, 1976). In terms of college choice, human capital theory postulates that students evaluate the costs and benefits of attending a particular institution instead of another and subsequently select the college that will provide the highest return on their investment.

While human capital theory is focused on cost-benefit analysis, status attainment theory argues that individual educational choices are influenced by families' social status. Specifically, parental levels of educational attainment, family income, occupational status, and social standing, have an influence on the educational attainment of their children (Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972). Thus, higher levels of parental social status serve as a means by which their children will have higher levels of degree aspirations and seek higher levels of educational attainment. Often categorized as socioeconomic status, status attainment research is concerned with the role of various occupational statuses and positions in the social hierarchy. Status attainment theory offers insight into factors that influence students' college aspirations that are formed prior to and during students' decision to attend college.

Bourdieu (1977, 1986) outlined several forms of capital as distributable structural representations of our social world. Based on the notion of perpetual exchanges in economic capital, Bourdieu posited that material exchanges can also be manifested in non-economic forms of capital, and three forms of capital are present in human society: economic, cultural, and social. Social capital refers to the sum of personal networks, relationships, and group memberships that are available for redemption in a variety of uses. These networks and relationships can be considered as investments that will yield returns for the bearer (Bourdieu, 1986). In college admissions, social capital can influence college choice outcomes by providing students with access to information networks about the college admission process (Ceja, 2006).

Cultural capital can be defined as a transposable durable form of capital that can be represented in various states and under some circumstances can be converted into

economic capital. When discussed under the premise of capital as a mechanism of economic investment, cultural capital can be viewed as the portion of an investment portfolio that is rooted in cultural practices, values, and outlooks (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital represents culture and dispositions developed over time, physical artifacts, and educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). In terms of college choice, cultural capital has been demonstrated to influence students' relative value of a postsecondary education, knowledge of college admissions, and enrollment in college (McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004; Perna, 2000). Recently, Musoba and Baez (2009) have called for researchers to use social and cultural capital in conjunction with each other, while work by Martin and Spenner (2009) found that social and cultural capital were difficult to disentangle. Bourdieu (1977) also introduced habitus as a construct to understand how routines and practices in our daily existence reproduce themselves as forms of tacit knowledge that are internalized in our habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). In terms of college choice, habitus can effect the decision to attend college and the decision to attend a particular institution (McDonough, 1994, 1997; Nora, 2004).

Early attempts to model the college choice process were offered by Chapman (1981), Jackson (1982), and Litten (1982). Chapman's (1981) model asserted that students' background characteristics, external influences, fixed college characteristics, and college communication efforts, all influence the selection of a postsecondary institution. Jackson (1982) expanded on Chapman's model and incorporated students' aspirations to attend college (preference), their formation of college options (exclusion), and their selection of a college (evaluation). These foundational models laid groundwork for the development of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) seminal model of college choice.

Derived from Jackson (1982) and Litten (1982), Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice posits that college enrollment is embedded in the three-stage process of deciding to attend college (predisposition), searching for a college (search), and the final selection of a college (choice). Hossler and Gallager (1987) proposed that in the *predisposition* stage students are in the planning stages of their post-high school plans and are undecided about attending college. Students in the *search* stage have made the decision to attend college and are searching for colleges. In the final *choice* stage, students decide which institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Previous research has found that individual, social, cultural, organizational, and policy variables, influenced the three stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice. Table 2.1 summarizes these findings.

Table 2.1

Summary of Variables Influencing College Choice

Stage	Individual	Social/Cultural	Organizational/Policy
Predisposition	Grade Level Academic Performance Extracurricular Activities	Race Gender Parental Income Parental Education Socioeconomic Status Parental Encouragement Extended Family and Peers	Teachers School Racial Makeup
Search	Academic Ability	Race Family Income Socioeconomic Status	Tuition Cost College Counselors Financial Aid Policy Postsecondary Marketing
Choice	Economic Expectations	College Rankings Parental Education Parental Occupation Socioeconomic Status Parental Encouragement	Financial Aid High Schools

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) prominent three-stage model of college choice provides a developmental explanation of how high school students navigate the process of deciding to attend college and selecting a college. Despite the vast utility of this college choice model, it is limited to traditional age college bound students. Specifically, this framework lacks the ability to appropriately model students who remove themselves from the predisposition stage and return to college as adults. Non-traditional students remove themselves from the predisposition stage during high school and ultimately re-enter into the search stage during adulthood. Students who spend extended periods of time in the labor force prior to entering college may have geographic limitations in the college choice process, and that may result in a different model of college choice for this student population (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997).

Students in the *predisposition* stage are undecided about whether they will attend college. The importance of aspirations cannot be understated. Students' probability of college enrollment is increased if they make a decision by the tenth grade, and in fact on average students decide about college by the tenth grade (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, Ventresca, & Outcalt, 2000). Research has found that in the predisposition stage individual variables such as grade level, academic performance, and participation in extracurricular activities; and social and cultural variables such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, parental income and education, parental encouragement and involvement, peers, siblings, and extended family; and organizational variables such as teachers and high school racial composition, influence students' decision to attend college (Falsey & Haynes, 1984; Frost, 2007; Goldsmith, 2004; Hearn, 1984; Hossler et al., 1999; Manski & Wise, 1983; McDonough,1997; Qian & Blair, 1999).

The second stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is categorized as the *search* stage, and students are now utilizing various resources to search for colleges. The college search process is perhaps one of the more understudied and undervalued aspects of the college choice process. It is also a daunting task for high school students and their respective families. The complexity of the search process also comes at a time when students are applying to more colleges than ever before (McDonough, 1997). Currently over 37% of college bound high school students apply to five or more colleges and these numbers have increased since the 1950's, when only 8% of applicants applied to five or more colleges (Paulsen, 1990). Research on the search stage has demonstrated that individual, social and cultural variables such as socioeconomic status, family income, academic ability, and race; and organizational variables such as institutional marketing procedures, college counselors, tuition and financial aid policies; and public policy variables such as statewide financial aid programs, influence students' college search processes (Abraham & Clark, 2006; Dynarski, 2000; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Hossler et al., 1999; Jackson, 1982; Kane, 2003; Litten, 1982; McDonough, 1994, 1997; McDonough, Korn, & Yamasaki, 1997; Thomas, 2004; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983).

The final stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice is the *choice* stage. This stage is comprised of students who have already decided to attend college (predisposition), searched for and applied to colleges (search), and received offers of admission. Students in the choice stage now face the task of deciding which college to attend. This crucial decision usually occurs in students' senior year of high school, as 70% of students decide which college to attend during their final year (Hossler et al., 1999). Students generally get accepted to their first college choice (Hossler et al., 1999;

19

Karen, 1988; Manski & Wise, 1983). However, racial differences exist in students' decision to attend their first college choice (Freeman, 1999a, 2005; Hurtado et al., 1997; Maxey, Lee, & McLure, 1995, Smith & Fleming, 2006). Research on the choice stage found individual, social and cultural variables such as socioeconomic status, parental education and occupation, parental student encouragement and involvement, and economic expectations; and organizational or policy variables such as financial aid, statewide financial aid programs, high schools, local colleges and institutional prestige and ranking, influence students' decision to select a college (DesJardins, 2002; Griffith & Rask, 2007; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Reynolds, 2007; St. John, Musoba, Simmons, & Chung, 2002; Wolniak & Engberg, 2007).

The college choice process of high school students is complex. Students' decisions can be influenced by any number of background characteristics, organizational high school variables, institutional postsecondary, and public policy factors; the culmination of which leads to student decisions to attend college and the selection of a college. The dominant conceptual framework offered by Hossler & Gallagher (1987) has proven to be a useful tool in modeling the developmental stages of college choice for high school students. Despite these intellectual advancements, there are still lingering questions about the variables that influence students' college choice decisions. The majority of these questions are related to racial differences found in college choice processes and outcomes. Specifically, college choice research has yet to develop a sustainable model of how traditionally underrepresented students navigate their college choice decisions (Freeman, 1999b, 2005; McDonough, 1997). In the following section, I discuss research on the four-year college choice process of African American students.

African American College Choice

College choice in the African American student population has received heightened attention in the last decade. Legal attacks on affirmative action and sustained disparities in college choice outcomes have fueled interest in ameliorating educational inequality for African American students (Allen, 2000, 2005; Ternanishi & Briscoe, 2008). While previous research on college choice for the broader student population has adequately modeled the college decision process, similar efforts have failed to address college choice outcomes for African American students (Freeman, 1999a, 2005; Pitre, 2006). To date, the majority of research on African American college choice has concentrated on students' decision to attend an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) instead of a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Given the pervasive role that HBCUs have played in creating and sustaining the Black middle and upper class in the later portion of the 1970's, this focus was warranted (Gurin & Epps, 1975). Today, African American students' access to higher education is dwindling at a dizzying pace. With declining access to selective institutions, lower degree attainment and continuous college enrollment, research on African American students should receive more attention in academia and policy discussions (Allen, Harris, & Dinwiddie, 2008; Dinwiddie & Allen, 2003; St. John, Carter, Chung, & Musoba).

Despite a dearth of research on African American students' college choices, findings in this area of inquiry have been consistent over the last 30 years. Seminal studies by Gurin and Epps (1975) and Astin and Cross, (1981) found that African American students who decided to attend HBCUs had better educated parents, higher post baccalaureate degree aspirations, were influenced to attend HBCUs by alumni who

21

were relatives, friends, and teachers, and were more concerned with community minded goals than their counterparts who attended PWI's. Current research conducted by Freeman (1999b, 2005) and McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1997) also found that African American students who attended HBCUs had higher graduate degree aspirations, were influenced to attend HBCUs by alumni relatives, friends, and teachers, and were more concerned with community goals than their African American peers who attended PWI's.

African American high school students face a grim reality regarding their college choice outcomes. African Americans are more likely than other groups to attend less selective colleges even when controlling for academic ability, are less likely than Whites to earn a bachelor's when starting at a community college, and are least likely of all racial groups to engage in volunteer work or extracurricular activities associated with increasing admissibility to highly selective institutions (Allen et al., 2008; Astin, 1978; Hearn, 1984, 1990; Karabel & Astin, 1975; McDonough & Antonio, 1996). Thus, one cannot be surprised that despite higher academic aspirations than other racial groups, Black students' academic aspirations are unstable and in some cases actually decrease from eighth to tenth grade (Berkner, et al., 2007; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2005; St. John, 1991).

Research on African American students' college choices is best understood through Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) prominent model of college choice. This model does not capture all of African American students' challenges, but it is still a useful framework to discuss their college choices. A summary of research findings is presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2

Summary of Variables Influencing African American College Choice

Stage	Individual	Social/Cultural	Organizational
Predisposition	Academic Performance Economic Expectations	Gender Parental Education Parents, Family, Others	High Schools (Public/Private, Teachers, Racial Composition)
Search	Timing	Parents	High School Counselors Affirmative Action
Choice	Religion Social Conscience Cultural Awareness	Geography Socioeconomic Status	HBCUs (Alumni) Financial Aid (College)

Research on African American college choice found that in the *predisposition* stage individual variables such as academic performance and economic expectations; social and cultural variables such as gender, parental education, parents, siblings, extended family, and others; and organizational variables such as high school type, racial composition, and teachers, influenced African American students' decision to attend college (Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Freeman, 1997, 2005; Goldsmith, 2004; Irvine, 1990; Pitre, 2006; Qian & Blair, 1999). Research has shown that Black students have similar or higher aspirations than White students, yet these aspirations decline from grades eight through twelve (Kao & Tienda, 1988; Qian & Blair, 1999). The role of socioeconomic status on Black students' college aspirations are inconclusive, but we know that mothers' education influences African American students' college aspirations, while family income has no effect on their college plans (Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Qian & Blair, 1999). Student performance in the classroom also influences African American students' aspirations, as higher GPAs are positively associated with college aspirations. However, the effect of academic performance is less for Black students than other groups.

Research also has found that siblings, extended family, and others provide access to other social networks that influence Black students' college plans. Specifically, siblings who attended college and extended family that did not attend college have a positive affect on African American students' college plans (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Pitre, 2006). Research has demonstrated that Black students' perceptions of economic returns play a role in their decision to attend college. Black students who believed that attending college would yield economic returns were more likely to attend college (Freeman, 2005). High schools also influenced Black students' college plans, as school racial composition, type (private or public), and teachers, influenced Black students' college plans (Freeman, 2005; Goldsmith, 2004; Irvine, 1990; Qian & Blair, 1999).

In the *search* stage of college choice, individual and social and cultural variables such as parental involvement and encouragement, and timing and deadlines; and organizational and policy variables such as high school racial composition, counselors, and affirmative action, influenced African American students' search processes (Card & Krueger, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; Long, 2004; McDonough, 2005; McDonough et al., 1997; Smith & Fleming, 2006; Toboloswky, Outcalt, & McDonough, 2005). While parents of African American students are involved in the college search process, research has found that their lack of familiarity with college may inhibit their role (Smith & Fleming, 2006). This finding may help explain previous research conducted by Litten (1982), Hurtado, et al. (1997), and McDonough, et al. (1997), which found that African American students not only begin the search process later than other racial groups, but also apply to fewer colleges and apply to college later in the college admissions application cycle.

Organizations also played a role in shaping the search stage of college choice for African American high school students. Research conducted by Freeman (1999b, 2005), Horvat (1996), McDonough (2005), and McDonough and Calderone (2006) found that the racial composition of a high school and high school counselors influenced African American students' college search processes and outcomes. Black students from predominantly White high schools were more likely to consider HBCUs and Black students from predominantly Black high schools were more likely to consider PWI's. High school counselors also played a role and were found to influence the institutional type of colleges considered by African American students. Lastly, the banishment of affirmative action in several large states influenced Black students' application patterns to public research universities (Card & Krueger, 2005; Toboloswky et al., 2005).

In the final *choice* stage, individual variables such as religion, social conscience, and cultural awareness; social and cultural variables such as socioeconomic status and geography; and organizational variables such as HBCUs and financial aid, influenced African American students' institutional selections (Astin & Cross, 1981; Freeman, 2005; McDonough, et al., 1997; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; St. John, 1990). Research has found that socioeconomic status influenced African American students decision to choose a selective college (McDonough & Antonio, 1996). Geography and religion also play a prominent role in African American students decision to select an HBCU. Black students residing in the south were more likely to choose an HBCU than students from other regions of the country. In addition, African American students cited that the religious affiliation of a college was a factor in their decision to attend an HBCU instead of a PWI (McDonough & Antonio, 1996; McDonough et al., 1997).

Research has also found that African American students' perception of cultural awareness and levels of social conscience influenced the choice stage. Freeman (1999a, 2005) found that Black students who chose to attend a HBCU expressed a desire to build a stronger understanding of their African American roots. In addition, there was evidence that Black students with a stronger sense of connection to their culture favored attending PWI's to have a better sense of what it is like to operate in the majority culture. Astin and Cross (1981) and McDonough et al. (1997) also found that Black students who chose to attend HBCUs were more concerned with socially conscience issues than their peers that chose to attend PWI's. Lastly, HBCU alumni and financial aid also play a role, as alumni assist in student recruitment, and financial aid positively affects Black students selection of a college (Freeman, 1999b, 2005; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Somers & St. John, 1997; St. John & Noell, 1989).

Conceptual and theoretical models of college choice for the broader high school student population are prominent throughout higher education (see Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). While no particular model fully captures the dynamic nature of students' decisions, there is little argument regarding the utility of these models to shape our understanding of college choice in the majority student population. The same cannot be said about modeling the college choice process for African American students. Despite decades of research on college choice, a severe gap remains in our ability to provide a comprehensive model of the college choice process for African American students (Freeman, 1999a; Pitre, Johnson, & Pitre, 2006).

In this section of chapter two, I provided a review of four-year college choice outcomes for the general student population and for African American students. I

reviewed the theoretical roots of college choice research and models used to investigate this phenomenon. I concluded this section by discussing research on African American students' college choice processes and outcomes; furthermore, I outlined the need to develop a model of college choice for African American students. I now discuss literature for the problem under investigation. I review literature on community college choice and four-year transfer and discuss an integrated framework for these processes.

Community College Choice and Four-Year Transfer

Access to higher education is at an all time high, but increased stratification has relegated these gains to community colleges, institutions that occupy a lower tier in the educational marketplace (Altbach, 2010; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Community college enrollment has experience unprecedented growth in the last 50 years and these gains have outpaced other postsecondary institutional types. Community colleges now enroll over 35% of all postsecondary students, and nearly seven million students attend these burgeoning institutions (American Council on Education, 2010). The growing popularity of community colleges is not surprising. Tuition increases and declining access to public four-year institutions are now commonplace throughout the country (Mumper, 2003). When juxtaposed to low tuition rates, open admission, and a lower financial burden, it is easy to see why the popularity of community colleges has soared (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Dougherty, 1994). Despite these benefits, baccalaureate degree seeking students who initially attend a community college are 15% - 33% less likely to earn a bachelors degree than their peers who attend a four-year institution (Alfonso, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The decision to attend a community college instead of a four-year institution is inherently complex. Institutional choices that students face make choosing a college in the 21st century a difficult endeavor. Even educationally savvy students and parents are often distraught over the college choice process. Community colleges are often the last option for knowledgeable students and their families, and the first choice for low-income and underrepresented students and their families. Despite being positively portrayed in popular media, community colleges are often held in lower regard than traditional four-year colleges and universities (Bourke, Major, & Harris, 2009). Community colleges tend to enroll a high number of low-income and underrepresented students, and these trends will only increase in the near future (Bueschel, 2009).

The decision to attend community college can be bracketed as a subset of four-year college choice. Research on community college choice is sparse. Variables that explain four-year college choice are also found in community college choice research. In community college choice, individual, social and cultural, and organizational level variables influenced students' decision to attend community colleges (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Dougherty, 1994; Joshi, Beck, & Nsiah, 2009; Kurlaender, 2006; Martinko, 1976; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Monroe, 2002; Santiago, 2007; Somers et al., 2006; Stokes & Somers, 2004). See Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

Summary of Variables Influencing Community College Choice

Individual	Social/Cultural	Organizational
Employment	Geography	High School Climate
Financial Barriers	Parental Influence	High School Counselors
Academic Performance		

Intuitively, financial considerations would have an affect on students' decision to attend community colleges instead of four-year colleges and universities. Educational research has indeed demonstrated the pervasive role of financially based variables. Bers and Galowich (2002) found evidence to suggest that financial restrictions were the primary reason students decided to attend community colleges. This finding was significant within all income brackets of students who enrolled in community colleges. Thus, even high-income students who chose to attend community colleges were influenced by the relatively low cost of these institutions. These findings have also been replicated in research conducted by Joshi et al. (2009), Tinto (1975), Kurlaender (2006), and McPherson and Schapiro (1994).

Other financially based variables include part-time or full-time work. Stokes and Somers (2004) found that students who chose to attend community colleges were more likely to be employed than students who attended four-year institutions. Not surprisingly, students were also more likely not to receive financial support from their parents and were more likely to have been laid off in the last 12 months. Community college students tend to be profiled as students from working-class backgrounds and these findings are in line with common perceptions about this student population. Research conducted by Stokes and Somers (2004) confirms that some students base their decision to attend community college on the financial cost associated with these institutions and the need to support themselves while pursuing a bachelor's degree.

While financial considerations are critical in community college choice, racial or ethnic differences are also important. Kurlaender (2006) found evidence to suggest that even among comparable socioeconomic statuses, Latino/a students were more likely to

enroll in community colleges than Whites or Blacks. This evidence may suggest that cultural variables affect Latino/a community college choice, as collectivist cultures have demonstrated different values sets than individualistic cultures (Triandis, 2007). Research conducted by Santiago (2007) has found that Latino/a students were more likely to attend a local college or university. For Latino/a community college students this may serve as a dual impediment (four-year college enrollment), as community college students were more likely to attend an institution closer to their primary residence (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Martinko, 1976; Monroe, 2002; Stokes & Somers, 2004; Tinto, 1973).

Students who decide to attend community colleges also appear bound by their geographic location. Specifically, students are more likely to attend a local institution than their four-year counterparts (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Tinto, 1973). Stokes and Somers (2004) found similar results and Monroe (2002) demonstrated that 70% of community college students cited proximity as their major reason for choosing their current institution. Findings about the importance of proximity in community college transfer support previous work by Martinko (1976) and Cohen and Brawer (2002), and illustrate community college students are restricted by geography. The issue of proximity is a vital component to increase our understanding of student mobility and these findings are in line with the aforementioned research about financial resources. The evidence is clear; self-supporting students are not equipped to make choices that may supersede their current means of financial support.

In addition to financial and geographic variables, family and peers also play a role in students' community college choice processes. Parental influences have been demonstrated by Somers et al. (2006), as they found that parents were more likely than

students to initiate the idea of attending a community college. This may speak to the parental realization that the overall cost of attending a four-year institution is beyond their means, leading parents to facilitate the discussion of alternative options. Social capital also influenced community college choice, as parents with less social capital were less likely to be involved in the college choice process, were less engaged in college choice related activities, and were more concerned with affordability. These findings are indeed useful and speak to the aforementioned financial issues, but they still do not address why students with parents who have higher levels of social capital are still deciding to attend community colleges. Peers also influenced community college choice; however, minimal research has been conducted in this area. Stokes and Somers (2004) found evidence that peers and friends influenced the decision to attend a community college, but it is clear that additional work in this area could shed light on how pervasive these networks are in students' community college choice decisions.

Prior academic achievement also influenced students' decision to attend community colleges. Kurlaender (2006) and Joshi et al. (2009) found that low achieving students were more likely to enroll in community colleges than four-year institutions. This finding supports the common perception that community colleges serve as a resting place for underachieving high school students. Similar findings were replicated by Tinto (1975) and Cohen and Brawer (2002), and found that students with weaker academic records tend to choose community colleges instead of four-year institutions. This finding leads to a key question: would students with weaker academic profiles choose to attend four-year institutions if their economic standing were appreciably higher? Previous research by McPherson and Schapiro (1994) and Cabrera and La Nasa (2001)

demonstrated that high-income and low-income students have disproportionate levels of college enrollment. Given these findings, it is reasonable to postulate that poor achieving, high-income students are more likely to attend four-year institutions and high achieving, low-income students are more likely to attend community colleges.

Students' racial or ethnic background also plays a role on the effect of academic achievement on community college choice. Kurlaender (2006) found that high achieving Latino/a students were more likely than their White and Black peers of comparable socioeconomic status to select community colleges instead of four-year institutions. As with socioeconomic status, the possible presence of cultural antecedents may play a role in mediating the college choice processes of the Latino/a high school student population. As with other areas of community college choice research, the investigation of racial and ethnic differences is limited. The growing presence of Latino/a's in community colleges has led to some research in this area; however, a significant gap remains in the literature.

The organizational context that precedes community college enrollment also plays a role in community college choice. Stokes and Somers (2004) found students who chose to attend community colleges were more likely to have received negative messages during high school about their ability to succeed in college. Students in non-supportive high school climates received consistent feedback from staff that they could not succeed or were not college material. This finding lends support to the role of academic performance in community college choice, as students who are not performing well academically are more prone to these types of academic experiences. Low academic performance does not justify the actions of the organizational context; however, they could be viewed as expected outcomes in many schools. McDonough and Calderone

(2006) have demonstrated similar findings, as high school counselors can influence students' college choices by basing their community college recommendations on students' social class background. In addition, it is plausible that negative messages in the organizational context may negatively influence students' perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. Thus, students' perceptions of what constitutes "college material" could affect their community college choice and four-year transfer processes.

Variables that influence students' decision to attend community colleges are multifaceted and offer a preview of the complexity of community college choice. Previous research has demonstrated that finances, employment, geography, parents, academic performance, high school climate, and high school counselors, affect students' decision to attend community colleges instead of four-year institutions (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Joshi et al., 2009; Kurlaender, 2006; Martinko, 1976; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Monroe, 2002; Somers et al., 2006; Stokes & Somers, 2004; Tinto, 1973, 1975). Despite previous research in this area several gaps exist: the importance of information resources, the role of standardized admissions tests, and racial differences in community college choice. Research on college choice has found that access to information on college admission and students' perceptions of standardized tests, influenced choice outcomes (Ceja, 2006; Walpole et al., 2005). The notion of these variables also affecting community college choice is not unwarranted and merits additional investigation. The dearth of research on racial differences in community college choice is surprising, given other educational inequities that exist between majority and minority groups. A review of literature revealed no empirical research solely dedicated to **African American community college choice**.

The lack of research on African American students' community college choice decisions is just one part of the problem. Gaps in the literature are further complicated by the lack of theoretical frameworks used in this area of inquiry. Over the last 25 years, research on four-year college choice has made strides in the utilization and development of theory to explain college choice outcomes. However, extensive use of theory has not been replicated in community college choice research. In fact, a recent review of over 40 empirical studies on community college choice revealed that only four studies used theoretical constructs to address the phenomena in question. Theoretical voids in community college choice research may explain the stagnation of this field, which relegate this important decision to students' financial resources and geography. Intellectual development in this area of inquiry may require the promotion of theoretical constructs to investigate students' community college choice decisions. Increased use of theory in this area of research could help explicate the complexities that underlie students' decision to attend community colleges and their formation of four-year transfer choice sets.

In this section of chapter two, I reviewed research on variables that influence students' decision to attend community colleges. A review of literature in this area was important as we try to understand variables that influence the educational choices of all student populations. In the following section, I review and discuss research on community college transfer. Specifically, I discuss previous research on the variables that influence community college transfer for all student populations. A comprehensive review of these substantive areas of research provides much needed background for this investigation of African American community college choice and four-year transfer.

Pathways to baccalaureate degree attainment are generally bracketed into two segments: high school-to-four-year or high school-to-community college-to-four-year. While tangent pathways are prevalent, these road maps encompass the majority of baccalaureate degree recipients. Students who have chosen to enroll in community college as a pathway to the baccalaureate represent three-fourths of the community college student population, and roughly 25% - 40% will eventually transfer to a four-year institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Grubb, 1991; Lee & Frank, 1990; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2008, Surette, 2001). These statistics demonstrate that more than half of all community college students are formally seeking transfer to a four-year institution, and of those seeking to transfer, less than half are successful in this endeavor. Geographic and contextual differences in transfer rates are prevalent; however, a 25% overall success rate is cause for concern, especially given the development of the community college as an institution constructed for transfer preparation to four-year colleges and universities.

Research has shown that individual, social and cultural, and organizational level variables influence students' transfer processes. Specifically, self-concept, socioeconomic status, academic aspirations, external demands, enrollment status, academic preparation, academic performance, completion of intermediate outcomes, and institutional focus on vocational education, play a role in facilitating community college students transfer to four-year institutions (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2006; Holmstrom & Bisconti, 1974; Kinnick & Kemper, 1988; Kraemer, 1995; Lee & Frank, 1990; Roksa, 2006; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010; Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wang, 2010) (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4

Summary of Variables Influencing Community College Transfer

Individual/Psychological	Social/Cultural	Organizational
Employment	Socioeconomic Status	Counselors
Self-Concept		Vocational Education
Enrollment Status		
Academic Aspirations		
Academic Preparation		
Intermediate Outcomes		
Academic Performance		

Socioeconomic status once again plays a prominent role in educational research. Parents' socioeconomic status is associated with community college students transfer to four-year institutions. Students who successfully transferred were more likely to be from families with higher reported levels of social class (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Lee & Frank, 1990; Velez & Javalgi, 1987). When findings are disaggregated by income quartiles, the results are disturbing. Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) found that transfer rates within top quartile high-income students were 55% and only 10% for students in the lowest income quartile. Given previous research demonstrating the pervasive influence of socioeconomic status, this finding is not surprising and the severity of these differences is especially disconcerting. In addition, Lee and Frank (1990) found that socioeconomic profiles of successful transfer students were similar in composition to students who attended four-year institutions directly after high school. This finding provides evidence that successful transfer students bare similar socioeconomic characteristics to students who are already enrolled in four-year institutions. This evidence may support the anecdotal accounts of middle-class students choosing to enroll in community colleges for initial cost savings, when, in fact these students have the social, cultural, and economic capital to attend four-year institutions

directly after high school. There is ample evidence to suggest that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in community college students' transfer to four-year institutions; however, one cannot discount the influence of students' academic aspirations.

Students' academic aspirations also influenced community college transfer. Dougherty and Kienzl (2006), Cabrera and La Nasa (2001), and Holmstrom and Bisconti (1974) demonstrated that students' academic aspirations are positively associated with successful transfer from a community college to a four-year institution. Specifically, students with higher degree aspirations were more likely to transfer to four-year institutions than students with lower degree aspirations. These findings are of particular interest, given supplementary evidence that degree aspirations mediate the influence of socioeconomic status. Adelman (1999), Lee and Frank (1990), and Kinnick and Kemper (1988), also found that students' degree aspirations influence community college transfer. The success of community college student transfer to four-year institutions is influenced by their degree aspirations. Despite these findings, additional research is needed to truly demonstrate the role of degree aspirations in the community college transfer process.

Psychological variables also influence community college students' four-year transfer processes. Research conducted by Wang (2010) found that students' self-concept is associated with an increased likelihood of transfer to four-year institutions. Results demonstrated that a one-point increase in students' self-concept increased their likelihood of four-year transfer by 2%. This finding is important, as the role of psychological variables in students' college choice processes has been understudied. Results from this current study of community college choice and transfer will further explicate the role of psychological variables in students' educational choices.

Academic performance is also important, and successful transfer from a community college is influenced by students' academic performance in high school or their current community college. Early research by Holmstrom and Bisconti (1974) found that community college students with good grades in high school were more likely to transfer to four-year institutions than their peers with lower high school grades. Additional studies by Kraemer (1995), Lee and Frank (1990), Cabrera and La Nasa (2001), Velez and Javalgi (1987), and Roksa (2006) lend additional support to the influence of students' academic performance on four-year transfer. With previous evidence that high-achieving students have specific choice patterns in their selection of various postsecondary institutional types, this finding is expected (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006).

The external demands of community college students also play a role. The same financial constraints that influenced students' decision to attend community colleges also affect their subsequent transfer to four-year institutions. The external demands of employment while in college also influence the transfer process. Specifically, students who have the luxury of not working, or working fewer than 40 hours per week, were more likely to transfer from community colleges (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Additional evidence regarding the impact of working while in college was also replicated in findings by Lee and Frank (1990), as students who were unsuccessful in transferring were more likely to have worked during college. This finding supports the common perception that working while in college has an adverse effect on students transfer rates.

Velez and Javalgi (1987) found contradictory evidence to these claims. In their study of community college transfers, they found that students who worked in a federal

on campus work-study position were more likely to transfer than students who were not employed while in college. One explanation for these alternative findings may be tied to the types of positions these students held. Federal work-study jobs tend to serve campus-based support programs and services, and perhaps participation (direct or indirect) in these types of positions facilitates the transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. Further research regarding the influence of federal work-study employment while in college is needed as we try to untangle the differential influence of external demands on the transfer process of community college students to four-year institutions.

Students' enrollment status is yet another facet of the community college transfer process. While extensive evidence regarding the impact of students' enrollment status on the transfer process is not found in the literature, Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) have demonstrated that a positive relationship exists between these variables. Full-time students are indeed more likely to transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions than part-time students (see also Wang, 2010). While these findings are useful in examining transfer rates, I would caution the application of these results as a true facilitator of transfer success. The issue of time to transfer readiness demonstrated by Hagedorn et al. (2006) further complicates this finding. Full-time enrollment may influence the time needed to transfer from a community college; however, this research does not provide insight into the long-term transfer success of part-time students.

Academic preparation is another prominent variable in community college transfer. Community college students' academic preparation does influence their ability to transfer. While investigating community college transfer rates, Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) and Lee and Frank (1990) found that students who successfully transferred to

four-year institutions were more likely to have received college oriented curriculum while in high school. In fact, Lee and Frank (1990) found that successful transfer students were twice as likely to have been on college curricular tracks in high school, than students who were unsuccessful in the transfer process. This finding is replicated by Velez and Javalgi (1987), who demonstrated that the academic preparation of students who transferred to four-year institutions, resembled students who went directly to four-year institutions after high school.

The importance of academic preparation for community college transfer is not limited to students' high school careers. Hagedorn et al. (2006) found that students who have taken the appropriate coursework while attending a community college, and are thus deemed transfer ready, were more likely to transfer than comparable students with dissimilar levels of academic preparation. There is evidence that demonstrates academic preparation at the high school and community college level influences transfer of community college students to four-year institutions. Students who are better prepared to handle collegiate coursework are more likely to be successful in the transfer process. Given the "band aid" and stop gap appearance of remedial education coursework offered at the community college level, this finding is not surprising. The same curriculum alignment issues that plague the high school pipeline to traditional four-year institutions are also impeding the transfer of community college students to four-year institutions (Karabel, Martin, & Jaquez, 2005).

The role of academic preparation in community college students' four-year transfer processes also extends to intermediate outcomes. Previous research by Adelman (2006) and Bailey and Alfonso (2005) has shown that intermediate outcomes such as

passing college level math and writing, academic credit milestones, and associate degree attainment, influence baccalaureate degree attainment. Recent research by Roska and Calcagno (2010), found evidence that suggests completing intermediate outcomes positively influences community college students' transfer to four-year institutions. In addition, they also found that academically unprepared community college students were 80% less likely to transfer to four-year institutions—and in less time—than their academically prepared peers. These findings add yet additional evidence regarding the importance of students' academic preparation on their four-year transfer processes.

Organizational level variables also influence community college students' ability to transfer to four-year institutions. The degree to which community colleges emphasize vocational education can influence students' likelihood of transfer to four-year institutions. Research conducted by Roksa (2006) found evidence that the number of certificates awarded by a community college has a negative relationship with students' transfer. In fact, as the number of certificates awarded increases, so does students' likelihood of successful transfer to four-year institutions. The vocational emphasis of a particular community college is an interesting addition to the conversation on four-year transfer. Evidence provided by Roska (2006) demonstrates that high degree of variance in community colleges educational foci can play an instrumental role in students' transfer to four-year institutions. More recent work by Bahr (2008) adds another level of analysis, as he found that academic advising at the community college level has a positive affect on students' educational attainment.

The overarching influence of the organizational context can often be guided by individual and social and cultural background variables. The lack of more organizational

and policy variables in the transfer table illustrates the need to examine all aspects of the organizational and policy climate that may affect community college students' four-year transfer processes (Horvat, 1996; Lee & Frank, 1990; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004). Specifically, the presence of community college articulation agreements may improve student transfer rates to four-year institutions. Future research should investigate the role of articulation agreements on community college students' transfer processes.

Community college choice research has found that the following variables influence students' decision to attend community colleges: finances, geography, parents, academic performance, high school climate and counselors (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Monroe, 2002; Somers et al., 2006; Stokes & Somers, 2004). Furthermore, community college transfer research has found that the following variables influence student transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions: socioeconomic status, academic aspirations, self-concept, external demands, enrollment status, academic preparation and performance, intermediate outcomes, and vocational education (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2006; Lee & Frank, 1990, Roksa, 2006; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010; Wang, 2010). The importance of these findings cannot be understated; however, community college choice and four-year transfer research has remained moribund over the last decade. The emergence of new findings, or divergent approaches to study either of these phenomena, is non-existent in higher education research. This study of community college choice and four-year transfer in the African American student population makes a significant contribution to the higher education literature and provides an increased understanding of African American students' college choices.

The preceding sections of chapter two offered background on college choice research for both the general student population, and for African American students. I also provided an overview of the problem by reviewing research on community college choice and transfer to four-year institutions. With a greater understanding of these college choice processes, I now discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework that anchored this study. This section of chapter two concludes with a review of self-efficacy as a theoretical construct and also reviews academic self-efficacy and its possible application to college choice processes. In closing, I propose that baccalaureate degree seeking African American community college students' perceptions of their ability to succeed at four-year institutions is influenced by self-efficacy. In the community college context, self-efficacy is conceptualized as students' perceived ability to succeed at the four-year level after they have completed the transfer process. In addition, students' experience in the community college setting could positively influence their perceptions of self-efficacy. Students' experience in community college could help them feel more prepared for the social, psychological, and academic transition to four-year colleges and universities.

Theoretical Framework

Theory in the social sciences is used to explain and investigate social phenomena. While definitions of theory constitute various contradictory descriptions, such as idea building, principle laden, speculatory, factual, and hypothetical propositions, the notion of theory as a means to explain phenomena are rarely contested (Weick, 1995). Despite these contradictory terms, theory does provide researchers with a working set of factual and speculative notions of how certain principles explain the social world. Speculative

theoretical perspectives can then be proved, disproved or extended, and empirically tested through various methodological approaches. The range of theoretical approaches is quite vast, as some theories provide detailed explanations of a phenomenon while others make broad generalizations (Van Maanen, Jesper, & Mitchell, 2007). Theoretical approaches and the methodological tools used to investigate theory can often seem convoluted. However, the dynamic and reflexive nature of inquiry in the social sciences is what makes the use of theory intellectually stimulating.

Theory is often regarded as the foundation for sound intellectual inquiry, and the proper use of theory in educational inquiry is one of the formidable challenges of higher education research (Peterson, 1986). Proper use of theory requires a thorough understanding of the origins, approaches, and critiques of a particular theoretical approach. This study draws from psychology, a theoretical base that is not prominently utilized in college choice or four-year transfer research. Psychological constructs inform an array of decision-making processes. However, college choice research has yet to thoroughly explore the influence of psychological variables. This study makes a significant contribution to college choice research by using self-efficacy to understand African American community college students' educational choices. In this section of chapter two, I review self-efficacy as a theoretical construct and discuss research on academic self-efficacy. I conclude this section with an introduction of self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy as a construct used to understand African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer. In the context of this investigation, self-efficacy could be described as students' perceptions of their ability to succeed at four-year colleges and universities.

Self-Efficacy

Grounded in social cognitive theory, self-efficacy is the degree to which an individual believes in their ability to perform at a certain level or accomplish a particular task (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy is often categorized or misrepresented as: self-concept, self-esteem, effective motivation, inborn drive, prevalent incentive, outcome expectancy, and the process of self-guidance through envisioned self (Bandura, 1997; Shavelson & Bolus, 1982; White, 1959). While these constructs are related, self-efficacy distinguishes itself by the importance it places on how people believe in their own causative ability to influence outcomes. In addition to social cognitive theory, other theoretical approaches like social learning theory, self-concept theory, and attribution theory, can be used to understand self-efficacy. Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory differs from these approaches by using a more comprehensive notion of how self-efficacy is acquired. I used Bandura's (1997) notion of self-efficacy to anchor my theoretical framework because it offers four primary modes of acquisition by the individual. Given the complexity of community college choice and four-year transfer, I believe that students acquire self-efficacy through a variety of methods.

In addition to influencing individuals' ability to perform at a certain level or accomplish a particular task, Bandura (1986, 1997) also posits that self-efficacy influences individual decision-making, persistence, and achievement (Bandura, 1997; Schunk, 1995). The ability to exercise control over an individual's life allows them to accomplish desired goals and provides a valuable incentive to accomplish other goals. Self-efficacy is an arbiter of human agency. Action, absent self-efficacy, is undirected and may not help an individual accomplish his or her goals. In fact, many actions are

undertaken without intention to produce an outcome. However, actions that are purposeful can be positively influenced by efficacious beliefs. An individual's degree of self-efficacy not only has an influence on the actions they undertake, but also the duration of time they pursue an action and their willingness to sustain the action through impediments (Bandura, 1997).

Perceived self-efficacy also relates to one's ability to coordinate the cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral skills needed to take action for the completion of a task. It is not enough to believe you have the skills in a particular domain; you must also be able to coordinate the use of those skills (Bandura, 1997). In laymen's terms, self-efficacy is what you believe you can do with your talent and how you can coordinate that talent to achieve your goal, with no claims about the talent you possess. In terms of action, if an individual is efficacious and believes in their ability to succeed in a particular undertaking, they are more likely to attempt this task. Conversely, individuals with low levels of self-efficacy often believe they are unable to complete a task, and the added stress and poor execution lead to difficulties in achieving that task. Lastly, it is challenging to make positive actions in pursuit of a desired outcome if an individual is unsure of their beliefs to accomplish that particular task (Bandura, 1986, 1997). It should also be noted that self-efficacy is not a predictor of task achievement. Rather, it is one of many contributing factors that influence the achievement of a task (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). This distinction is important and differentiates self-efficacy from other constructs. Self-efficacy also differs because it centers on perceptions of ability and not views of self-worth, outcomes, and universality of similar constructs like outcome expectations, self-concept, and effective motivation (Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

The level of causative belief that someone has about their ability to complete a task within a domain can also influence an individual's aspiration, action, effort, and reaction needed to attain that task. For example, students who are efficacious about their intellectual ability are more apt to engage in classroom activities, persist for longer periods of time, and have higher levels of academic achievement (Schunk & Pajares, 2002). Perceived self-efficacy also regulates the level of intention that someone possesses. It is difficult to exhibit intent if an individual does not believe they have the ability to successfully achieve an endeavor (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Intent can also influence the degree of effort that someone undertakes for an endeavor. Efficacious beliefs also influence how people approach challenging tasks. If someone believes in their ability to accomplish a task, they approach it as something that is difficult, but can be mastered. An individual with low levels of perceived self-efficacy may approach the same task as a fearful endeavor that should be avoided (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Perceived self-efficacy is not universally applicable to all actions, it is contextual in nature and domain specific. High levels of self-efficacy in one domain do not equate to high levels of self-efficacy in other or related domains (Bandura, 1997; DiClemente, 1986; Hofstetter, Sallis, & Hovell, 1990). A student may have strong efficacious beliefs about their ability to do well in math; however, the same may not be said about their writing ability. Both math and writing are academic in nature, but the skills required to accomplish each task are different. When applied to students' college choice decisions, students could have high levels of perceived self-efficacy about their ability to succeed in community college, but they could feel less efficacious about their ability to succeed at a four-year institution.

Self-efficacy is acquired from four primary sources: personal mastery of experiences within the respective domain, vicariously through the experiences of others, verbal influences of others, and physiological reactions and emotional states. Bandura (1997) suggests that individuals' own mastery of experiences is the most prominent and effective mode of efficacy transmission. It is through these personal experiences that someone is able to acquire direct and authentic verification of their ability to be successful in an endeavor. Success can help construct a foundation that positively informs one's perceived self-efficacy in that domain. Self-efficacy is also influenced by vicarious experiences of others that can be contrasted against their own. The appraisal of others' experiences in relation to one's own is a powerful source of self-efficacy and using the performance of others as a referent group is a useful appraisal tool (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Exceeding the performance of peers can increases one's perceived self-efficacy in that domain, while underperforming can lead to lower self-efficacy beliefs (Weinberg, Gould, & Jackson, 1979). In other words, seeing someone similar to you successfully perform a task raises your perceptions about your ability to complete the same task.

Verbal persuasion is another mode of self-efficacy acquisition. Specifically, an individual's perceived self-efficacy in a domain is positively influenced by verbal expressions of confidence by others. This can signify faith in one's ability. Conversely, negative messages about one's ability that are expressed by others can have negative influences on individual perceptions of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). For those who are susceptible to verbal persuasion, these messages can serve as a tool to increase effort and deflect adversity. The affect of verbal persuasion is highest for people who already

believe that they have the ability to exercise control over their lives (Chambliss &

Murray, 1979a, 1979b). The final source of self-efficacy is physiological and affective

states. This source is particularly important in actions that require physical activity or

elicit a physical response. Physiological reactions often arise in actions that accompany

stress, and can also lead to increased levels of stress that may hinder performance. These

stressful reactions may negatively influence perceptions of self-efficacy and further

hamper one's actions (Bandura, 1997; Solberg & Villarreal, 1997).

Efficacious beliefs develop throughout the lifespan. Newborns initially acquire

self-efficacy through their own mastery experiences that coincide with their development

of self. Early influences of self-efficacy are rooted in the home and family structure,

where parenting styles and home environment can positively affect children's efficacy.

The investment of time, materials, and supportive climates in the home are crucial in the

development of children's self-efficacy and intellectual enrichment (Meece, 1997).

Parents play a large role in providing the range of exploratory physical and emotional

environments that are needed to develop a child's sense of self-efficacy. Home

environments in which children engage in a variety of activities are encouraged and help

develop basic skills that provide a baseline of self-efficacy beliefs and advance a child's

social and cognitive development (Bandura, 1997).

Familial self-efficacy provides early exposure to efficacious beliefs, but increased

access to outside social contexts contributes to the development of self-efficacy over the

lifespan. Specifically, peers of the same age group play an early role in fostering self-

efficacy, as students tend to socialize among similar groups in school settings and these

groups affect individual levels of efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Steinberg, Brown, &

Dornbusch, 1996). Peers provide children with relationships that influence the perception of their abilities. The comparative nature of these relationships is another reference point for assessing one's ability to complete a task. The peer affect on self-efficacy is especially interesting considering the powerful influence of peers on youth judgment and decision-making (Berndt & Keefe, 1992). Schools also function as important social structures that influence self-efficacy beliefs. The systematic evaluation of students' abilities can exert an influence on students' perception of ability. Within the social structure of schools, individual actors such as teachers can affect the development of students' perceived self-efficacy (Schunk & Pajares, 2002).

As demonstrated in the preceding review of literature, individual action is influenced by perceptions of ability (self-efficacy). Furthermore, self-efficacy can be applied in specific contextual settings, and perceived levels of self-efficacy are domain centric. In the following section, I advance the discussion of self-efficacy to a specific domain that may also influence students' college choice processes. This section concludes with an introduction of academic self-efficacy as a construct to understand African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes.

Academic Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to the perception of one's ability in a specific domain. As discussed earlier in this section, individuals can be highly efficacious in one endeavor and not efficacious in another. The domain reviewed in this section focuses on students' perceived ability to achieve academic related tasks: academic self-efficacy. Academic self-efficacy can refer to a variety of academic tasks (Zimmerman, 1995). Previous research on academic self-efficacy found that students' belief in their academic ability

50

declines as they advance in grade level (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Variables such as stress-related school transition, teacher engagement, and increased student competition, could negatively influence students' self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Harter, 1996). Research on academic self-efficacy tends to focus on the effect that students' perceptions of academic ability have on their academic motivation and achievement, major persistence, educational self-regulation, and adjustment to college.

Students' perceived academic self-efficacy influences their academic motivation. Research has shown that highly efficacious students tend to exhibit higher levels of academic motivation than their peers who are less efficacious (Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Hanson 1985; Schunk, Hanson, & Cox, 1987; Salomon, 1984). Research conducted by Salomon (1984) found that students' perceptions of academic self-efficacy influenced their effort in academic related tasks. Similar results were found regarding the role of academic self-efficacy in student persistence (Elias & Loomis, 2000; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984, 1986; Lyman, Prentice-Dunn, Wilson, & Bonfilio, 1984; Schunk, 1981; Zimmerman & Ringle, 1981). In a more recent study of major persistence, Elias and Loomis (2000) found that students with lower perceptions of academic self-efficacy were more likely to change majors than students who were more efficacious about their academic ability.

Academic self-efficacy also has an influence on students' academic achievement and goal setting. Specifically, students who are highly efficacious about their academic ability have higher levels of academic performance than students who report lower levels of academic self-efficacy. And various forms of instructional feedback can have a positive or negative effect on students' academic achievement (Hackett & Betz, 1989;

Lent et al., 1984, 1986; Schunk, 1981, 1989, 1991; Schunk & Hanson, 1985; Schunk et al., 1987; Vrugt, 1994; Vrugt, Langereies, & Hoogstraten, 1997). Wood and Locke (1987) examined the effect of academic self-efficacy on student achievement in college and found that even when controlling for academic ability, academic self-efficacy influenced students' academic performance and goal setting. Students with lower levels of perceived academic self-efficacy set lower academic goals for themselves than students with high levels of perceived academic self-efficacy. Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Ponz (1992) found similar results and showed that academic self-efficacy has a prominent influence on academic achievement and goal setting.

The role of academic self-efficacy on achievement is also replicated in Chemers, Hu, and Garcia's (2001) examination of first year students' adjustment to college. Chemers et al. (2001) found that even when controlling for high school GPA, academic self-efficacy was related to college students' academic performance. Students who started college with highly efficacious beliefs about their academic ability also performed well in college, while students who started college with low efficacious beliefs about their academic ability did not perform as well as their highly efficacious counterparts. Additionally, college students with highly efficacious beliefs interpreted the academic rigor of college as a challenge that could be overcome. This finding is in congruence with Bandura's (1986, 1997) assessment of the challenge or threat perceptions that efficacious and non-efficacious individuals possess.

Research on racial differences in perceived academic self-efficacy has mixed results. In a review of research, Graham (1994) found that social class differences could be attributed to racial differences in ability perception. Previous research had shown that

minority students had lower perceptions of academic self-efficacy than White students. The same can be said for African American students, as research conducted by Hare (1985), Hacket, Betz, Casas, and Rocha-Singh (1992), found that African American students have lower levels of academic self-efficacy than White students. However, Graham (1984) found that African American students do not have lower perceptions of academic ability when controlling for socioeconomic status. In fact, African American students' perceptions of ability were higher than their actual academic performance. Graham (1994) also found that African American incongruence is higher than other racial groups, as Black children hold a higher assessment of their ability than is demonstrated in their actual academic performance (Graham, 1994). The incongruence of African American students' perceptions of academic ability and academic performance is similar in to African American students' disconnect between college aspirations and academic performance in high school (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 2005).

The complex nature of African American students' academic self-efficacy is further complicated when research is disaggregated by domain and item specific notions of ability. Research conducted by Britner and Pajares (2001) found that African American students reported lowers levels of science self-efficacy than White students. In a study of mathematics self-efficacy by Pajares and Kranzler (1995), African American students also reported lower levels of item specific self-efficacy than their White peers. The disconnect between African American students reported self-efficacy and achievement on a broader scale may be best understood through item-specific assessments of self-efficacy. In addition to domain-centric notions of academic self-efficacy, there is a relationship between African American students' level of Black

consciousness and academic self-efficacy. African American students with high levels of Black consciousness had higher levels of academic self-efficacy than students with lower levels of Black consciousness (Okech & Harrington, 2002). The evidence suggests that more research is needed to fully understand the role of academic self-efficacy on African American students' educational processes and outcomes.

The preceding review of research discussed the role of self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy on students' actions, achievement, and goal attainment. The degree to which students believe in their ability to succeed in a domain can also influence their approach to a particular endeavor. The role of self-efficacy on students' college choice processes has yet to be explored in education research. To date, educational research on self-efficacy has been limited to student achievement, goal setting, major persistence, and adjustment to college. However, the extension of these theoretical constructs to improving our understanding of community college choice and transfer is justified. When applied to the context of college choice outcomes, self-efficacy could be used as a lens to improve our knowledge about how social cognitive processes influence students' post-high school educational decisions.

Students' perceived ability to succeed at the four-year college level may influence their college choice processes. It is plausible to hypothesize that African American students who are not efficacious about their ability to succeed at a four-year college may choose an institutional type that is not "threatening." In this case, success could be defined as community college students' ability to adjust to the social, psychological, and academic rigors of a four-year institution. Thus, community college students' perceptions of their ability to succeed at the next level could be conceptualized as

domain-specific area of self-efficacy. In addition, students could use the community college experience as a means of acquiring self-efficacy through a mastery of experiences. Community colleges can often be viewed as less rigorous and competitive than four-year colleges and may represent a destination for students who are not efficacious about succeeding in college. Conversely, students with similar academic backgrounds who are highly efficacious about their ability to succeed at a four-year college may view these institutions as a "challenge." Additionally, students' self-appraisal of academic, social, and college ability may influence the types of four-year institutions African American students consider for transfer.

The applicability of self-efficacy as a construct to understand African American community college students' college choice processes is apropos. Discourse regarding self-efficacy must also be accompanied by an explicit discussion of the situational versus trait positions about efficacious beliefs. Self-efficacy is often discussed as fixed or contextualized and these viewpoints often oppose each other (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). For the purpose of this study, I adhere to both conceptualizations of self-efficacy and discuss self-efficacy as a construct that can be either situated or contextualized, as it relates to African American students' community college choice and transfer processes.

In this section of chapter two, I reviewed literature on self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy. I introduced the notion of using self-efficacy to further understand African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. In the following section of this chapter, I introduce and discuss an integrated conceptual framework for African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer.

Conceptual Framework

Previous research on community college choice and four-year transfer investigated these phenomena as separate functions of the college choice process. This approach is flawed. Successful baccalaureate degree seeking community college students must eventually transfer to a four-year college or university. Linkages between the decision to attend a community college and the selection of a transfer institution are indeed two separate decisions, but it seems prudent to conceptualize them as a continuum of linked decision processes. The following integrated conceptual framework is informed from the previous review of literature and theoretical framework, and offers a new way to think about community college choice and four-year transfer.

As shown in Figure 2.1, this two-stage model shows that students' decisions to attend community college are influenced by individual, social and cultural, and organizational variables. Specifically, finances, employment, geography, parents, academic performance, high school climate, and high school counselors, affect student decisions to attend community colleges instead of four-year institutions (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Joshi et al., 2009; Kurlaender, 2006; Martinko, 1976; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Monroe, 2002; Somers et al., 2006; Stokes & Somers, 2004; Tinto, 1973, 1975). And research on African American college choice found that parents and family, timing and deadlines, and high school climate and counselors, influence Black students' college choices (Astin & Cross, 1981; Freeman, 2005; McDonough, et al., 1997; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; St. John, 1990). In addition, I hypothesize that self-efficacy also plays a role in African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1

Integrated Conceptual Framework
African American Community College Choice and Four-Year Transfer
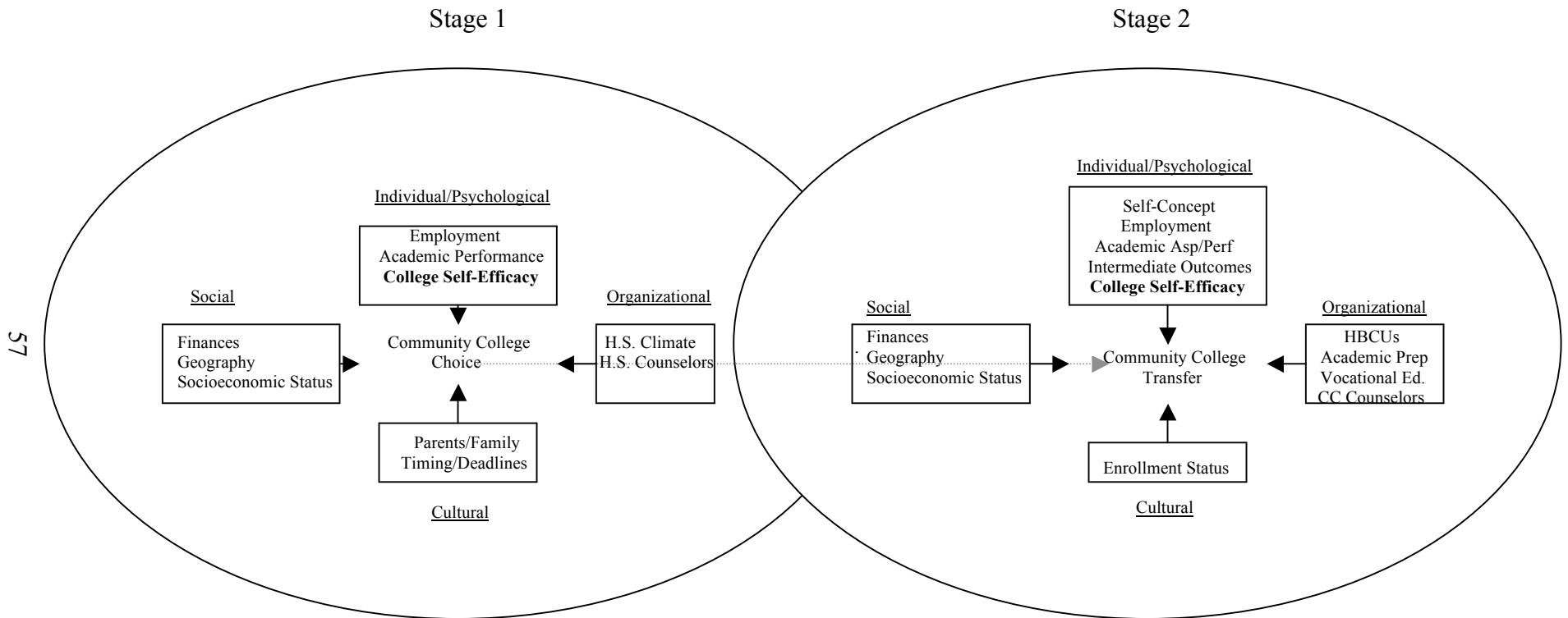
Tinto (1975), Kurlaender (2006), and McPherson and Schapiro (1994) found that financial restrictions were the primary reason that students elected to attend a community college; and Bers and Galowich (2002) found that finances played a role for students in all income brackets. Part-time or full-time employment also influenced students' community college choice, as Stokes and Somers (2004) found that students who chose to attend community colleges were more likely to have a job than comparable students who attended a four-year institution (see also Joshi et al., 2009). In addition to finances (see Figure 2.1), geography also plays a role in community college choice. Research has found that community college students were more likely to attend an institution close to their residence (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Martinko, 1976; Monroe, 2002; Stokes & Somers, 2004; Tinto, 1973). Additionally, students who decided to attend community colleges were more likely to attend a local institution than their four-year counterparts (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Tinto, 1973). Stokes and Somers (2004) found similar results and Monroe (2002) demonstrated that 70% of community college students cited proximity as their major reason for choosing their college.

In addition to financial and geographic variables, family and peers (see Figure 2.1) also play a role in students' community college choice processes. Somers et al. (2006) found that parents were more likely than students to initiate the idea of attending a community college. Meanwhile, Stokes and Somers (2004) found that peers and friends influenced students' decision to attend community colleges. Students' previous academic achievement (see Figure 2.1) also influenced community college choice. Kurlaender (2006), Tinto (1975), and Cohen and Brawer (2002) found that low achieving students were more likely to enroll in community colleges than four-year institutions. Finally,

high school climate and counselors influenced students' decision to attend community

college (see Figure 2.1). Stokes and Somers (2004) found that students who chose to

attend community colleges were more likely to have received negative messages in high

school about their ability to succeed in college. Students in non-supportive high school

climates received consistent feedback from staff that they could not succeed or were not

college material. McDonough and Calderone (2006) demonstrated similar findings, as

high school counselors influenced students' community college choice by basing their

college recommendations on students' social class background.

Once baccalaureate degree seeking students decide to attend community colleges,

they have advanced to stage two of the model and are now on the road to transferring to

four-year institutions. As shown in Figure 2.1, research has found that individual, social,

cultural, and organizational variables, influenced community college students transfer to

four-year institutions. Specifically, socioeconomic status, academic aspirations, self-

concept, external demands, enrollment status, academic preparation and performance,

intermediate outcomes, and vocational education (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa,

2001; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2006;

Holmstrom & Bisconti, 1974; Kinnick & Kemper, 1988; Kraemer, 1995; Lee & Frank,

1990, Roksa, 2006; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010; Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wang, 2010). In

addition to these variables, I hypothesize that self-efficacy also plays a role in African

American students' community college transfer processes (see Figure 2.1).

Socioeconomic status influences student transfer to four-year institutions (see

Figure 2.1). Students who transferred were more likely to be from families with higher

reported levels of social class (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Lee

& Frank, 1990; Velez & Javalgi, 1987). Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) found that transfer rates within top quartile high-income students were 55% but only 10% for students in the lowest income quartile. In addition, Lee and Frank (1990) found that socioeconomic profiles of successful transfer students were similar in composition to students who attended four-year institutions directly after high school. Academic aspirations (see Figure 2.1) also influenced community college transfer. Dougherty and Kienzl (2006), Cabrera and La Nasa (2001), and Holmstrom and Bisconti (1974) demonstrated that students with higher degree aspirations were more likely to transfer to a four-year institution than students with lower degree aspirations (see also Adelman, 1999; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Kinnick & Kemper, 1988; Lee & Frank, 1990). And psychological variables also play a role in community college transfer. Wang (2010) found that a one-point increase in students' self-concept increased their likelihood of transfer by 2% (see Figure 2.1).

Academic performance is also important for community college transfer. Studies by Kraemer (1995), Lee and Frank (1990), Cabrera and La Nasa (2001), and Velez and Javalgi (1987) have found that high academic performance positively affects student transfer to four-year institutions. As shown in Figure 2.1, part-time employment also plays a role in successful transfer. Specifically, students who are not working, or working fewer than 40 hours per week, were more likely to transfer from community colleges (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Additional evidence regarding the influence of working while in college is replicated in findings by Lee and Frank (1990), as students who where unsuccessful in transferring were more likely to have worked during college. Students' enrollment status is yet another facet of the community college transfer process

(see Figure 2.1). Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) found a positive relationship between these variables. Full-time students were indeed more likely to transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions than part-time students.

Academic preparation also influenced community college transfer (see Figure 2.1). Cabrera et al. (2001) and Lee and Frank (1990) found evidence that successful transfer students were more likely to have received an academically oriented curriculum while in high school. In fact, Lee and Frank (1990) found that successful transfer students were twice as likely to have been on academic curricular tracks in high school than unsuccessful transfer students. In addition, Velez and Javalgi (1987) found that the academic preparation of successful community college transfer students resembled those of students who went directly to four-year institutions after high school. The importance of academic preparation is not limited to high school preparation. Hagedorn et al. (2006) also found that students with the appropriate coursework in community college were more likely to transfer than comparable students with dissimilar levels of academic preparation. In addition (see Figure 2.1), intermediate outcomes such as passing college level math and writing, academic credit milestones, and associate degree attainment, positively influence community college students' transfer to four-year institutions (Roksa & Calcagno, 2010). Lastly, an institutional focus on vocational education also plays a role in community college students transfer processes (Roksa, 2006).

Variables related to African American students' college choice processes may also play a role in their community college choice and four-year transfer decisions. Research found that siblings, extended family, and others provide access to other social networks that influence Black students' college plans (see Figure 2.1). Specifically,

siblings who attended college and extended family who did not attend college have a positive affect on African American students' college plans (Freeman, 1997, 2005; Pitre, 2006). High schools also influenced Black students' college plans, as school racial composition, type (private or public), and teachers influenced Black students' college plans (Freeman, 2005; Goldsmith, 2004; Irvine, 1990; Qian & Blair, 1999).

Timing and deadlines also influence Black students' college choice processes (see Figure 2.1). While parents of African American students are involved in the college search process, research has found that their lack of familiarity with college may inhibit their role (Smith & Fleming, 2006). This finding may help explain previous research conducted by Litten (1982), Hurtado, et al. (1997), and McDonough, et al. (1997), which found that African American students not only begin the search process later than other racial groups, but they also apply to fewer colleges and apply to college later in the college admissions application cycle.

Organizations also played a role in shaping the college choice processes of African American high school students. Research conducted by Freeman (1999b, 2005), Horvat (1996), McDonough (2005), and McDonough and Calderone (2006) found that the racial composition of a high school and high school counselors, influenced African American students' college search processes and outcomes (see Figure 2.1). Black students from predominantly White high schools were more likely to consider HBCUs and Black students from predominantly Black high schools were more likely to consider PWI's. Lastly, high school counselors also played a role in determining college choice outcomes and were found to influence the institutional type of colleges considered by African American students (see Figure 2.1).

62

Geography also plays a prominent role in African American students decision to select an HBCU (see Figure 2.1). Black students residing in the south were more likely to choose an HBCU than students from other regions of the country. In addition, African American students cited that the religious affiliation of a college was a factor in their decision to attend an HBCU instead of a PWI (McDonough & Antonio, 1996; McDonough et al., 1997). Lastly, HBCU alumni and financial aid also play a role, because alumni assist in student recruitment and financial aid positively affects Black students selection of a college (Freeman, 1999b, 2005; McDonough & Antonio, 1996; Somers & St. John, 1997; St. John & Noell, 1989).

Research on community college choice and transfer is nearing a crucial stage in its intellectual maturity. Advancements in the field are needed. Community college enrollments continue to rise and nearly half of these students are seeking to transfer to four-year institutions (American Council on Education, 2008; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Dougherty, 1994; Driscoll, 2007; Griffith & Connor, 1994; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). The complexity of these college choice processes should not be understated. The integrated model of community college choice and transfer offered in this chapter provides a preliminary framework from which institutional agents and educational researchers can conceptualize students' educational decisions. The evidence used to construct this model affirms the complexity of community college students' pathway to the baccalaureate. There is much to learn about community college choice and transfer outcomes for African American students. This current study sought to address this void and improve our understanding of African American students' post-high school educational choices.

The preceding chapter provided background on traditional college choice outcomes and reviewed research on community college choice and four-year transfer. In addition, I reviewed self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy and introduced the notion of self-efficacy as a construct to understand African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer. I concluded this chapter with a preliminary conceptual framework to guide this study. In the following chapter, I review the methodology and research design used for this study. In this chapter, I discuss the research questions, participants, research sites, participant recruitment, and methods of data collection and analysis. I conclude chapter three with a discussion of the limitations of this study and potential researcher biases.

Chapter III

Methodology

Research methods used to investigate educational phenomena are usually

predicated on the researchers' view of what constitutes knowledge and how it is acquired.

Four prominent philosophical assumptions are used to investigate knowledge claims:

postpositivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism (Creswell,

2003). As the primary investigator, I believe that knowledge is created by the lived

subjective experiences of individuals. This constructivist approach to knowledge claims

is rooted in these beliefs, and this study used collected data from the participants'

perspective to make claims about the nature of society (Creswell, 2003). An interpretive

paradigm is useful for research that seeks to understand the experiences of these

individuals from their own perceptions of reality (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The

constructivist paradigm focuses on the process of a particular phenomenon.

Constructivism uses qualitative methods in the form of interviews or ethnographies to

socially construct participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2003).

The methodological approach used for this study was influenced by the aims of

this line of inquiry. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of African

American community colleges students' college decisions, educational experiences, and

perceptions of self-efficacy. Thus, this study utilized qualitative methods to investigate

African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer

processes. Qualitative research methods can be used to improve knowledge about individual experiences and further explicate our understanding of a particular phenomenon (Maxwell, 1996). In addition, qualitative research is a useful method to understand, interpret, and disseminate participants' lived experiences (Conrad, 1993; Haworth & Conrad, 1997).

Qualitative research is particularly useful to investigate students' college choice decisions. The decision to attend college, the search for colleges, and the decision to select a college are influenced by various social and cultural variables. These variables are embedded in the construction of lived social and cultural experiences of each participant. The inductive and iterative nature of qualitative inquiry is also important, as this study sought to understand the meaning that participants of a particular group ascribe to their experiences (Maxwell, 1996). Additionally, this study was exploratory in nature, and the use of qualitative methods is appropriate when investigating a previously un-examined area of inquiry (Creswell, 2003).

Research Questions

The development of appropriate research questions is important for any study; however, the formation of sound research questions is especially vital in qualitative research. The nature of qualitative inquiry requires the researcher to construct research questions that help focus the investigation on the topic of interest (Creswell, 2003; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Poorly constructed research questions can often lead researchers astray during data collection. Research questions also provide the researcher with a blueprint to understand the problem under investigation from the participants' vantage point (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

This investigation shed light on African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. This area of inquiry was needed, as the bulk of community college choice and transfer research has focused on majority student populations. Previous research on community college choice has found that finances, geography, parents, academic performance, high school climate, and counselors influenced students' decision to attend community college (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Monroe, 2002; Stokes & Somers, 2004). Research on community college transfer has found that socioeconomic status, self-concept, academic aspirations, external demands, employment, academic preparation and performance, intermediate outcomes, and vocational education, play a role in facilitating community college students' transfer to four-year institutions (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Hagedorn et al., 2006; Holmstrom & Bisconti, 1974; Kinnick & Kemper, 1988; Kraemer, 1995; Lee & Frank, 1990; Roska, 2006; Roska & Calcagno, 2010; Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wang, 2010).

Previous research has focused on community college choice and four-year transfer in the general student population, but no study has explicitly examined how African American students experience these two processes. The following overarching and sub questions guided this study:

A. Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community college?

What factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to (e.g., four-year transfer choice sets)?

B. What role do community colleges play in preparing baccalaureate degree seeking African American students for their transition to four-year institutions?

How do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions?

Participants

      Participants in this study were given voice through semi-structured interviews. I conducted each interview with a pre-constructed interview protocol (see Appendix A). The interview protocol was designed to assist in the collection of the data that were relevant to the study. To properly address the research questions, a purposeful sample of community college students were interviewed. The purposeful unique sample provided participants that were central to the area of inquiry, as I sought to understand the community college choice and four-year transfer processes of African American students. Purposeful sampling is an appropriate method for qualitative research that seeks to understand the experiences of a specific group, where group members serve as "experts" under investigation (Chein, 1981; Patton, 1990). In addition, this sampling method is useful for studies that require participants with extensive experience regarding the phenomenon under investigation and increases the likelihood of participants who can provide information-rich cases (Patton, 1990).

      Student participants were limited to African American freshmen and sophomore community college students who had aspirations to transfer to a four-year college or university, were between the ages of 18 and 24, and attended high school in the United States. Criteria for this purposeful sample were important for several reasons. This study sought to understand both the decision to attend a community college after high school and the formation of four-year transfer choice sets while in community college. Thus, it was imperative that I interviewed African American community college students with transfer aspirations. Community colleges serve any number of roles by providing vocational training and community based services, and restricting student participants by

68

degree plan was necessary (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). Community colleges also enroll a wide range of students, so age limitations were also needed to ensure participants were closely aligned with the traditional college going population (age 18 thru 24). Domestic restrictions were also important. Community colleges continue to serve a large number of international students seeking access to traditional four-year institutions. International students seeking a domestic college education are typically burdened with higher tuition prices than permanent U.S. residents and citizens. By enrolling in community colleges prior to transferring to four-year colleges, baccalaureate degree seeking international students can significantly reduce their college expenses. A total of 21 African American community college students were interviewed for this study.

Research Sites

For this investigation, two community colleges in San Parnard, California were selected as research sites. California is highly regarded as the model for higher educational organizational structures, and the study of community college choice and transfer is well situated for this state. The structure and organization of California postsecondary education, as outlined in the California Master Plan, provided the contextual richness needed to unpack African American students' community college choice and transfer processes (University of California Office of the President, 2008). Since the 1960s, the California Master Plan has been the blueprint for serving a burgeoning postsecondary population and outlines a three-tiered system: University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), and California Community College (CCC), that provides universal access to postsecondary education (University of California Office of the President, 2008).

The California Master Plan outlines a ten-campus UC system comprised of selective research institutions that serve the top 12.5% of graduating high school students. The 23 campuses in the CSU system are comprehensive masters level universities and serve the top 33% of graduating high school students. The 110 campuses in the CCC system are open access institutions that provide vocational, continuing, and remedial education for high school graduates. In addition, these institutions serve as gateways to the UC and CSU system by providing general education coursework for students seeking transfer to traditional four-year campuses. With over 2.7 million students, the CCC system is the largest community college system in the United States (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2009; University of California Office of the President, 2008).

California community colleges have structured statewide articulation agreements between campuses in the UC and CSU system. Individual CCC campuses have guaranteed transfer agreements (TAG) with UC and CSU campuses throughout the state and the assist.org website provides access to curriculum equivalency between CCCs and public four-year colleges and universities. In addition, CCC campuses have articulation agreements with local, private four-year colleges and universities, although the majority of private transfers are to for-profit institutions[2] (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2009; University of California Office of the President, 2008). In California there is substantial emphasis on community college transfer as a promoted route to baccalaureate degree attainment (Dougherty 1994; Driscoll, 2007). During the last decade, transfer rates from CCCs to the UC and CSU system have increased 27% and 17% respectively, and over 40% for both four-year systems during the last 15 years. In

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[2] The University of Phoenix and National University are the most popular private four-year transfer destinations of CCC students.

the 2007/08 academic year alone, over 70,000 students transferred from a CCC to a public four-year college or university in the state of California (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2009).

California community colleges are ranked among the best in the nation and their low price point of $26 dollars per unit make them a feasible option for many low-income students seeking higher education. Access to these institutions is a two-step process that includes a brief application, high school diploma or GED, and secondary transcripts. It isn't uncommon for students to apply for admission to a community college and receive notification of acceptance within a few weeks. Demographic evidence suggests that California is an appropriate setting for studying community college choice and transfer.

Participants for this study were selected from two community colleges in Southern California: Tesla College and Fisker College[3]. These campuses had similar African American student populations (5% or more of total enrollment) and no significant gender disparities in student enrollment (within 1.5%). In California, only Tesla and Fisker College met these criteria. African American community college enrollments over 5% are common in urban districts; however, these campuses tend to have low transfer rates for African American students, and more than half of the community colleges in California have gender disparities in African American enrollment (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2009).

Tesla College was established in 1964 and is located in a suburban middle-income neighborhood of San Parnard, California. Tesla College is a member of a three-campus community college district that serves over 100,000 students, is the second largest community college district in the state of California, and is one of the largest community

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[3] Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of each community college site.

college districts in the country. Tesla's stated mission is to provide accessible, high quality learning experiences to meet the educational needs of its community. Tesla College offers over 150 associate degree and certificate programs and transfers more students to four-year colleges than any of the other eight community colleges in the region. Tesla College maintains low resident-tuition fees of $26 dollars per unit. Similar to many community colleges, Tesla College is a commuter campus with no residential facilities and is the only community college within a ten square mile radius.

Strip malls with convenience stores, small independent restaurants, recognizable fast food chains, and low-cost cell phone providers, are all commonplace in and around Tesla College. At first glance, Tesla College invokes feelings of hope, inspiration and new beginnings. The primary source of this observation is the physical condition of the campus. Tesla College is undergoing several major new construction projects and the "newness" of the completed and pending projects is aesthetically pleasing to any campus visitor. The main campus entrance boasts new decorative signage, a civil rights memorial, remodeled parking garage, and health building. These impressive structures are progressive in their architectural design and present a professional image when entering campus. Several additional construction initiatives are also underway and included a remodeled football stadium, new humanities building, and a state of the art student services center. As I walked around campus it was clear that a transformation was underway and older more dilapidated buildings were being restored, remodeled, or torn down. This was especially evident as I encountered the older sections of campus that reminded me of classic public postsecondary structures constructed in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, Tesla College had undergone facility improvements that were attributed

to the passage of several bond initiatives, that generated over 1.5 billion dollars in new construction (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2009).

In addition to the aesthetic notables, one of the more striking observations about Tesla was the high level of racial and ethnic diversity amongst the student population. Without referencing quantitative data, I could readily stand in the quad and see students from a variety of racial backgrounds. It was impressive to see a range of students of color on the same campus, and in such high numbers; however, it was also apparent that Tesla College students were congregating within similar racial and ethnic groups.

In the fall of 2008, Tesla College enrolled 22,180 students (see Appendix B). During the 2007/08 academic year, a total of 342 students transferred from Tesla College to a UC campus, while 916 students transferred to a CSU campus (see Table 3.1). Proximity played a role in the four-year college choices of Tesla College transfer students, as the local UC campus was the preferred UC destination, and the local CSU campus was the most popular CSU destination. Tesla College also had a transfer center that served as a resource for students seeking admission to four-year institutions (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2009).

The success of student transfers from Tesla College to the UC system during the 2007/08 academic year was not replicated for African American students. Of the 342 UC transfers from Tesla College, only seven were African American and all transferred to the local UC campus (see Table 3.1). This is not surprising, given the decline of African American enrollment in the UC system (University of California Office of the President, 2008). Similar transfer statistics were found for the CSU system, as 45 of 916 Tesla College-to-CSU transfer students were African American (see Table 3.1). While these

numbers are low, they are similar to other community colleges in the state (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2009). In addition, Tesla College promoted African American students' transfer to HBCUs through its annual HBCU college fair and transfer day. Currently, it is the only local community college that hosts such an event, and the promotion of HBCU transfer was negatively influenced the transfer of African American students to the UC and CSU system.

Table 3.1

Summary of Tesla College Transfers to the UC/CSU System

2007 – 2008 Academic Year

Top 5 CSU Campuses	Transfer Students	African American Transfers
CSU 10 miles from Tesla College	613	(28)
CSU 25 miles from Tesla College	136	(3)
CSU 501 miles from Tesla College	30	(1)
CSU 104 miles from Tesla College	19	(2)
CSU 98 miles from Tesla College	19	(1)
# of Transfers to Remaining 18 CSU Campuses	99	(10)
Totals	916	(45)

Top 5 UC Campuses	Transfer Students	African American Transfers
UC 9 miles from Tesla College	264	(7)
UC 128 miles from Tesla College	25	(0)
UC 453 miles from Tesla College	22	(0)
UC 398 miles from Tesla College	9	(0)
UC 70 miles from Tesla College	6	(0)
# of Transfers to Remaining 4 UC Campuses	16	(0)
Totals	342	(7)

Fisker College was established in 1961 and is located in a low-middle income suburb of San Parnard, California. Fisker College is 15 miles from Tesla College and is a member of a two-campus community college district serving over 47,000 students. Fisker College's stated mission is to serve the broad and diverse community of individuals who seek to benefit from the college's wide range of educational programs and services. Fisker College will fulfill its commitment by providing instructional

programs that meet the needs for transfer education, vocational and career education, general education and developmental courses, community education programs and services, and programs that promote economic, civic, and cultural development (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2009). Fisker College offers over 100 associate degree and certificate programs and offers a transfer curriculum for students seeking admission to campuses in the UC and CSU systems.

Despite being only 15 miles apart, the physical topography of Fisker College is vastly different than Tesla and resembled the desert climate found in Arizona. Fisker College is isolated from most major business districts and located directly off a highway that connected the inland area to the coastal region. Fisker College has a prominent athletics program and many of their accomplishments on the field were displayed on campus. The placement of this signage reminded me of how some high schools proudly display their team mascot and name across various campus buildings and signage. In fact, Fisker College did feel, resemble, and project itself as a large suburban high school. Specifically, the campus physical layout and location were reminiscent of local high schools in the immediate area. Several student participants also made reference to this and identified Fisker College as an extended version of their high school experience.

Fisker College was founded in the 1960's and most of the original construction remains. Aesthetically, the campus is unappealing to the eye and few if any of the main academic buildings have been remodeled. The campus is quite large and sprawling, with ample space between academic buildings for students to congregate. The newest addition to campus is the library, but the overall design is more reminiscent of older buildings on campus. As I walked around campus, it became evident that Fisker College was not

undergoing the same level of new construction as Tesla College. Evidence of this was found in the cafeteria, which was the size of a small convenience store and only offered packaged sandwiches from the local 7-11 retailer. The counseling and transfer offices were equipped with one-page transfer guides that were dated March 2004 and only covered campuses within the local region. While on campus, I couldn't help but feel as if someone pressed the pause button for the last 20 years, because much of the campus infrastructure and resources were in disrepair and seemed neglected.

I conducted participant interviews at Fisker College after interviewing students at Tesla College, and there was a considerable difference in the level of racial and ethnic diversity between both campuses. During my time on campus, I observed that Fisker College enrolled more White, and fewer Black students, than Tesla College. I observed these differences over several campus visits, but a closer look at the demographic data revealed that Fiskers' White student population was higher than Tesla, but the African American student populations were actually similar. The more time I spent on campus, I began to wonder why Tesla and Fisker Colleges' African American student populations were 6% and 7% respectively, but there was a disparity between the visibility of these students at each campus site.

In the fall of 2008, Fisker College enrolled 18,426 students (see Appendix B). During the 2007/08 academic year, a total of 166 students transferred from Fisker College to a UC campus, while 872 students transferred to a CSU campus (see Table 3.2). Proximity also played a role in the four-year college choices of Fisker College transfer students, as the local UC campus was the preferred UC destination and the local CSU campus was the most popular CSU destination. Of the 166 UC transfers from

Fisker College-to-UC campuses during the 2007/08 academic year, only five were

African American, and all transferred to the local UC campus (see Table 3.2). Similar

transfer statistics were found for the CSU system, as only 45 of the 872 Fisker-to-CSU

transfer students were African American (see Table 3.2). Unlike Tesla College, Fisker

College does not actively promote African American transfer to HBCUs (California

Community College Chancellors Office, 2009). Neither Tesla nor Fisker College has a

successful record of African American student transfer to selective four-year institutions.

Table 3.2

Summary of Fisker College Transfers to the UC/CSU System

2007 – 2008 Academic Year

Top 5 CSU Campuses	Transfer Students	African American Transfers
CSU 10 miles from Fisker College	620	(23)
CSU 23 miles from Fisker College	79	(4)
CSU 92 miles from Fisker College	22	(2)
CSU 512 miles from Fisker College	22	(1)
CSU 89 miles from Fisker College	17	(1)
# of Transfers to Remaining 18 CSU Campuses	116	(14)
Totals	872	(45)

Top 5 UC Campuses	Transfer Students	African American Transfers
UC 12 miles from Fisker College	110	(5)
UC 457 miles from Fisker College	16	(0)
UC 120 miles from Fisker College	13	(0)
UC 407 miles from Fisker College	10	(0)
UC 197 miles from Fisker College	7	(0)
# of Transfers to Remaining 4 UC Campuses	10	(0)
Totals	342	(5)

Descriptive evidence suggests that Tesla and Fisker College provide some

educational opportunities for baccalaureate degree seeking African American community

college students. Tesla and Fisker College were selected out of 110 community college

campuses in the CCC system. Throughout the site selection process, I used the review of

literature as a guide to select research sites that would be appropriate for this study. Early

consideration was given to large urban and small suburban community colleges with high African American student enrollment. Initially, high levels of African American enrollment seemed advantageous to this examination. However, after reflection, I sought community colleges with African American student enrollments that mirrored the statewide postsecondary participation data for this racial group. This limitation reduced the number of community colleges under consideration. Four-year transfer rates and gender enrollment disparities were also used as criteria to select the final two research sites for this study.

Lastly, despite their approval of the research project, the level of cooperation from Fisker College campus officials was inadequate, and in stark contrast from Tesla College. During my contact with Fisker College there was an odd tenor in my dealings with staff and upper management, before, during, and after data collection. There was an air of mistrust that permeated throughout many of my meetings with campus officials, and one staff member even inquired about his personal level of compensation for approving this research project. Throughout data collection, the same campus officials who approved the project repeatedly asked me to supply evidence that I was authorized to conduct research on this campus. During the latter half of data collection, I was urged by the Vice President of Student Services to move my interviews offsite, because the administrative assistant assigned to book interview rooms could no longer do so. This type of behavior exemplified the level of cooperation that I received from Fisker College during this research project. At the conclusion of data collection, I expressed my concerns to the Fisker College senior administration and highlighted the importance of campus support for approved research projects.

Recruitment

Student participants were recruited through email solicitation, on-campus student organizations, and traditional flyer and on-campus advertisement methods. Recruitment of student participants was also aided by extensive cooperation with campus administrators and the registrar's office of each campus. Campus liaisons also provided an email list of potential participants for the study. In addition, student participants were encouraged to recruit additional participants that met the student demographic criteria. Prospective student participants received recruitment emails outlining the study, and all interested participants received a follow up email outlining additional aspects of the study. Prior to scheduling an interview with student participants, I confirmed each participant's eligibility for the study. Only domestic freshman or sophomore African American community college students between the ages of 18 and 24, who had aspirations to transfer to a four-year college or university, were selected to participate in this study.

Student participants were compensated 40 dollars for each 60-75 minute interview. Students were compensated an additional 25 dollars for each actionable student referral for this study. At the conclusion of semi-structured interviews in fall 2009, spring 2010, and summer 2010, several student participants were selected to participate in a focus group in March 2011, and they were compensated an additional 40 dollars. A website was also constructed to aid with the recruitment of student participants. The website provided an outline and rationale of the study and also allowed participants the opportunity to register online and schedule their initial semi-structured interview.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with African American freshman and sophomore baccalaureate degree seeking community college students were conducted on each campus site. I interviewed student participants until I reached saturation at both community college campuses. A total of 21 African American community college students were interviewed for this study. Tesla and Fisker College operated on the semester academic calendar and interviews were conducted during each academic term. Campus liaisons provided me with a secure, welcoming, and easily accessible interview location on each college campus. Interview locations were private and away from central campus, and allowed participants to remain anonymous during the interview process. Each student interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes in length. Follow up interviews lasted between 10 and 20 minutes in length.

Participant interviews were recorded on a digital recorder, and I also authored supplementary notes during each interview. At the conclusion of each student interview, I set aside time to document my reflections of the interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). The supplementary interview and post interview notes were merged into a participant memo, which accompanied the transcribed interview during data analysis. A professional transcriber was hired to transcribe each participant interview. A total of 11 participants were contacted for follow up interviews to clarify or expand on their initial interview. Transcribed interviews, related documents, and audio recordings were safely stored on a password-protected laptop and categorized by numbers with no recognizable identifiers. Additionally, interview transcripts and recordings were backed up on an external hard drive and web-based data storage.

Instruments

The primary instruments used for this study consisted of an interview protocol and a short demographic survey for student participants (see Appendices A and C). The semi-structured interview protocol served as a guide to assist with the collection of relevant data. The secondary instrument consisted of a demographic survey that student participants were required to complete prior to the interview. In addition, all participants were required to complete the appropriate consent form prior to each interview. The consent form authorized the recording of the interview and the use of collected data for publishable research.

The semi-structured student participant interview protocol was divided into four sections (see Appendix A). The content in section one served as a guide to address the following research questions: Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community colleges? Interview questions in this section were developed in conjunction with a review of community college choice and four-year transfer literature, as well as two separate pilot studies of the problem under investigation.

Content in section two of the student interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to address the following research question: How do students' high school experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions? Interview questions in this section of the interview protocol were developed in conjunction with a review of literature on self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy. In addition, I relied on preliminary results from two pilot studies on community college choice conducted in January and April of 2009.

The content in the remaining sections (three and four) of the student participant interview protocol was designed to address the following research questions: What factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to? How do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions? The interview questions in sections three and four were designed in conjunction with a review of community college literature, results of a previous pilot study, and my own personal knowledge of community college transfer to four-year institutions. To date, there are no empirical investigations of community college students' formation of four-year transfer choice sets and the aforementioned sources were the only available resources.

The final instrument utilized for this study was a short demographic survey for student participants (see Appendix C). The brief survey consisted of short answer questions to collect data that were used in the final analysis of student interviews. Baseline demographic data were needed to properly analyze and disseminate themes that emerged from student participants. The demographic survey was also constructed in conjunction with results from a pilot study conducted in April of 2009 and a review of community college choice and four-year transfer literature.

Data Analysis

Transcribed student participant interviews were indexed into a qualitative software program (Atlas.ti) for storage and analysis. Each transcribed participant interview was reviewed against the original digital recording to ensure authenticity and correct any discrepancies between the transcription and recorded interview. Transcripts were randomly coded and were not reviewed in the same order as the original interviews,

and this process was replicated throughout each phase of coding (i.e., the first interview conducted will not be the first interview coded). Coding of participant interviews was conducted in four phases to provide multiple vantage points to yield the data applicable for this study, and illuminate additional themes that were unrelated to the original research questions.

Phase one consisted of open coding of each transcript. Transcripts were coded with no reference to this particular study and all emergent themes were coded using the qualitative software (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). This process was repeated for each transcript and a total of two rounds of open coding were conducted. Phase two consisted of selective coding aimed at addressing the topic area of interest and the research questions in this study (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Themes were coded using the qualitative software and stored as the preliminary findings. This process was repeated to ensure all relevant themes were identified. An additional round of coding within phase two allowed me to reflect on the original round of coding and gain perspective and familiarity with the data. Phase three of the coding consisted of reviewing the results of both phases one and two, to assemble a working set of codes that represented the final themes for the study. Each transcript was then coded with the final set of working codes, and these coded transcripts served as the primary documents utilized to discuss the findings of this study.

The fourth and final phase of data analysis included two additional elements aimed at providing me with a comprehensive understanding of the problem under investigation: peer debriefing and member checking in the form of a focus group. Peer debriefing included, but was not limited to, an interactive process of data interpretation

with colleagues in the social sciences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final set of working codes, interview transcripts, and memos were shared with two colleagues for analysis and interpretation. The primary colleague had a working knowledge and expertise with community college choice and transfer, and the supplemental colleague had little-to-no experience with this area of inquiry. These two divergent perspectives provided additional insight into these findings and aided with interpretation of the data. Member checking involved the sharing of preliminary results with student participants for additional insight into phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final set of thematic results were openly shared and discussed with a focus group of selected student participants, and they provided feedback to aid with analysis and interpretation of the interview data.

Limitations

Research methods implored for this study have several limitations that may have influenced the results: external validity, triangulation, and geographic context. An explicit discussion of these limitations is needed, as I attempted to minimize these effects. The extent to which findings from qualitative research can be generalized to a broader population is a prominent issue in educational research (Maxwell, 1992). The lack of generalizibility present in the utilization of qualitative methodologies is often attributed to small sample sizes and the inability to control for sample characteristics. These arguments anchor the overall lack of external validity in the process of qualitative inquiry. Given the research design, this study was limited in its ability to generalize findings to the broader African American community college student population. Despite this limitation, I made two important decisions to address the generalizability of these

findings: sample size and institutional location. I interviewed student participants until there was saturation in the topic area of interest. Saturation in qualitative research occurs when the researcher has reached a point in data collection when participants no longer provide new information (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). In addition to sample size, institutional location also aided in the generalizability of these findings. Tesla and Fisker College were located in two different socio-economic climates in Southern California. Tesla College was located in a middle-class community and Fisker College is located in low-middle income community. The sample size and institutions utilized for this study failed to eradicate all concerns regarding the generalizibility of findings. However, they improved the overall external validity of this investigation.

Methodological triangulation in educational research involves the use of alternate methods to investigate a particular area of inquiry and improves the credibility of qualitative methodologies (Patton, 1990). The use of alternate methods in data collection can provide researchers with the ability to minimize their individual subjectivity and may also serve as a tool to "corroborate" findings from data collection (Denzin, 1970). This study lacks methodological triangulation and is limited by two methods of data collection: semi-structured interviews and a short demographic survey. I addressed this limitation by utilizing member checking in the form of a student participant focus group, and incorporated their feedback into data analyses and presentation of findings. The aims of methodological triangulation discuss the importance of data credibility, and feedback generated from student participants can be viewed as an alternative method to improve the credibility of qualitative research findings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990).

In addition to external validity and triangulation, the geographic context is another limitation of this study. Data were collected in California, and the unique educational landscape and postsecondary organizational structure of this state may have influenced the findings. With two prominent private research universities, over a dozen private religious institutions, and over thirty public four-year institutions, California has a unique balance of private and public postsecondary options in the academic marketplace. Additionally, the organizational structure outlined by the California Master Plan is unique in that it provides access to postsecondary education for students with various levels of academic performance. California is widely known as a state that is "student friendly" and this can be attributed to multiple points of entry and coordination via the three systems. The California Master Plan is not replicated anywhere in the United States and geographic differences may have influenced the findings in this study.

Geographic contextual differences were not limited to organizational structure and the presence of private postsecondary institutions. California also has a robust course articulation system via the assist.org website. The site offers a list of transferrable coursework from public community colleges to campuses in the CSU and UC system. Finally, geographic differences related to tuition costs are also a consideration. Community college tuition for California residents is the lowest in the country, and in other states community college resident tuition is similar to in-state public four-year tuition. The cost savings associated with CCCs limits the generalizibility of the findings of this study. These and other limitations were not addressed in this study, and future research on African American community college choice and transfer should be conducted in other geographic regions in the United States.

Researcher Biases

Inherent in the process of objective sociological inquiry is the subjective experiences of the observer (Bourdieu, 1977). Awareness of individual subjectivity is not a mechanism by which one can remove or eradicate these biases; however, reflexive practice throughout the study provided me with tools to examine how my subjective experiences influenced the investigation and interpretation of the findings (Peshkin, 1988). Objectivity in qualitative inquiry has remained a prominent issue in the discussion of sound sociological research (Kvale, 1996). During the course of this study, I kept a research journal to reflect on all phases of the investigation and made note of individual observations and potential biases. I periodically reviewed the journal during all phases of the examination, and access to these materials illuminated any potential influences I may have had on this study. I will also provide a brief demographic biography.

I am an Afro-Latino male from a working class family, a high school dropout and graduated high school at age 21. I attended community college after completing my high school diploma through an adult school. After enrolling in a community college for three years, I transferred to a master's level non-residential campus. After graduation I worked in admissions and financial aid for several universities in California before enrolling in a master's program in education. I then served as a graduate assistant at a research university while pursuing a doctoral degree in higher education. I attribute my ascension through the educational pipeline to the academic preparation I received at the community college level. The community college experience left an indelible impression on my academic path and any biases for these institutional types are noted. The aims of this study are situated under the context of these personal experiences.

The preceding chapter outlined the methodological aspects of this qualitative

investigation. In the following chapter, I discuss the descriptive findings of this study of

African American community college choice and four-year transfer. I discuss the

remaining thematic findings in chapters five, six, and seven.

Chapter IV

Findings

In this chapter, I discuss findings that emerged from this study. In the first section, I provide a cursory summary of thematic findings across all participants. I review student demographics and provide descriptions of participants from Tesla College and Fisker College. In the following chapters, I discuss thematic findings related to African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Thematic findings are organized by organizational (chapter five), social and cultural (chapter six), and individual and psychological themes (chapter seven). In the final chapter, I provide an overview of all thematic findings and offer a revised conceptual framework to understand the complexity of African American community college students' pathway to the baccalaureate.

The purpose of this study was to examine the community college choice and four-year transfer process of African American students. Specifically, I sought to answer the following research questions: Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community college, what factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to, what role do community colleges play in preparing baccalaureate degree seeking African American students for their transition to four-year institutions, and how do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions?

Organizational thematic findings revealed that community colleges act as a *preparatory space* for African American community college students. Social and cultural thematic findings revealed that *finances, proximity, family members, timing and deadlines*, influenced African American students' decision to attend community colleges and their formation of four-year transfer choice sets. Individual and psychological thematic findings revealed that *major and career choice* influenced African American students formation of potential four-year transfer destinations. Students also revealed their academic performance didn't match their perceived levels of *academic self-efficacy*. And attending community college increased African American students' perceptions of their ability to succeed at four-year institutions (*college self-efficacy*). Thematic findings revealed no differences by research site or any other identifiable marker.

African American students not only revealed why they chose to attend community college, but also discussed why they decided to attend Tesla College or Fisker College. Regardless of the institution, students chose their community college because of student diversity, proximity from home, quality of athletics, and the desire to not "be around" the same students they went to high school with. Students in this study discussed that Tesla College and Fisker College offered a diverse student body. Participants also cited that Tesla and Fisker were closer to their home. A number of participants were student athletes and selected Tesla or Fisker for their athletic programs. Lastly, many students selected Tesla or Fisker because it offered them an opportunity to experience a different social circle than their high school environment. While these findings were prevalent in this study, thematic evidence didn't provide compelling participant quotes to illustrate the importance of these factors in students' selection of a community college.

90

In the following section of this chapter, I review student background demographics of participants from Tesla and Fisker College. Specifically, I review participants: gender, age, enrollment level, financial aid, employment, student and family income, first generation status, high school and college GPA, four-year transfer choice sets, undergraduate and graduate degree aspirations, and standardized admission test preparation.

Student Demographics

Participants in this study were comprised of African American community college students in California. Prior to each student interview participants completed a one-page demographic survey. The instrument contained questions about African American students: age, gender, year of attendance, financial aid and employment status, student and family income, first generation status, high school and community college GPA, degree aspirations, transfer choice sets, and admissions testing (see Table 4.1).

Participants in this study averaged 20 years of age and 57% were female. 57% of participants were first year college students and 71% were first generation college students. 48% of participants had graduate degree aspirations and 38% prepared for the SAT or ACT while in high school. The average high school GPA for all participants was 3.07, and the average community college GPA was 2.77. Students averaged three schools in their transfer list, with an average distance of 51 miles from home. 52% of participants were employed full time while in college and 38% were not employed. All participants reported personal income levels of under $20,000 for 2009. Meanwhile, 52% of participants reported parental incomes between $20,000 and $50,000. Lastly, all participants were enrolled full time at their respective community college.

Table 4.1

Student Background Demographics

21	Total Participants
52%	Attended Fisker College
57%	Female
20yrs	Average Age
57%	First-Year Students
71%	First Generation Students
48%	Graduate Degree Aspirations
38%	Prepared for the SAT/ACT in High School
3.07	Average High School GPA
2.77	Average Community College GPA
3	Average Number of Four-Year Transfer Options
51	Average Distance (miles) of Transfer Options
38%	Not Employed
52%	Employed Part Time
10%	Employed Full Time
100%	Enrolled in College Full Time
100%	Student Income (Under $20,000)
52.5%	Family Income ($20,000 - 50,000)
19%	Family Income (Under $20,000)
19%	Family Income ($50,000 - 74,999)
9.5%	Family Income ($75,000 or above)

Student Descriptions

Student participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity during the study (see Table 4.2). In the following section, I provide a brief narrative of each student participant. These narratives include additional background information and anecdotes about each participant and provide another vantage point into the lived experiences of these students.

Table 4.2

Student Profiles

Pseudonym	School	Age	Gender	Family Inc	Pell	First Gen	H.S./C.C. GPA	Employment	Aspirations	Transfer
Angie	Fisker	23	F	50k – 75k	No	No	3.00/2.00	Full Time	Bachelors	1
Peter	Fisker	22	M	50k – 75k	No	Yes	2.90/3.47	Part Time	Doctoral	4
Brandon	Fisker	22	M	20k – 50k	No	No	3.00/2.60	Full Time	Masters	2
Chris	Fisker	21	M	20k – 50k	No	Yes	3.00/2.70	Part Time	Masters	4
Karen	Fisker	21	F	20k – 50k	Yes	Yes	3.50/3.00	Part Time	Bachelors	2
Kerri	Fisker	21	F	Under 20k	No	Yes	3.00/3.00	None	Bachelors	3
Patrick	Fisker	20	M	20k - 50k	No	Yes	3.30/2.00	Part Time	Bachelors	3
Evette	Fisker	20	F	20k – 50k	No	Yes	3.10/2.50	Part Time	Bachelors	2
Joe	Fisker	19	M	Above 75k	No	No	3.00/2.00	Part Time	Masters	3
Tammy	Fisker	19	F	20k – 50k	No	Yes	3.30/2.70	Part Time	Bachelors	2
John	Fisker	18	M	20k – 50k	No	Yes	2.80/2.90	None	Bachelors	4
Michele	Fisker	18	F	Under 20k	Yes	No	3.00/2.70	None	Doctoral	4
Isaac	Tesla	20	M	20k – 50k	Yes	Yes	3.50/2.30	None	Bachelors	3
Jenna	Tesla	21	F	Under 20k	Yes	Yes	3.80/3.00	Part Time	Bachelors	3
Jason	Tesla	19	M	Above 75k	No	No	3.20/3.00	None	Bachelors	3
Rania	Tesla	19	F	50k – 75k	No	Yes	3.92/4.00	Part Time	Doctoral	4
Melissa	Tesla	19	F	20k – 50k	No	Yes	2.50/2.90	Part Time	Bachelors	4
Tania	Tesla	18	F	20k – 50k	Yes	Yes	2.10/2.40	None	Doctoral MD	1
Anthony	Tesla	18	M	Under 20k	Yes	Yes	3.33/3.10	None	Masters	3
McKenzie	Tesla	18	F	20k – 50k	No	No	2.60/2.70	Part Time	Doctoral MD	2
Gwynne	Tesla	18	F	50k – 75k	Yes	Yes	2.70/3.20	None	Masters	5

Fisker College

Angie, 23, was a first-year college student. Angie is originally from San Parnard. Both of Angie's parents have bachelor's degrees. Angie was an average student in high school. She didn't seek admission to, nor did she consider going to, a four-year institution after high school. After high school Angie started working full time to support her family. She recently decided to return to school and attend a community college because she felt like she needed more time to prepare for a four-year college or university. Angie currently had one local CSU campus in her list of potential transfer destinations. Angie plans on majoring in education and pursuing a career as an elementary or secondary teacher.

Peter, 22, was a second-year college student. After high school Peter spent three years in the military before being honorably discharged for a medical condition. Originally from San Parnard, Peter enrolled in community college first, because he said he didn't know much about getting into a four-year school. Peter's mother has a bachelor's degree from an online proprietary institution and he thinks his estranged father has an engineering degree from a vocational school. Thus far, enrolling in community college was a good experience for him and he had two local institutions in his potential list of transfer institutions. Peter plans on majoring in sociology and would like to eventually enroll in a doctoral program and mentor youth in his hometown.

Brandon, 22, was a first-year college student. Brandon is originally from Missouri. In high school he played football and was an average student. Brandon and one of his siblings were adopted and he is the youngest of four children. All of his siblings and both of his parents graduated from four-year colleges. He was the first in his

94

family to attend community college. He was a member of the Fisker football team and has aspirations to play at the major football bowl subdivision (previously known as division one) when he transfers to a four-year institution. Self-confidence, finances, and timing and deadlines, played a large role in his decision to attend Fisker College. Brandon plans on majoring in business management and two of the four institutions in his transfer list are local CSU campuses.

Chris, 21, was a second-year college student. He is originally from San Parnard and is the first in his family to attend college. Two of his cousins also attend Fisker College. His mother was recently laid off and he contributed some of his earnings to his family income. Chris was a solid student in high school, but never considered attending a four-year college or university. His primary reason for attending community college was the cost and location. Chris had four schools in his four-year transfer choice set and they were all located in Southern California. He plans on majoring in drama and pursuing a career as an actor in television and film.

Karen, 21, was a second-year college student. Karen was raised in a single parent household and is the first in her family to attend college. Karen had a learning disability and received additional assistance from the community college disability office. In high school Karen was an above average student and took several steps to enroll in a four-year college or university. She applied to four schools in her senior year and was admitted to a UC and a CSU campus in California. Because of financial restrictions, Karen decided to decline those admission offers and enrolled in Fisker College. Karen had already completed her transfer coursework and was accepted to two four-year colleges. She plans on majoring in forensic science and pursuing a career as a forensic investigator.

Kerri, 21, was a second-year college student. Originally from Minnesota, Kerri was the first in her family to attend college. Kerri's parents emigrated from Somalia and she was the only member of her family that was born and raised in the U.S. Kerri was a solid student in high school and applied to two local CSU campuses in her senior year. She was accepted to both campuses, but she didn't feel ready to enroll at a four-year institution and decided to enroll at Fisker College. Kerri had three local four-year institutions in her list of potential transfer destinations. She plans on majoring in engineering and pursuing a career as a mechanical engineer.

Patrick, 20, was a second-year college student. His mother attended college at the local CSU campus, but didn't graduate; he has no contact with his father. Patrick was a solid student in high school and was preparing to attend four-year colleges and universities. He scored 1460 on the SAT and applied to several colleges. Patrick was offered admission to a CSU campus in central California. Patrick was concerned about the distance from home and his preparation for college. He declined the CSU offer of admission and attended Fisker College. Patrick had three potential transfer destinations in his choice set and they are all located in Southern California. He plans on majoring in drama and pursuing a career as an actor in the television and film industry.

Evette, 20, was a second-year college student. Evette was raised in a single parent household and her mother was also attending Fisker College. Evette attended four different secondary schools. She eventually received her general education diploma from a trade school. Evette didn't seek out four-year institutions while in high school, and eligibility and cost were her primary reasons for attending a community college. Evette had one local CSU and one local UC campus in her four-year transfer choice set. When

she transfers, Evette is planning to major in sociology or psychology, but is unsure about her future career aspirations.

Joe, 19, was a second-year college student. Joe was originally from Florida and was raised in a single parent household. His mother received a master's degree from a large research institution in Florida. Joe was a solid student in high school and he applied to five four-year institutions in Florida while in high school, but was only admitted to one school. Joe declined this offer of admission because he felt like he could get into a better school after attending community college. He cited the need to prepare himself for a four-year college, and the need for a change of scenery, as reasons he enrolled in a community college. Joe was the starting point guard on the Fisker College basketball team and hopes to receive a scholarship when he transfers. Currently, Joe has two out-of-state and one local college in his list of potential transfer destinations. Joe was still undecided about his major and career choices, but he was intrigued about my career path in higher education.

Tammy, 19, was a first-year college student. During high school Tammy was diagnosed with a rare liver disease and initially struggled with her academic pursuits. Originally from San Parnard, Tammy was raised in a single parent household and was the first in her family to attend college. Tammy graduated high school with high academic marks, but decided to attend community college. Tammy also had a daughter right after high school. Tammy cited that location and timing and deadlines, and parenthood, were reasons why she chose to enroll in a community college. Tammy is currently considering two four-year institutions for transfer. She plans on majoring in biology and pursuing a career in the medical field.

John, 18, was a first-year college student. John was raised in a single parent household and his mother is also pursuing a college degree. His older sibling attended the local UC campus. John attended an affluent high school and was bused in from his low-income neighborhood in San Parnard. John was an average student in high school and during his senior year he applied to several HBCUs and one CSU campus in Southern California. John was a football player in high school and he was recruited to play at three HBCUs. John was admitted to all of his top choices, but he ultimately decided to stay home and attend Fisker College. John referenced being away from home and needing more time to prepare for a four-year college as reasons why he chose to attend community college. John had four schools in his list of potential four-year transfer destinations. He plans on majoring in early child development and pursuing a career as an elementary teacher. John would also like to start youth football camps in his hometown.

Michele, 18, was a first-year college student. She was the fourth member of her family to attend community college. Her mother attended Fisker in the 70's and received a bachelor's degree from the satellite campus of a small private liberal arts college. Her father was not a college graduate. Michele's three sisters also attended Fisker and they were currently enrolled in the same CSU campus in the Los Angeles area. Michele decided to attend community college because of the low cost and ease of transfer to a four-year institution. In high school Michele was an average student and was placed in a special program for "disabled" students. She felt like this was a mistake and doesn't consider herself a special needs case. This was an especially difficult issue for Michele and she used that experience as a motivational tool. Michele was also very close to her

mother and was not planning to leave the San Parnard area. She had several CSU campuses in Southern California in her four-year transfer choice set. Michele is unsure of her college major and future career options.

Tesla College

Isaac, 20, was a first-year college student. He was the first in his family to attend college. After high school he started working full time as a security guard. He was laid off in 2009 and decided to enroll in community college. Isaac was a high achieving student in high school and considered the local CSU and some UC campuses, but he decided that working first would allow him more time to prepare for a four-year college. Isaac would like to remain in the San Parnard area and is considering two local CSU campuses for transfer. He plans on majoring in business and pursuing a career in international business.

Jenna, 19, was a second-year college student. Jenna was the first in her family to attend college. Originally from San Parnard, Jenna attended two different high schools in her secondary school career. She considered several four-year colleges prior to attending Tesla, but she decided to attend community college after not taking the SAT in high school. Academically, Jenna was a high achieving student, but in high school she was not prepared to apply for admission to four-year institutions. Her younger sibling decided to enroll at Tesla College in Fall 2010. Jenna had three schools in her transfer choice set and two are located in Southern California. Jenna plans on majoring in dance or biology and pursuing a career in the arts or as a physical therapist.

Jason, 19, was a first-year college student. Both of Jason's parents attended community college and his mother graduated from a four-year institution. Jason decided

to enroll in community college because he was concerned about his ability to adjust to the social aspects of college life and timing of his college search. He was an above average student in high school and he considered several four-year colleges before he decided to attend Tesla College. Finances were also a consideration for Jason. Despite his parents' repeated financial commitment to college, Jason was still worried about the financial cost of a four-year college. Jason had three schools in his transfer choice set and he plans on majoring in film and pursuing a career in the television and motion picture industry.

Rania, 19, was a first-year college student. Rania was the first in her immediate family to attend college was raised in a single parent household. Her grandparents are both college graduates from highly selective institutions. Rania was a high achieving student in high school and applied to several four-year institutions. She was accepted to three prominent UC institutions and was offered an option to attend a community college before enrolling at the UC. Rania was unsure of her potential college major and career path and opted to enroll in Tesla College first. She had two UC campuses in her transfer choice set. Rania is considering careers in the medical field and dramatic arts.

Melissa, 19, was a second-year college student. She was raised in a single parent household and her mother attended trade school, but never graduated. Melissa moved several times throughout high school and she felt that her unstable home life contributed to her low GPA. Melissa looked into four-year schools during high school, but she only applied to art schools. Melissa was admitted to several art institutions, but opted not to attend because of the high tuition costs. Her primary reasons for attending community college were finances, proximity, and time to sort out her career and educational path. She also felt like the community college was a good space for her to prepare for a four-

year institution. Melissa had two local and two east coast four-year institutions in her transfer choice set. Melissa is undecided about her career plans, but she is considering a career in art or counseling.

Tania, 18, was second-year college student. She was originally from Oakland, California and relocated to San Parnard to attend community college. Tania and her sister were the first in their family to attend college. Tania struggled with her studies in high school. She attributed her low GPA to moderate drug use and lackluster attitude about school. Despite her struggles, Tania still maintained a sufficient GPA to receive admission offers to several HBCUs. Her primary reasons for attending community college were finances and deadlines. During the admissions process, she missed several financial aid deadlines and her parent's fiscal health was uncertain. Tania had one local four-year institution in her transfer choice set. She plans on majoring in biology and pursuing a career in the medical field.

Anthony, 18, was a first-year college student. Anthony was raised in a foster home with three siblings. All of his siblings are now in college and his foster parents had no previous college experience. His mother died at a young age and he has dedicated all of his educational pursuits to her. He was an outstanding student in high school and applied to two four-year colleges during his senior year. Anthony was accepted to both of his options, but he declined his offers of admission. Anthony decided to attend community college because he wanted some more time to sort out his career options and remain in San Parnard, California. Anthony had two local and one Northern California four-year institution in his transfer choice set. He wants to major in kinesiology and purse a career in physical therapy.

McKenzie, 18, was a first-year college student. She was from San Parnard, California. Her parents both attended college and she was a below average student in high school. McKenzie applied to a number of four-year institutions during her senior year, but she applied late in the admissions process. McKenzie applied late because her parents were guiding the college search process and there were several disagreements about where she should apply. Many of her applications were submitted after the deadline and she wasn't admitted to any four-year institutions. Her primary reasons for attending community college were finances and timing and deadlines. McKenzie had two colleges in her list of potential transfer destinations. While both her parents were involved in the college application process, her mother was especially hands-on in sorting out McKenzie's post-high school educational path.

Gwynne, 18, was a first-year college student. Gwynne was the third member of her family to attend Tesla College. Her older sister and brother attended Tesla several years ago and eventually transferred to the local CSU campus. Gwynne and her siblings were the first in their family to pursue a college education. Gwynne was a solid student in high school and took steps to prepare for admission to a four-year college. Gwynne took both the SAT and ACT, and applied to the local CSU campus in San Parnard. Her decision to attend community college was primarily based on her inability to gain access to the local CSU, which was impacted at the time she applied. Impacted CSU campuses are overenrolled and limit enrollment for freshman and transfer students. Gwynne also applied and was admitted to two other CSU's in Southern California. She ultimately declined those offers of admission because she was reluctant to leave San Parnard and Southern California. Gwynne had two local CSU campuses and three out of area schools

in her four-year transfer choice set. Gwynne plans on majoring in biology and pursuing a career in forensic science as an investigator.

The student demographic and background descriptions offered in this section provided some preliminary insights into African American community college students' choice and four-year transfer processes. Student profiles and demographic data demonstrated that many of these students were raised in low-moderate income families, had little familiarity with four-year institutions, and their choice and transfer process incorporated a myriad of factors. In the following chapters, I discuss thematic findings that further illustrate the complexity of African American community college students' educational choices. In chapter five, I discus an organizational related finding that revealed community colleges act as a *preparatory space* for African American community college students.

Chapter V

Organizational

In this chapter, I discuss an organizational theme related to the role of community colleges: preparatory space. Previous research on African American students has identified organizational variables that play a role in students' **four-year college choice** processes. The same cannot be said about the important role of **community colleges** in African American students' preparation for four-year institutions. Research has shown that organizational variables such as high schools, HBCUs, teachers, counselors, and school racial composition, influence African American students' four-year college decisions (Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Freeman, 2005; Goldsmith, 2004; Irvine, 1990; Kao & Tienda, 1988; Pitre, 2006; Qian & Blair, 1999). These factors influence African American students decision to attend college (predisposition), their search for colleges (search), and the final selection of a college (choice). While these findings provide some insight into African American students' four-year college educational choices, there is still a gap in our comprehension of African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. We are still unsure how organizational level variables influence African American community college students' college choice decisions. Thematic findings from this study build on these findings and reveal that community colleges play a prominent role in preparing African American students for the transition to four-year colleges and universities.

Findings from this study make an important contribution to the discussion on African American students' educational choices. In this chapter, I discuss that participants in this study revealed how community colleges served as a preparatory space for students to prepare themselves for the social and academic transition of attending a four-year college or university. I conclude this section with a discussion of how this finding extends our understanding of African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes, and the role that community colleges serve for this student population.

Preparatory Space

Participants in this study discussed a number of reasons why they decided to attend community college. Participants revealed that finances, proximity, family members, timing and deadlines, and major and career choice, influenced the community college choice and four-year transfer process. Thematic findings in this investigation also revealed that community colleges served as a preparatory space for African American students. Participants in this study discussed how community colleges provided them with an educational space to prepare for the social, psychological, and academic realities of "real college" (four-year college or university). Participants discussed that community colleges provided them with an opportunity to "prepare for a real college" and get acclimated to the social and academic norms of college life. Academically, students expressed some concern about the scholastic challenges that await them at a four-year institution. These findings illustrated the important role that community colleges serve for African American students. When asked about why she decided to attend community college, Melissa, a Tesla College student, discussed how

positive achievement at this level could translate to academic success to a four-year college or university. Melissa talked about the role of community colleges here,

> Coz they're real schools, you know, and they're totally different. So yeah I would probably be a little nervous but I think if I actually stayed here for a long enough time and really understood, got the feel for college and doing good here (Tesla) I know I could do good there (four-year college) too… Totally, it's totally a stepping stone here. It's totally something I could learn from and it's helping me grow as a student and as a person you know. You know these classes I'm taking now are nothing really compared to what I wanna be taking, but this experience is going a long way, you know, and Tesla's totally gonna help me with that 'coz it already has.

Throughout this study, student participants suggested that community colleges were not as academically rigorous as their four-year counterparts. Terminology such as; "real college" and "its just a community college," were often referenced. Given that underlying assumption, Melissa decided to enroll at a community college as a way to assess her academic readiness for a four-year institution. As early as her first year at Tesla, Melissa cited there was a marked improvement in her preparation for "real college." Prior to attending community college, Melissa was unsure of how she would perform academically in college. With several terms under her belt, she currently holds a 2.9 GPA, and is feeling more efficacious about her ability to succeed academically when she transfers to a four-year college or university.

Students who felt they could handle the academic demands of a four-year college still experienced doubt about certain aspects of college life. When asked about his decision to attend a community college, Isaac, a Tesla College student, indicated that his study habits were a concern. Similar to other students in this study, he also operated under the assumption that students at a four-year college must possess a higher level of academic effort or ability. Isaac discussed this here,

I knew, I felt in my heart I was capable going to a four year but
mentally I think my study habits are not there yet. And you know,
I text them (friends) every once in a while. They'd be like, "oh, I cant
talk, I'm studying" So it was like a daily thing, like they study, study,
study, study, study. Or they have an assignment due, you know, they
dont talk to me for like the next two weeks because of that assignment.
So just based of that I'm just like, yeah. I think I just lay back, So,
in that case, I said, just go to a community and then work my way
up. And then I'll be ready for that. I see it as you know. Yeah, four
year is much better because you know, it sets your course while
community college you do have to work for, it is another stepping
stone to a four year but yet again you know, there's different classes
you have to work so hard in. And I'm getting better at it and once I
get the feel of it, but so far I think I'm doing pretty good.

Similar to the previous participant, Isaac also used the community college as a

space to assess the likelihood of his academic success at a four-year institution. In

addition to his self-assessment, Isaac also had several high school friends who are

enrolled at a prominent private four-year research university in Southern California.

Since their arrival at this university, Isaac noticed the frequency and intensity of his

friends' study habits. Isaac discussed how difficult it was to reach his friends when they

had large projects due at school and this level of academic focus was something he didn't

feel prepared for. When he compared his friends' study habits to his own, Isaac's beliefs

were strengthened about the level of ability and effort required to succeed at a four-year

college or university.

In addition to academic adjustment, students discussed other concerns about the

transition to a four-year college. Students indicated their decision to attend a community

college was influenced by concerns about acclimating to a four-year institution.

Specifically, students expressed doubts that they were ready for the social transition to a

four-year college, and thought a community college would provide them with the time

and space to prepare for these institutions. In this study, college readiness represented

more than academic ability, it also signaled students' level of preparedness for other aspects of the college experience. Anthony, a Tesla College student who had several high school friends attending a local CSU campus, discussed how concerns about adjusting to college influenced his decision to attend a community college after high school. Anthony talked about the important role of adjustment here,

> Yeah. I think the reason why I chose the community was like,
> I don't want to have a freak out moment. I see a lot of kids when
> they go to four-year, they will freak out. Like, "oh my God, I'm really
> here, am I gonna do good?" That's what my sister had. And it's like,
> do I really want to put myself through that? Or do I want take like the
> steps to get comfortable with it instead of jumping into it. For me high
> school, that was easy. That was cool. Whatever, it was a breeze. So, it
> was like, do I want to jump into a full-blown mess. Like, wow, I just
> walk into it like to have the sense. That's what I'm thinking community
> college was meant for. Warm myself up to a kind of thing, like get used
> to the work load, and all the projects and all that. It will make it easier
> to transfer. It will make it easier to go into it. Like the transition would
> be a lot easier than just going from high school straight to a four-year.

Throughout this study, students consistently referred to their time at a community college as a place where they could ease their way into all aspects of four-year college life. Through his high school friendship groups and siblings, Anthony witnessed first hand how the initial year of college can be a difficult transition for many students. Despite admission offers from two CSU campuses, he was reluctant to experience a "freak out moment" that would accompany his enrollment at a four-year institution directly after high school. Anthony expressed a preference to "warm" himself up and get acclimated to college by attending a community college first and then transferring to a four-year college or university.

Students also expressed concerns about the social transition to a four-year college and their capacity to acclimate to campus residential life. Students expressed doubts

regarding their ability to practice self-restraint and remain focused on their academic

responsibilities. Jason, an above average Tesla College student, discussed how the

prospect of living in a dorm influenced his decision to attend a community college

instead of a four-year institution. Jason talked about this social adjustment here,

> I thought it would be a good for start, I think it would be, I wouldn't
> say easier than a four-year institution but I think it's a good place for
> me personally to get my feet on the ground just to start off. You know
> going to a four-year college or universities and, oh you know, it's tough,
> there is so much work and all that. I think in the dorms I get I would say
> distracted really easily. And man, I cannot see myself getting any work
> done in those dorms I wouldn't be able to focus as well as I think I could.
> And then at home I just think I get less distraction because I kind of know
> my surroundings and everything, you know.

Students in this study, expressed concern about their ability to mange the many

"temptations" they associated with attending a four-year institution. For Jason, attending

a community college first represented an opportunity to get acclimated to college life

without added distractions. Other students referenced similar concerns about issues, such

as dorm life, making new friends, and being away from home.

Community colleges served an important role for students in this study. These

institutional types acted as transitory spaces where students could take the initial steps to

college, without taking the full plunge into college life. Student participants discussed

their decision to attend a community college as moving forward to the next stage in their

post high school career. This intermediary stage would provide them with a chance to

test the waters and get more familiar with college. Since many students in this study

were first generation students, their apprehension about college was not surprising.

Patrick, a Fisker College student, discussed the role of community college as he

reflected on his college choice decision. Patrick talked about it here,

Yeah. Let's say it's like a, I guess it's like a gateway ticket, I'd say. Like you get what you need from here to receive the ticket to the next level like me coming here getting all my education, getting ready to get done, paved the way for me to even go to university, I believe. Even my drama teacher telling me, he was like "how did you come to Fisker College," how it could make it a lot easier for you to get to university because of how you handle yourself at community college. How it's like a taste, I guess you could say. Community college is like a nice little taste of what a college life is. High school couldn't really give you that. But coming to Fisker, like it is a lot more serious. The teachers are a lot more college-like. You know, professors not worry about you. They're not calling your parents. They're not doing anything like that. They're showing you that you're on your own and that really that prepared me a lot because. Okay, I can't come to class. If I don't come, he's just going to drop me. I know I have to just get my work done and I know I would have to just be focused or else it is going to come back on me basically. So, I think it's a different preparation for university just coming here. Yeah, definitely. The way my mind just changed from being in high school, like in my freshman year. I had made a complete turn around in my life as far as school life as school goes like mentally. I can see myself going to a college and succeeding because I know how to get the work done, now I know how to focus in class and to stop BS'ing, like it is not going to be that easy like in high school just breezing through. So, yeah, I think it did prepare me.

Transitioning to a traditional four-year college or university is a challenging endeavor for any student. This transition can be more difficult for low-income and first-generation students who tend to be less familiar with college norms. For Patrick, attending a community college before transferring to a four-year institution was a vital component to his development as a student. Patrick used the community college as space where he could get accustomed to increased levels of autonomy and personal responsibility. Prior to attending a community college Patrick was unsure he could succeed at a four-year institution, and after two years at Fisker College, he now feels prepared to punch his ticket to the next level and transfer to the local CSU campus.

Students in this study also discussed how important other aspects of their community college experience were in their development as college students. Similar to

the previous student, Karen discussed how enrolling in a community college after high

school prepared her for eventual transfer to a four-year college or university. Karen, a

Fisker College student, discussed the role of community colleges here,

> I will just say that being in a two-year seems like it takes a long time,
> but in the long run, it's very helpful because you get your, you know,
> your general ed out of the way basically. And then when you transfer,
> you're just focusing on what to want to do…I'm kind of glad I made that
> decision. It's kind of helping me be prepared for, I'll say, a big campus
> in the future. I mean, yes these are what small class sizes. But this school
> I'm going to are small class sizes, and so keeping some similarities together.
> But I think being here and just completing, you know, my general ed and all
> that I need is a good thing. In my college, let's see, I think it (Fisker college)
> just prepared me to do well. Yes, there were some times where, you know, I
> was up and down. Like I'm talking by myself, but overall, this it's like a step
> in the door type of thing. I mean it is a college but a smaller version of this.
> You know how it feels so flustered so much pressure, but it also helps you
> conquer those so you are going to, you know, big four-year you don't feel
> so much of that pressure but you can still do well.

Karen expressed how the overall size of her community college was smaller than

many of her potential transfer destinations. Her enrollment at Fisker College allowed her

to acclimate to college life without the "pressure" of attending a "big four-year "

institution. Of the potential transfer destinations in Karen's choice set, two were large

CSU campuses with enrollments over 40,000 students. With an enrollment of roughly

18,000 students, Fisker College can be classified as a smaller institution when compared

to her potential baccalaureate degree options. Many students in this study sought transfer

to public colleges and universities with enrollment levels over 30,000 students. Thus,

their community college experience served as a primer for their eventual attendance at a

larger postsecondary institution.

Participants in this study consistently referenced their decision to attend a

community college as a "step" toward attending a four-year college or university. Even

students, who were academically eligible to attend the local CSU campus, chose to attend a community college. Brandon, an average Fisker College student, talked about his decision to attend a community college instead of a four-year institution,

> I mainly came here like I said for a step, like to get used to it. I mean, I think I could have really gotten into a lot of schools, but I don't think I really wanted to. Like my mindset wasn't set on a four-year. Like I'm not, I don't think a four-year is that great, honestly, to just jump into. I mean, it's cool. Okay, get to four-year, but, you are bound to go to a four -year because you can transfer to a four-year. So, I mean, I guess the one thing that everyone hypes up is your freshman year of the four years like the best. So, I mean I can do that here.

Jenna, a high achieving Tesla College student, also expressed similar feelings about her decision to attend a community college,

> I think that it will be more of a drive because I know that I'm actually working towards something, I'm actually there and like that's like kind of the last step. So, I think it will like push me more into like, "Hey, just finish this and you'll like be what you need to be" I guess I don't know what you'll call it, but it's kind of like a baby step for me. It's definitely comfortable. I don't want to say easy because it's definitely not easy, but it's like I don't know…Community college gave me an opportunity to like go to college, but still in my community and then so that's like a step before I take, going away to college like in another community. Yeah. I think that it's going to make to much of a baby step. Yeah. Because I have been here for three years, but it's like the perfect baby step.

Many students in this study expressed similar statements regarding the important role that community colleges had in their college student development. As students progress through community college and get used to college life, their apprehensions about attending a four-year institution were quelled. Similar to Bandura's (1986) notion of mastery of experiences influencing self-efficacy, students in this study used community colleges to prepare for four-year transfer. Jenna now feels like she is ready to transfer from community college and attend a four-year institution. As she stated, community college is the "perfect baby step" on her road to the baccalaureate.

112

Community colleges serve an important role in the educational landscape. Originally constructed to serve transfer students, these institutions have grown to offer a variety of services for their respective communities. Scholars theorized that community colleges act as a sifting mechanism by which students' academic aspirations can be "cooled out" (Clark, 1960a, 1960b). Therefore community colleges are often the last port of entry for underprepared students. In fact, students structure their future career and academic choices on their ability to successfully transfer to a four-year institution (Clark, 1960a; Cohen & Brawer, 2002). Student participants in this study discussed similar views. John, a Fisker College student talked about the role of community colleges here,

> I was comfortable. I feel better because I am learning the benefits
> of being in a community college to transfer to another university.
> I feel more independent if I did better. My parents will trust me more.
> I feel like there is more of educational level because some people say
> community college prepares you for university. I think you can prepare
> yourself for the experience. You just have to go out there and experience
> it. So, it is more on educational level, just getting education harder. Yes,
> because I guess between high school and university some people can
> make that, that big jump, some people have to work their way up. So I
> guess the community college will kind of help me climb my way up.
> It is here to help push along, push me along or push the people along that
> need help. If people haven't really, have made their decision fully, it is a
> good place to go to see like, "I am really going to continue my education
> or this is not right for me?" I guess that's the crossroad where you can…
> when you are there you are going all the way or you can stop right here.

For John and others in this study, the community college represented a turning point in their career. John expressed that if he were unable to succeed at this level, then transferring to pursue a baccalaureate degree wouldn't be an option. Attending a community college was seen as a "testing ground" for him to assess whether to advance academically or pursue other options. For many students, community colleges represent the last stand in their post-high school educational career.

Community colleges play an important role in African American students' pathway to the baccalaureate. For many low-income and first-generation students, attending a community college is the primary route to earning a bachelor's degree. With 70% of African American students in California enrolled in community colleges, it is clear that this institutional type is a popular destination for African Americans (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2009). While statistical data can yield some insights into enrollment patterns, qualitative data can provide a deeper understanding of students' educational choices. The role of community colleges is far ranging; however, thematic findings from this investigation revealed an organizational component to African American students' community college choice processes. Participants readily discussed that community colleges act as a preparatory space for African American students to prepare for their transition to four-year colleges or universities.

Throughout this study, students referenced their community college experience as an opportunity to "prepare for a real college." Implicit in these discussions was the notion that community colleges were easier to adjust to (socially and academically) than traditional four-year institutions. Students explicitly used community colleges as a testing ground to determine their own ability to move forward in their educational careers. This period of self-evaluation can be conceptualized as an individual and comprehensive needs assessment to determine their likelihood of success at the four-year level. One of the more striking observations about this finding is that students in this study had minimal experience with or knowledge of four-year institutions. However, they felt comfortable making explicit distinctions between the level of social and academic preparation needed to succeed at a four-year institution.

In the preceding chapter, I discussed the important role of community colleges in African American students preparation for four-year colleges and universities. In several cases students chose to attend a community college instead of a four-year institution. In addition to organizational related findings, social and cultural factors also played a role in African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Specifically, thematic findings revealed that finances, proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines, influenced students' decision to attend community college and their formation of four-year transfer choice sets. In the following chapter, I review these findings and discuss their role in structuring African American students' educational choices.

Chapter VI

Social and Cultural

In this chapter, I discuss social and cultural factors that influence African

American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. In the

previous chapter we learned about the organizational impact of community colleges on

African American students' post-high school educational decisions. Similar to the four-

year college choice process, students' decisions are multi-layered and also include social

and cultural level variables. In addition to community colleges acting as preparatory

spaces, African American students also revealed that social and cultural variables

influenced their decision to attend community college and the formation of four-year

transfer choice sets. Student participants discussed four thematic findings: finances,

proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines.

Thematic findings from this qualitative study revealed that financial barriers,

family members, and timing and deadlines, influenced African American students'

decision to attend community college. Meanwhile, students also discussed that proximity

from home played a role in their decision to attend community college and in the

formation of four-year transfer choice sets. I conclude chapter six with a discussion of

how these findings extend our understanding of why baccalaureate degree seeking

African American students decide to attend community college, and how they assemble

their list of potential four-year transfer destinations.

Qualitative findings about the role of finances, proximity, family members, timing and deadlines on African American community college students mark a significant contribution to college choice research. These findings illustrate that African American students' two and four-year college choice, and college transfer processes share similar characteristics. Previous quantitative research demonstrated that finances and geography influenced the **community college choice** and **transfer** process for students from **all racial backgrounds** (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006; Martinko, 1976; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Monroe, 2002; Stokes & Somers, 2004; Tinto, 1973, 1975). Meanwhile, previous research demonstrated that family members and timing and deadlines, influenced **four-year college choice** outcomes for **African American students** (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; McDonough et al., 1997; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). The qualitative evidence found in this study supports the notion that African American high school students face the same challenges as their community college counterparts seeking access to four-year institutions.

Finances

Income, tuition costs, and other financially related factors played a role in African American students' decision to attend community college. Similar to previous research conducted by Bers and Galowich (2002), Tinto (1975), and McPherson and Schapiro (1994), financial barriers have an influence on students' educational choices. African American students in this study also discussed how financial considerations influenced their college choice processes. Rania, a Tesla College student, discussed how the cost of a four-year college influenced her community college decision,

Well, initially, I was supposed to go to CSU. And then I decided that I was gonna not go my first year and save money before I go there and pay all that money. I just thought it probably would be financially better and smarter to just attend a community college prior to going there. I mean financially, I wasn't getting full scholarships or anything. So, I would have to get some financial aid loans and everything. I don't want to have loans all the way until I die…I mean because really financially, it's a great decision. That was my choice. I mean my family they thought it was a good idea because you're going to save tons of money.

The costs savings associated with attending a community college prior to transferring to a four-year college is considerable. Nationwide, community colleges remain a low-cost alternative to a four-year institution, and this is especially the case in California where community college tuition is currently $26 per unit (California Community College Chancellors Office, 2009). With tuition rates at public four-year institutions in California exceeding $4,000 per year, students view the financial savings of attending a community college as a compelling choice. Unlike many students in this study, Rania was offered admission to several four-year colleges. Her decision to decline these admission offers was rooted in financial considerations. She was academically prepared for a four-year institution, but she lacked the financial resources to attend.

The fiscal realities of college enrollment can often be restrictive and dissuade low-moderate income students from seeking access to a four-year college education. Federal and institutional financial aid programs haven't kept pace with rising tuition costs (Hossler, 2006; Mumper, 2003). Increasingly, under-resourced students across the country have little "choice" in the college selection process, as their limited financial means structure their decision. Michele, a student at Fisker College, discussed the role of finances in her decision to attend a community college instead of a four-year institution. She, along with other participants engaged in explicit conversations with family and other

agents about how college costs were an overriding factor in the community college

decision process. Michele talked about the role of finances here,

> We had a meeting one time with my mom like we were talking about
> like we had, like different meetings on like how to keep people on track
> like stuff like, and what are they're going to do after high school. We had
> a meeting and they were asking about would I want to go to, you know a
> UC or any kind of like a university, and I decided because, it's like well its
> cheaper but you know you're doing the same requirements you know, like
> as you do at a four-year for the first two years so, that's when I decided that
> I would just go here….like I know my mom would take out loans and stuff
> like that, but me I'm not a selfish person, so sometimes I think about other
> stuff too, not just myself but other people. I think this is a good choice
> money wise.

Michele evaluated the relative costs associated with attending other four-year

colleges in California and decided that a community college provided her the ability to

pursue a postsecondary education while saving money. In addition, Michele rationalized

that attending a community college for the first two years before transferring to a four-

year college or university, would allow her the opportunity to take the "same

requirements" for general education. Michele's family also assured her that she would

yield the same level of cost savings they enjoyed while navigating the community

transfer process.

Michele was not alone in her rationalization that she could save money while

taking the same freshman and sophomore curriculum as students enrolled in a four-year

institution. Melissa, a Tesla College student, discussed similar considerations while

discussing her community college choice decision,

> I attended community college just because, one, I wanted to get my
> general studies out of the way to save a little bit of money before I
> went to like a university or CSU school. I mean, my mom is a single
> parent so it's kinda like, it's all on me to do this. And, I mean of course
> she wants me to pursue college but it's like I wanna save myself some
> money too.

Student participants in this study discussed the idea that "college is just any college" during their freshman and sophomore years. With that rationale as a precursor, African American students justified their lack of financial resources by referencing the decision to attend community college as a "smarter and better" decision. Embedded in these sentiments is the notion that students could receive a similar education during their first two years at a community college. Thus, the additional cost of attending a four-year college for the first two years of their college education was viewed as an unnecessary expense.

Financial considerations regarding community college choice extend beyond the calculation of tuition costs. The family unit and current economic conditions also influenced African American students' decision to attend community college. In some cases, financial health of the family unit also constrained students' educational choices. Chris, a Fisker College student, discussed how the economic downturn played a role in his decision,

> My senior year was really a rough year because that is when the economy had hit and a lot of things changed financially for me and with my family. My mother was pulling money out of pension plan for us and I am okay, this is to keep up right for the family and to provide, you know, food and you know and pay rent. So, I had a lot of family issues, the economy you know mom is struggling and I am mamma's boy and I see my mom in position where she cannot, you know, provide for herself. It was holding me back from, you know, pursuing what I wanted to do because my mom would go hurt. When I was working, you know, whatever I had to give that is what I gave. You know, to make things go and she is now in a stable situation with her hUSPand right now. And personally for me I was going to think as well, you know, with my job as well because I had previously had lost my job to the economy and they got laid off, so I was trying to seek, employment. My car that I had back then was going to have a lot of issues and problems. It cost me every other month, you know, $400 to get parts fixed you know. You know, parents cannot provide for themselves so I was on my own. So, I was going through that and at the top of that I had the family to worry about and plus school.

For Chris, the condition of his families' finances influenced the degree to which he could apply personal income to his educational expenses. These fiscal restraints limited his postsecondary options to a local community college. This institutional type allowed him to meet two needs: affordable access to postsecondary education and providing additional income to support his family. As a low-income student, Chris stated that community college was the "only choice" he took into consideration.

Financial barriers that influenced African American students' college choice decisions also extend beyond low-income students. Students from middle-moderate income families faced similar constraints when making college choice decisions. Families in this income category are often considered working class and even with higher income levels they struggle to meet college expenses (Dynarski, 2000; McDonough, 1997; McDonough, et al., 1997; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Mumper, 2003). In particular, the presence of another college age sibling played a role in determining how finances influenced Tania's decision to attend a community college. She talked about the role of finances here,

> My older sister, she attended school in Alabama. She went to a school called Selgman University (SU). And she went there for all her years. But that school had hurt my parents financially. And that really put a dent in some stuff, you know. And right after everything is fine when she went and we can handle it all but then the economy started dropping and everything started happening and it was more of me, being like the youngest and I felt like pressure was on me. So I didn't know if I, you know…It was more I was thinking too much and I'm thinking of my parents pocket more than of my own learning and stuff and it wasn't because my parents said I couldn't. I just knew that they couldn't afford it. They might try, but I really knew that they couldn't. They might be taking it from somewhere else. Bill collectors calling and I, you know, they don't think that their children know about it, but we do. We know whether you are not so I started to do more around the house and I started putting all my checks to go directly to my parents.

Similar to Chris, Tania's family's new financial condition required her to contribute personal earnings to assist her family. In addition, Tania had an older sister who recently graduated from a private HBCU in the south. Tania's parents spent a considerable amount of their personal savings to support her siblings' enrollment at SU and that expense left them with few resources to support her sisters' education. The circumstances that led to her enrollment in a local community college were especially disappointing for her, as Tania applied to and was accepted to several prominent HBCUs. As with other student participants, financial restrictions left her with what she deemed as the "best choice" for her and her family. Despite this setback, Tania still has aspirations of attending a four-year school when she transfers from Tesla College.

Student choice is predicated on having options and in many cases students were limited by financial constraints. Karen, a student at Fisker College, also discussed the influence of financial barriers within the family setting. Raised in a single-parent household with limited income, she discussed how the cost of attending a four-year college influenced her college choice process. Karen also harbored some resentment about her mother's financial constraints and throughout the interview she was uncomplimentary about her mother when discussing the issue. Karen also indicated that her frustration hastened her transfer. Karen discussed the role of finances here,

> I came here, it wasn't really my choice it was financial trouble for my
> mom. For my mom is a single parent so I was just like, "okay, well since
> you want me to a two-year, I'll go to two-year. No problem." Basically
> I don't have a choice. Half of me was like you know I may not be ready
> for a four-year college. I may not be responsible enough or whatever to
> be on my own for a four-year and then I kind of did want a two-year but
> all my friends were going to four-year so it would be just nice to follow
> that little group but basically senior year when it came to application time
> and she was like almost like you cannot go to a four-year you need to go
> to a two-year.

For Karen, the decision to attend a community college was made by her mother and she wasn't given an alternative postsecondary option to choose from. Given Karen's mother's lack of resources for her college education, the low cost of a local community college structured their decision processes. In addition, Karen was academically prepared to attend a four-year college or university. She had a 3.5 grade point average during high school, was active in extracurricular activities, and scored well enough on the ACT and SAT to receive offers of admission from local public universities. Karen's disappointment regarding the decision to attend a community college instead of a four-year institution was further compounded by her friend's enrollment at a local four-year institution.

Students' concerns about college related finances extend beyond their family situation. Even with financial assurances from their parents or relatives, student participants were apprehensive about their families' ability to pay for a four-year college or university. In fact, for some students, their level of concern regarding finances played a role in their decision to attend a community college. Parents were unaware that students were well versed in the family's financial strength and students often calculated their own assessments of what their parents could afford. In addition, students discussed how their parents would offer full financial support for a four-year college, despite knowing they couldn't really afford that institutional type. Students often commented about their parents in terms like, "I knew they couldn't really afford it" or "they want to be there for me and I know they can't." Despite his parents' pledged financial support Jason, a Tesla College student, expressed his concern about the cost of attending a four-year college or university,

I was a little worried about the money. Even though I shouldn't have
been. My parents said you know do what you wanna do. And don't
worry about the money but I was worried about it you know. I could
have applied for, what do you call those California grants? I didn't
apply anywhere I mean I just I knew from pretty much end of my
junior year in high school that I was going to attend you know Tesla
or just any community college.

For Jason, financial barriers played an important role in his decision to enroll in
community college; however, his parents were still committed to funding his college
education. Jason still harbored concern about his parents' financial status and this also
influenced his decision-making process. Jason and other students expressed similar
feelings about the importance of financial barriers in their decision to attend community
college. Jason also discussed that the low cost of California community colleges was
also a contributing factor in his decision process. With the lowest community college
tuition in the country (26 dollars per unit), California offers many African American
students a fiscal incentive to enroll in community college.

The pervasive influence of finances on students' college choices is no surprise.
Thematic findings from this study support previous research that demonstrated the
prominent influence of finances on community college choice. Finances even influence
middle-income families, as McPherson and Schapiro (1994) found that moderate-income
students cite finances as their primary reason for attending community college. In
addition, Bers and Galowich (2002) found that finances were the primary reason for
deciding to attend community college. Thematic findings from this study illustrate how
personal and family finances, macro level economic forces, four-year tuition costs,
financial aid, and low community college tuition, influenced African American students'
community college choice processes.

Proximity

African American students' community college choice and transfer decisions were also influenced by their unwillingness to leave the San Parnard area. Students in this study cited proximity as a factor in their decision to attend community college and in the formation of their list of potential four-year transfer destinations. This finding is not surprising, given that previous research has shown that proximity plays a prominent role in the community college choice process of students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. Research conducted by Cohen and Brawer (2002), Martinko (1976), Monroe (2002), Stokes and Somers (2004), and Tinto (1973,1975), has shown that community college students were more likely to attend an institution closer to their primary residence. And community college students were more likely to attend a local institution than their four-year counterparts (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Tinto, 1973). Stokes and Somers (2004) found similar results and Monroe (2002) demonstrated that 70% of community college students cited proximity as their major reason for choosing their current institution. Students who decide to attend community colleges appear bound by their geographic location. The issue of proximity is a vital component to increase our understanding of student mobility and these findings are in line with the aforementioned research about financial resources. The evidence is clear: self-supporting students are not equipped to make choices that may supersede their means of financial support.

Students in this study expressed a desire to remain in Southern California and they specifically wanted to remain in their current city. Participants cited a variety of reasons for wanting to remain local that included, staying near family and friends and an appreciation for San Parnard. Students were reluctant to leave the immediate area and

that decision limited their college choice options to a few local colleges and universities (see Table 6.1). Additionally, admission to many four-year colleges in the area is competitive, further constraining students' college choice options and placing more emphasis on proximity.

Proximity is especially relevant when discussing students' four-year transfer choice sets. Participants in this study expressed a desire to complete their first two years of college at a community college before transferring to a local four-year institution. Tammy, a Fisker College student, discussed how she is currently considering the local CSU campus and a large private research university two hours away from San Parnard. Tammy talked about the role of proximity in her community college transfer process here,

> Well, SPSU (San Parnard State University) pretty much because I'm from San Parnard. You know it's just kind of the big school and whatever. UDC (University of Downtown California) mostly because of LA, you know, I wanted to…besides going to the east coast I told myself, I would wanna be in California still but be far enough away that I can have the experience and but still be able to come back home…. And my family also really want me to go there because it's not as expensive especially coz I'm a resident and it is still close that I could live at home too and save some money…Location is a big issue.

For Tammy, the idea of staying close to home after community college was influenced by her opportunity to get the "best of both worlds." This reference is in regard to her ability to attend a local CSU and experience college while also being able to access home when necessary. For Tammy, it is important for her to consider nearby institutions that would also provide her with frequent access to home and her family. Tammy is not considering any four-year institutions outside of the San Parnard area.

The importance of proximity in African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer is apparent in the frequency of students who cited this

theme as a factor in their post-high school decisions. Descriptive statistics demonstrated

that 14 of 21 student participants expressed that proximity played a role in either their

decision to attend a community college, or the formation of their four-year transfer choice

sets.

Table 6.1

Distance of Potential Four-Year Transfer Destinations

Pseudonym	Number of Schools	Avg. Distance from Home (miles)
Angie	1	110
Peter	4	71
Brandon	2	10
Chris	4	5
Karen	2	120
Kerri	3	5
Patrick	3	86
Evette	2	33
Joe	3	5
Tammy	2	67
John	4	105
Michele	4	40
Isaac	3	77
Jenna	3	1,083
Jason	3	33
Rania	4	107
Melissa	4	1,202
Tania	1	5
Anthony	3	5
McKenzie	2	5
Gwynne	5	84
Total	62 (#schools)	51 (average miles from home)

Most participants in this study appeared to be bound within a certain geographical area of 5-120 miles from their home. Given that most student participants were from low-income backgrounds, it is not surprising there was reluctance to seek out colleges that lie outside of their mobility structure. Isaac, as Tesla College student, discussed why he is only considering transferring to four-year colleges in the immediate San Parnard area. He discussed the importance of proximity here,

> Because I would like to stay in San Parnard. I lived here all my life.
> I really don't want to move anywhere else. I was thinking about, me
> and my uncle are talking about this, this year and last year about Air
> Force Academy in Colorado. But I ended up here, now it's a little bit
> too far east. I would've d stay with him. I was thinking you know, the
> weather there is not for me, you know. San Tescos its somewhat close
> to San Parnard you know, it gets me out every once in a while but other
> than that I was thinking of the price and plus the drive, the traffic.

Isaac was born and raised in San Parnard and only briefly considered leaving California for nearby Colorado. The only school in his transfer choice set that was outside of the San Parnard area was a CSU campus in San Tescos, which is located 35 miles north of San Parnard. In addition to the emotional aspect of leaving his hometown, Isaac also cited concerns about the cost, both financial and time, of attending the CSU campus 35 miles away from home. Isaac's lack of mobility for four-year transfer limited his transfer choice set to one institution, the local CSU campus in San Parnard. Throughout the study, students consistently expressed their desire to remain in or close to their current city. Anthony, a Tesla College student with three local institutions in his four-year transfer choice set, discussed his reluctance to leave the local area,

> My thing was I really did not want to leave San Parnard. I felt I didn't
> wanna leave this area. So, I mean I'm so used to it. Because my sister
> when she first left, she was a mess like first two weeks. Thank goodness
> it was summer bridge too so, she got used to it real quick.

Participants in this study used a range of factors to rationalize their decision to stay close to home, when constructing their four-year transfer choice sets. Financial issues and familiarity with their current environment have all been discussed as reasons for considering schools in the local area. For many students, the degree to which family could be counted on to assist with the transition to college was also an important factor in the formation of these students' four-year transfer choice sets. Participants often cited that the comforts of staying near home, and in some cases even continuing to reside in their parents' home, as influential components of the four-year transfer process. Kerri, a Fisker College, student discussed the importance of staying home when she eventually transfers to the local CSU campus, and what that means for her level of comfort while attending college. Kerri talked about the importance of proximity here,

> Yeah, but when you really look at it and you see that you know it's not much of a difference, like for your first two years and I was like, yeah and then I know like, the main situation you know from my mom and dad so. Cause I just want to be home but, I don't want to leave home….I have it made. Like um, when I need stuff like you know my parents are there for me and like they help me out and like ever since like school like being in like you know the younger levels of school my parents have been there for me, and like they're like you don't have to leave like you know just like, if I get a job, as long as like you know you did either go to school I have a job like I have a home you know. So, I don't have a reason to go. I don't want to leave home. Like some people that I did go to school with a lot of people would say oh they will want to go to a four-year because they want to get out of the area or they want to you know, get out of the area, but a lot of people said that's why they wanted to get out or they wanted to go to colleges away from here. But me, I just want to stay home.

Kerri expressed that she didn't see the value of transferring to a four-year college that was too far from her home in San Parnard. Kerri not only enjoyed living at home, but she also appreciated how easy it was for her to have consistent help from her parents when it was needed. Kerri's rationale for staying home was further strengthened by her

desire to stay in San Parnard, but was also anchored in the belief that staying in her

parents' home after transferring to the local CSU campus would lessen the transitory

pressures of attending a "real college."

While many students in this study discussed a need to remain local and near San

Parnard, other students expressed a desire to merely stay in California for their college

career. Students' reluctance to leave the state was primarily based on familiarity with the

area and distance from family. In addition, students often referred to their home state of

California as a piece of their personal identity. Rania, a Tesla College student, talked

about the importance of staying in California when discussing her decision to attend a

local community college. Rania received admission offers from several four-year

colleges and universities in California, but also considered attending some out-of-state

institutions. Rania talked about this decision here,

> I mean it's an option but it's not anything I really wanted to do. I didn't
> want to leave California yet. This is where I grew up and this is where
> all of my family is. And so, I wanted to say I don't have no desire really
> to go out. But I guess, I mean if I were to get an option to like go some
> where like full depending on what I decide I want to do, I'd keep an open
> mind to it, I guess. I'm a California kid though.

Throughout this study, many students referenced themselves as "Californians"

and expressed their admiration of the state's lifestyle and culture. Students discussed

California as their "home base" and when posed with alternatives, they often shrugged at

the notion of leaving the state to attend college. Participants readily expressed their love

for California with terms such as "I love Cali," "California is home," and in the case of

Rania, "I'm a California kid."

The importance of staying close to home can also have a similar effect on students

who aren't originally from California. Specifically, students from other states who are

seeking to return home when they transfer from a community college. When asked about his decision to include two Florida schools in his transfer choice set, Joe, a Fisker College student originally from Florida, discussed the importance of proximity here,

> Well, because I have a lot of family in Florida. So, I went down there and for a family reunion and I think that we have a little session, we got a little museum to some of my families like, "Hey, come now I am going to this university, go over here and check this out. You need to come here," like my grandmother is from Florida, and so I want to go to Florida back after this.

For Joe, proximity had a competing affect on his community college and four-year transfer process. Joe was originally from Florida and after high school he wanted to leave his home in central Florida and attend college in California. Joe was an athlete and was recruited to play basketball or Fisker College. Joe is now in his second year at Fisker and is preparing for transfer to a four-year institution. After living in California for two years, Joe is now seeking a return to his home in Florida and only has one local institution in his list of potential transfer destinations. The duality of proximity for out-of-state community college students is one that should receive attention in future studies.

Thematic findings from this study build upon previous research identifying the role of proximity in students' community college choice and transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Research has demonstrated that proximity plays a prominent role in students' selection of a community college and four-year transfer destinations (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Martinko, 1976; Monroe, 2002; Stokes & Somers, 2004; Tinto, 1973, 1975). These findings extend our understanding of community college students' academic migrations and demonstrate the possibility that proximity is equally important to African American students. The absence of racial differences in the community college choice is an important contribution to college choice literature.

Family Members

In addition to proximity, thematic findings also demonstrate that family members played a role in African American students' community college choice and transfer to four-year institutions. This finding adds to previous research that demonstrated family members influenced the **four-year college** choice process of African American students (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; McDonough et al., 1997; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Research found that siblings, extended family, and others provide access to other social networks that influenced Black students' college plans. Educational research on African American students' **community college choice** decisions has yet to demonstrate a similar influence on students' post high-school decisions.

Student participants in this study discussed how family members influenced their decision to attend a community college. Family members can include parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family, and their roles can range from advisor to campus facilitator. The influence of college educated family members is especially important for these student participants, as many were first generation college students with minimal exposure to the college going process. Melissa, a Tesla College student, discussed how her cousin assisted with the decision to attend a community college. Melissa talked about the influence of her cousin here,

> My mom was very helpful and my cousin, I have one of my cousins
> who is very successful and she, you know, she went to a really good
> school and she is like a vice-president of a bank now and she really
> wants to pursue, like wants to see me pursue education. So she was
> very helpful, you know, in trying to get me to do that too. She just told
> me, you know, I'm there for you and she gave me advice about what
> she did. You know, because she actually went to college.

For Melissa, the decision to attend community college was a difficult choice. Melissa was raised in a single parent household and her mother had little familiarity with college. As an aspiring artist, she initially looked into enrolling in private art schools. She was accepted to her first choice, but when faced with the reality of accumulating over 100,000 dollars in student loans, she turned to her cousin for advice about her college choice. Melissa's cousin represented the only college-educated resource that she could rely on during the college choice process. Ultimately, this family member guided Melissa to attend community college before seeking transfer to an art school.

Melissa also benefitted from the assistance of other family agents. In addition to her cousin's help, Melissa also discussed the important role her grandparents played in the community college choice process. Specifically, Melissa expressed how her grandparents provided financial, advisory, and emotional support with her decision to attend community college. Melissa talked about the role of her grandparents here,

> My grandparents definitely and I also, when I was going through
> the process of really getting into the art institute, I needed a co-signor
> and no one would cosign for me. And they really wanted me to do…
> they thought maybe this would be a better option just to save a little
> money, but they are, my grandparents are very, you know, they wanna
> see me like succeed. My grandma, she helped me with all my books
> and all that stuff. She is very like involved, they know how hard it is,
> you know, nowadays and they want me to do better.

As previous research has shown, the influence of family members on African American students' four-year college choice processes is an important phenomenon (Freeman, 1997, 1999b, 1999b, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; McDonough et al., 1997; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). The extension of these findings to the community college choice literature is expected. Regardless of the institutional type under consideration, agents within the family setting can act as a

resource for African American students. While their role is not surprising, the extent to which African American students rely on family members for guidance in the community college choice process is revealing. Of particular interest is the dominant presence of non-parental family members (cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and extended family members). Jenna, a Tesla College student, discussed how other family members assisted with her decision to attend community college. Jenna talked about her aunt and grandparents here,

> My grandmother and my aunt were like the main ones. They were
> all pretty much I think. Yeah. Because I'm the first one who's like
> went to college. Yeah. So, they're kind of like, "Well, whatever you
> do, you just go here because, you know, you're like the only one."
> Well, my grandparents went, but they didn't finish. Yeah, I guess. It
> feels good because like they are really proud and like I like to be the
> one to make them proud and I'm the oldest like as far as siblings. So,
> it kind of makes me feel like a role model for my brother who's 18
> and he's going to college.

Similar to the Melissa, Jenna is also a first generation college student and was not familiar with the college going process. Jenna's grandmother and aunt both attended college and they were able to advise her about post-secondary options. These family agents provided Jenna with support and inspiration to be the first college graduate in her family. The importance of having family agents, who either attended or graduated from college, cannot be understated. Regardless of the outcome, attending college can yield social, economic, and intellectual benefits that if acted upon, can be shared with other family members (Baum & Payea, 2004; Eide, Brewer, & Ehrenberg, 1998; Institute of Higher Education Policy, 1998). Rania, a Tesla College student, discussed the role her grandparents played in her community college choice process. Rania talked about her grandparents here,

Basically, me and mom, growing up, I didn't really have a good
relationship with my mom. And my grandparents are kind of like
the head of the household. We are a really small family and I don't
know...this is my white side of my family. Yeah. And I don't know
my whole black side of my family. And so, it's basically, my grandma
and grandpa. I have four aunts and uncles and there are five cousins.
So, we're super small. And not having a good relationship with my
mom, my grandma was basically like my mom. And so, my grandma
is great. My grandma and grandpa, they both went to college and they're
successful and that's just kind of where I wanted to be. And they always
pushed all of us kids to just do grades first. It's always instituted. My
grandma calls me all the time, just, "How is school going? Are you in?"
you know. She's kind of the first people I go to when I, you know, when
I told her that I had straight A's and I guess, she rewards this and that's
probably a lot of the reason why we kept it going.

Rania's grandparents acted as surrogate parents and played an important role in

her community college choice processes. Similar to other students, Rania was raised in a

single parent household. Her mother didn't attend college and struggled with

maintaining consistent income to support Rania and her younger sibling. Rania also

discussed that it was the contrast between her mothers' financial difficulties and her

grandparents' success, which inspired her to attend a community college and seek

transfer to a four-year college or university.

Research has shown that parental encouragement has been linked to the likelihood

of college attendance (Hossler et al., 1999). In this study, other family members offered

encouragement, support, and advice in lieu of or in addition to parents. There is an

interesting duality about the role of grandparents in the community college choice

process. For participants in this study, college educated grandparents can serve as

explicit mentors and "coaches" regarding African American students. Meanwhile,

grandparents without a college education serve a motivational role to encourage African

American students college attendance.

135

The role of family members in community college choice and transfer to four-year institutions also extends to siblings. In this study, students revealed that elder siblings established educational tracks that younger siblings could model as they navigated their post high-school educational decisions. Michele, a Fisker College student, talked about the role of elder siblings,

> I decided to attend community college because of my sisters. They both went (to college) and we're not first generation or I'm not but my mom had been to community before, after she did was it Headlands University. My sister actually graduated from here, my older sister she's like 22. She went here and then she transferred to like a medical program now. And then my other sister just graduated last year and she's going to a CSU it helped us and she liked it so I thought about it here…Yeah, and then I liked the campus like when I went with my sister and it seems like its not like, its nice and I've been up there a couple of times with her and like some people that we went to school with go there and a lot of people are talking about going there, but just the environment seems nice and she talks about it and she enjoys it. So it just sounds like interesting.

For Michele, the educational path of her older siblings influenced her community college choice and the formation of her four-year transfer choice set. Both of Michele's siblings had positive and successful experiences in the community college system. One of Michele's siblings eventually transferred to a CSU campus two hours away from home, and was enjoying her experience at that campus. Her transfer experience was successful enough to convince Michele that she should limit her four-year transfer options to the same CSU as her sister.

First generation college students play an important role in any family setting and they can lay the groundwork for future generations of college mobility. Even more important is the role they serve in families with younger siblings. As demonstrated in the previous quote, these students were role models within their own family and acted as agents for their siblings' post-high school educational decisions. John, a Fisker College

student, discussed how his older sister broke the college seal and assisted him with the college admission and financial aid process. John discussed the influence of his older sister here,

> My mom, she helped because I guess my sister did it (apply to college) already so she knows the process, my mom knows the process. So my sister is the first generation in our family. So, she knew the process, she helped a lot and called the athletic department and talked to the coaches, talked to like the admissions office. She helped because she really wanted me to go to college, to a university. My mom was like, "Ahhh, I might not be able to work this out," my sisters was like, "Mom please just do this, we got to yes get on this thing university.

In this case, John's sister's familiarity with the college going process played an important role in his ability to pursue postsecondary education. John's sister had already made the successful transition to a traditional four-year institution and she was diligent in her efforts to make sure her brother would follow the same path. For John, his sister's knowledge of college admissions and financial aid served as a valuable resource during his community college choice process.

Often referred to as "college knowledge," the college search, application, and financial aid process is a complex process. This is especially the case for low-income and first-generation college students who are often unfamiliar with college going norms. Individuals who are familiar with these norms can provide invaluable assistance in the community college choice and transfer process. Participants in this study relied on family members who had either attended or graduated from college. For African American students, family members with experience in the college going process can serve as vital resources for students' acquisition of "college knowledge." These college agents were critical participants in the community college choice and four-year transfer process of African American students.

Timing and Deadlines

In addition to finances, proximity, and family members, timing and deadlines also influenced the community college choice and transfer processes of African American students. Research on African American **four-year college choice** demonstrated the importance of timing for this student population. African American students begin their college search process later than all other student groups and this has an adverse influence on their college choice processes (Freeman, 1997, 1999b, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; McDonough et al., 1997; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Evidence from this study demonstrated that timing and deadlines have a similar influence on African American students' two and four year college choices.

Thematic results from this investigation revealed that timing and deadlines also played a role in the **community college choice** and **four-year transfer** process of African American students. Student participants discussed how the timing of their decision negatively influenced their postsecondary options. Specifically, students tend to start the college search process in their senior year and would miss deadlines, thus limiting their college options. Tania, a Tesla College student, discussed how she missed application deadlines for some four-year institutions, which influenced her decision to attend a community college. Tania talked about the role of timing and deadlines here,

> Deadlines! I didn't meet em. Even though, I knew I could have found a way around them. Like my mom has 13 brothers and sisters and they're all over around the place. So each one of them has wonderful connections, even to here, but I became lazy. I occasionally smoked weed and that it makes you feel comfortable in your environment, you feel like you don't need to get anywhere else, it makes you feel like what you're doing is okay…like for the applications, for money and everything. How do you get financial aid, or your FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), things like that, honestly. My hopes were crushed.

For Tania, her inability to meet admission and financial aid application deadlines was personally "devastating" and attending a community college was her only option after high school. Similar to many African American students in this study, Tania was a first generation college student and started the college search process in her senior year of high school. And her lack of knowledge about college admissions and the timing of her search process limited her college options.

Community colleges are generally open access institutions that require less time and complexity to gain admission. Student participants, who began the college search process later in their senior year, find the community college as a suitable stopgap while they prepare for transfer to a four-year college or university. Other student participants had similar experiences regarding the timing of their college search process. Gwynne, a Tesla College student, felt "stuck," given the timing of her decision. Gwynne talked about the role of timing and deadlines here,

> Uh-hmm yeah. It was in my senior year, the beginning, well kind of the
> beginning, the end of the first semester, like it was like during the first
> semester I chose, "okay, well I guess I'm just gonna be stuck at a community
> college." Well not really stuck, but I'm just gonna be at a community college.

The influence of timing on African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes is an area of concern for stakeholders. Even academically prepared students can be relegated to attending a community college if they don't take necessary steps to begin the college search process earlier in their high school career. McKenzie, a Tesla College student, started applying for colleges in late spring of her senior year in high school, and discussed how timing of the college search process influenced her decision to attend community college. McKenzie discussed the role of timing here,

139

When it got close to time to start deciding and I mean, I couldn't decide
and then like I said I didn't know like much about scholarships or grants
to get into and so time just kinda ran out on me, and I said, "Okay, well
I'm gonna go to a community college. They (parents) knew that the finance
situation wasn't there, but they were just like, "Well, just send out letters
and let's just hope, you know, they'll send something back you," so I mean,
I did send out letters. I sent them out to SPSU and to SU and to UC and they
all kind of sent them back, you know, saying, "Well, our admissions process
is over." You know, "maybe you can try it again next year." And so that was
kind of another disappointment for my parents, but like it was July. It was
late, yeah. And then I just kind of sat down with my mom like, "you need to
be okay with this." Like, "I need to get in to somewhere." So, that's when I
started looking at the different junior colleges in the area and then found Tesla.

Similar to many African American students in this study, the ramifications of a

late college search and application process can hinder students access to a four-year

college or university. For Mckenzie, the timing of her college search process resulted in

the decision to investigate local community colleges in her area. The "fallback" option of

a community college provides students with a safety net that ensures they will be able to

attend college after high school. With low tuition costs, minimal admission criteria, and

streamlined admissions processes; community colleges remain a feasible option during

any time point in students' college search process. Regardless of their educational

accomplishments in high school, African American students in this study could always

rely on gaining access to a community college.

For students in this study, the pervasive influence of timing is consistent among

many participants. Specifically, 13 of 21 participants discussed timing as a factor in their

decision to attend a community college. Timing and deadlines are critical components of

the college search process. This is especially the case for African American students,

who tend to start the college search process later than other students (Smith & Fleming,

2006). Jason, a Tesla College student, discussed the role of timing here,

Like my senior because at first I wanted to go to Fisker. Oh man, end of junior year, I was worried about it very much up to junior year and then I heard all my friends. Some of my friends in the class of 2008 talking like "oh, I'm so worried, I'm so worried." It was like "Man! Its just too stressful." Yeah. So it really started to hit pretty much everything going into senior year I was thinking "Oh, like SPSU would be a pretty cool school to go to, you know, it's a good school" and I heard, no I was just talking like I knew I didn't really know anything at all…there is a good business school, so I was definitely thinking about it and then my mom was just kinda asking me "Hey! Are you thinking about it (college)?" and I say "Nah!" and then I don't know, something just clicked and I said I think it just be better going to a community. But I was definitely thinking state. I didn't think other than state. You know UC schools never popped to my head really and it never really occurred to me.

Jason began thinking about attending college as early as his sophomore year in high school. However, he readily admits that he didn't begin the college search process until his senior year. As Jason weighed his college options it became clear that a community college would better suit his needs at the time, but the timing of his search process still limited his postsecondary options. Jason began his college search process in the fall of his senior year. By then, the application deadlines for two local public four-year colleges had already passed and the local community colleges were Jason's only remaining options.

The complexities of timing in the college search process can even influence students who have already been accepted to four-year institutions. Anthony, a Tesla College student, applied late, but was accepted to a local CSU campus. Unfortunately, his official admission was delayed and he received the admission letter in August 2009. Given the late timing of his admission to SPSU, Jason decided to attend a local community college. Jason also discussed why he applied to certain four-year colleges and why he chose to attend Tesla instead of the other local community colleges. Anthony discussed that here,

Well, the CSU because of hoop, but then CSUMC (California State
University, Middle California) because of their engineering program.
They gave me an acceptance letter but it was already too late. So, I
had to choose a school. So, it's kind of they gave me the letter later,
I received it late. So, I just denied it. So that was another issue, I have
to deal with my parents like accepting like, "okay, community college
is a legitimate college to go to." But then I think my mom did some
research and she found out that Tesla was a little bit better than the
Fisker College and they are the other two and I think Northwest from
the other three community colleges that are in the area.

Anthony and his siblings were raised in a foster home, but his older siblings were already familiar with the college admissions process and all were admitted to four-year institutions directly after high school. Anthony received ample guidance about the college going process and applied on time to four-year institutions. Prior to receiving his admission letter to a local CSU, Anthony was compelled to enroll in community college to avoid "not going anywhere." Anthony had already begun courses at the local community college when he finally received his admission letter from the local CSU campus. It was at that point that Anthony felt it was best to decline the offer of admission to the nearby CSU. In this case, the timing factor was embedded in an institutional delay and not via the student's college search process.

Thematic findings from this study revealed that timing and deadlines play an important role in the community college choice process of African American students. This finding is similar to previous research that found timing and deadlines influenced the four-year college choice process of African American students (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; McDonough et al., 1997; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Participants in this study discussed how a late college search process limited their postsecondary options. Students also revealed that missing application deadlines further constrained any decisions they could

make about their college options. The importance of timing and deadlines was particularly influential for African American students who lacked familiarity with the college going process and were first generation students. In addition, students who were negatively impacted by timing and deadlines also lacked family agents that could guide them through the college application process. Future research should investigate the relationship between family agents and timing and deadlines in African American students' community college choice and transfer processes.

African American students in this study revealed that social and cultural factors played a role in their decision to attend community college and the formation of their four-year transfer choice sets. Specifically, students discussed that financial barriers, family members, and timing and deadlines, influenced African American students' decision to attend community college. Meanwhile, proximity played a role in students' decision to attend community college and in their selection of potential four-year transfer destinations. Thematic evidence from this study illustrates that African American students' community college choice and transfer processes are complex and involve a number of organizational, social, and cultural factors.

In the previous findings chapters, I reviewed the importance of the community college as a preparatory space (organizational) and the role of finances, proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines (social and cultural) in African American students' community college choice and transfer to four-year institutions. While these themes provide an increased understanding of African American community college students' post-high school decisions; an additional level of analysis is needed. In the final findings chapter, I review thematic findings related to individual and psychological variables that

influenced African American students' college choice decisions. Students in this study

revealed their potential major and career choices influenced the formation of four-year

transfer choice sets. Students also revealed that their academic performance didn't match

their perceived levels of academic ability (academic self-efficacy). In addition,

participants discussed that attending a community college also influenced their own

perceptions of their ability to succeed at the four-year college level (college self-

efficacy).

Chapter VII

Individual and Psychological

African American community college choice and transfer is inherently complex. Findings in this study revealed that in addition to organizational and social and cultural variables; individual and psychological factors also influenced African American students' educational decisions. In this chapter, I discuss individual and psychological level variables. I discuss the role of major and career choice in the formation of African American students' four-year transfer choice sets and the influence of students' self-efficacy on their preparation for transfer to four-year institutions. I conclude this chapter with an introduction of *college self-efficacy*, as a construct to understand African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes.

Research has demonstrated that finances, employment, and academic performance, influenced students decision to attend community college (Bers & Galowich, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Stokes & Somers, 2004). In addition, self-concept, employment, enrollment status, academic aspirations, perceptions, and performance, intermediate outcomes, and vocational education, influenced community college students' transfer to four-year institutions (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Holmstrom & Bisconti, 1974; Kinnick & Kemper, 1988; Kraemer, 1995; Lee & Frank, 1990; Roksa, 2006; Roksa & Calcagno, 2010; Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wang, 2010).

Major and Career Choice

For community college students, the road to the baccalaureate inevitably requires transfer to a four-year college or university. Prospective transfer students have a number of transfer options in the postsecondary marketplace. The complexity of this college choice decision has often been reduced to proximity, as many community college students seek admission to four-year institutions in their regional area (Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Lee & Frank, 1990). Thematic findings in this study, suggest the formation of community college students four-year transfer choice sets were also influenced by their major and career choice. Participants aligned their major and career pathways with four-year institutions that would support their academic and professional interests. McKenzie, a Tesla College student with aspirations to pursue a career as an OB GYN, discussed how her major and career choice influenced the formation of her four-year transfer choice set. Mckenzie talked about the role of major and career choice here,

> Well, what's played a role in the colleges that I'm looking at is the career that I'm going towards medical school. So, wanting to become an OB-GYN, you just can't go to any college, you gotta have to look at colleges that are focused in a medical program specifically in OB-GYN. So, that has played a major role in the colleges that I look at and consider even going to, like I won't go to a college that bases, or solely maintained on science. I wanna look at something, you know, more into the medical school. So, that has basically played a major role in the ones I looked. I can't consider any colleges that don't have a medical program.

Mckenzie wants to pursue a career in the medical field and acquired knowledge that undergraduate preparation is key to successful entry into graduate school. She focused her list of potential transfer institutions on schools that offer majors and support programs with preparation for medical school. Similar to other students in this study, McKenzie's major and career choice were factors in determining her transfer options.

Baccalaureate degree seeking community college students have two important college choice decisions: where to attend community college and where to transfer to after completing their general education coursework. The latter involves a decision that has received limited attention in educational research, and findings from this study improve our comprehension of this line of inquiry. Participants in this study frequently attributed their post community college options to their major and career choices. Karen, a Fisker College student, had two institutions in her four-year transfer choice set. While searching for potential transfer schools, Karen focused on the strength of each school's science program. Karen revealed that it was her major and career choice that ultimately influenced the formation of her four-year transfer choice set. Karen discussed the role of major and career choice here,

> For one, I wanted to go to the University of Perris (UP) to do science, again and because they have a forensic program. I'm a science freak. My high school newspaper was talking about UP's forensic program that they have and I was just kind of caught up in it and it was like, "Oh, interesting. I like that." So, I kind of did my homework and I researched the school up and I made sure I had my GPA and all that. I picked the UP for the forensic program that they have the forensic science. Yes, I did my homework. That's the only reason I picked that school which for the science. I knew I would not have all my science fulfilled to get into the program because you have to have, like six science classes and couple of math classes before you get into the program, because you have to apply for that too but I knew I had enough to get into the main campus.

For Karen, the formation of her four-year transfer choice set was predicated on the reputation of major offerings at potential transfer institutions. This second-year community college student spent a great deal of time researching institutions that would provide her with the appropriate program of study to facilitate her career goals. In the end, Karen made explicit transfer choices that were predicated on her future career goals.

For community college students, the decision on where to transfer to after they leave community college can be a complex choice. Many community college patrons are first generation college students with limited knowledge of postsecondary education. With a myriad of choices available to students, the college choice process can be daunting. Given this complexity, it is interesting to note how important major and career choice were for these students as they formed their transfer choice sets. Tammy, a Fisker College student interested in pursuing a medical career, discussed how important it was for her to consider transferring to institutions that were known for strong undergraduate preparation for her career. Tammy talked about the role of major and career choice here,

> I felt like because on the scale of their (SPSU) academics, they're really high and I feel like I said before, I'm capable of going there (smiling). I just have to stay focused and with the right direction and the medical programs that some of these schools are really, really good programs. They have been recognized before and I feel like if I graduated from those and then, you know, redeem myself, like the career path will be there. When, you know, people hire you and look at the university that, you know, you graduated from. They see the name and they see the good work and good quality that comes outa those schools. And then, San Parnard State has always been in the back of my head since I was younger since my aunt lives near there and she has always pressed that since I felt like sixth grade, she has been pushing me to go to State, so that's kind of just like, "oh, I liked it." I went over there. I liked the campus. I liked the school and environment so I would consider there and maybe UCSP (University of California, San Parnard) the medical program there is amazing.

Similar to other students in this study, Tammy had carefully aligned her major, career, and four-year transfer destinations. Tammy has long-term career goals and explicitly crafted a plan of study that would help her meet said goals. Throughout this study, the degree and intricacy of instrumentality used by students in this study was impressive. Equipped with knowledge about her career trajectory, Tammy formed a four-year transfer choice set that provided her the best opportunities to meet those goals.

148

Tammy had two institutions in her four-year transfer choice set and each had a strong reputation for preparing students for the medical field. For Tammy, her major and career choice played an important role in the development of her four-year transfer options.

In addition to using majors as a tool to form transfer options, participants in this study were also using community colleges as a space to try out different majors during their college career. In many cases, "trying out majors" equated to students taking one or two courses in a subject area and using that experience as a reference point to assess the entire major area. This sampling technique provided students with a slice of information from which they would base the remainder of their major choices. Rania, a Tesla College student, has aspirations to pursue a career as a pediatric oncologist. Rania discussed the exploration of her major choices and how that influenced the formation of her transfer choice set. Rania talked about the role of major and career choice here,

> And so, I guess I'm just kind of trying to get into different ones (courses) and then I'll figure out basically what I want to do. So, whatever I feel like I enjoy most is basically where I'm going decide where I want to transfer to. I'm going to start my chemistry and biology and all that stuff next semester. And then so I guess if get that passion again, that's probably where I'll be heading at UCSP for medical. Just, I want to be a pediatric oncologist and so I looked up basically UCSP was one of the top medical schools. And so, that was basically how I chose that one. But if not, I'm going to have to figure it out. And so, that would be business school and communications and stuff like that someplace else. But basically, I just depending on whatever I find my most enjoyment in and it's where I'm going to decide where I transfer to. So, I guess that's pretty much how I think like what can I do with things that I'm learning with? And so, that's just basically just feeds into my career.

Similar to other students in this study, Rania used a utilitarian approach in the formation of her transfer options. She indicated that her eventual transfer destinations were solely predicated on her final major selection. For Rania, her list of transfer options included institutions that were known for their strong academic reputation in the

following areas: medical, business, communications, and dramatic arts. The construction

of her four-year transfer choice set was used to facilitate Rania's long-term career goals

in a chosen profession.

The importance of major and career choice on students' four-year transfer choice

sets extended beyond the medical field. Students with career aspirations in other fields

also expressed similar comments about the utility that major offerings provided in the

formation of their four-year transfer choice sets. Chris, a Fisker College student with a

passion for the motion picture and television industry, discussed how the quality of major

offerings influenced his list of potential four-year transfer destinations. Chris talked

about the role of majors in his transfer decision here,

> Yes, well my major is definitely is going to tell everyone in production,
> acting is going to be sometimes doing outside of school still. You know
> we have been going to different campuses and colleges. It has been very,
> very helpful you know expanding our knowledge of different schools, so
> UCSW (University of California, South West) has always been the one
> with of the toughest school because of my acting career I want to pursue.
> So, all that is very intriguing stuff for me, so I think now I do have a major
> probably the major in television production, you know, I am going to keep
> acting. First like always but I am going to be acting on the side and we have
> been to UCSW and UDC on some field trips. So I have seen those schools
> and I know that the good schools look for that major and UDC will be a good
> area for my acting anyways because I good on television. So I am very inspired
> in this line of work. So UDC is part of my main options because, I like the good
> television for different departments, very high department, and besides that they
> are well recommended, education wise and school wise and they do have a lot of
> presenters and guests you know from Hollywood to act as producers, actors,
> directors and speak in workshops with students. So it would be great to be with
> that network. I am sure UCSW has the same stuff but UDC just kind of stood up
> in a little bit more, so, these are the kind of options going right now.

Eager to embark on a career in the motion picture and television industry, Chris

spent a considerable amount of resources to compile a list of potential transfer

institutions. He took several college trips, spent time researching institutions, and sought

advice from professionals in the field. These endeavors were geared toward providing

Chris with a list of four-year colleges and universities that would best prepare him for a

career in his chosen profession. Chris's college counselor also played an instrumental

role in helping him investigate potential four-year transfer destinations.

In addition to Chris, Patrick was another Fisker College student interested in

pursuing a career in the motion picture and television industry. Patrick also based his list

of potential transfer destinations on his major and career choice. Patrick discussed the

importance of major and career choice here,

> Acting is what I love to do. So, I just feel like that's what I need to
> be doing. But going to the UDC school and learning everything like
> I never knew they had a great film department there. I never knew like
> Steven Spielberg was, you know, like in construction with them like
> working with them in their film, like I didn't know that they were known
> for great film there or great acting, you know, like where has this been,
> where has this information been like? I would've never thought of coming
> here for acting. If I came here, it would be just to represent UDC, you know,
> football and all that. But, yeah, learning that, I was like, "Wow." I've seen
> their acting department. They gave me a tour. I was like, "This is crazy,
> guys. This is exactly what I want and I could really use this and like a lot
> of people come out of UDC acted there, I was like, "Oh, wow!" After that,
> I was like, "Yeah." I already want to come here like really bad now. And
> the way the guy acquainted me, how I could actually make it here like you
> come in and I've been acting for him and doing a lot of like nice little film
> work, and they're saying like to get a scholarship there for film. You can
> send them film clips or film tapes, and they will look it over and if they like
> it, you get a scholarship…Yeah, USP (University of San Parnard) I always
> remember how they talked about their acting program. And I heard it again.
> And so maybe I was like, "Okay, USP." And then, I went there for actually
> I was there for a basketball game. My old high school coach and some friends
> who work there, I mean, were playing in it. And I walked around the school,
> looked around, and like "Wow, this is a nice school," like I will try to get some
> information about it, and it was a little convincing. "Oh, well, okay. Maybe I
> can come here like I can see myself here." That's what made me like put them
> back on my list because I just added them back to my college list, so I'll go.

Similar to Chris, Patrick took part in a college tour of UDC and it was on that trip

that he learned about the significant role that UDC had on the career trajectory of

students in his chosen profession. The number of resources that UDC dedicated to

preparing young actors and actresses intrigued him. Prior to his visit to UDC, Patrick

only had two other potential transfer institutions in his four-year choice set; both schools

were known for their strong dramatic arts program. As with other students in this study,

Patrick sought institutions that aligned with his major and career choices.

The importance of major and career choice on community college students

formation of four-year transfer choice sets were not limited students seeking a career in

medicine and dramatic arts. Participants pursuing a career in physical therapy and

training were also instrumental in aligning their major and career choices in the formation

of potential transfer institutions. Anthony, a Tesla College student majoring in biology,

talked about the influence of major and career choice here,

> I think it's gonna be physical training. That one, so I don't know, I like
> to be in shape kind of thing. I like to help people get in shape because
> obesity is a problem so I was talking actually I've been talking to my
> counselor about San Parnard State, and she said that's the best place to
> go for kinesiology. So that's my first look and option but I haven't really
> really looked in depth. I just know it's also a lot of work and there's a
> lot of classes you have to take…Kind of like me and athletics. I mean
> I have injuries so I'd like to learn how, and you know, prevent them
> more. Work with the stuff like that. So, it's kind of interesting how
> you can work and fix the body.

As with other students in this study, Anthony decided to pursue a major that was

directly connected to his future career goals. And he is subsequently seeking transfer to a

four-year institution that has a strong undergraduate major offering that aligns with his

future career as a physical therapist. Anthony used the internet and college guides to

develop a working knowledge about strong undergraduate training programs. Anthony

also sought advice from his classmates and his college counselor to round out his list of

potential four-year transfer options.

Jenna, a Tesla College student, also discussed how her major and career choice influenced her list of potential four-year transfer destinations. Jenna also has aspirations of becoming a physical therapist. Jenna talked about major and career choice here,

> Yeah, I'm really excited because there's like other things that I wanna do in those areas that's not just about the physical therapy thing but I guess the scariness kind of like overtakes the excitement, a kind of a little bit. It's new but number one, are we more into like what I wanted to do which is like being a physical therapist, I will be doing that kind of work. Yeah. I'm going to be like starting like fresh by myself. CSUBH (California State University, Bontrager Hills) really I haven't, that's the one that I really didn't look into it for the physical therapy program. My friend goes there. And he was telling me that they have a really good one, but I never really looked on it. So UDC, when we went there, I talked to the guy about it. Yeah. And then the other ones that the lady gave me like she told me they're really good like some other ones in San Francisco that I can't remember.

Similar to other students in this study, Jenna was explicit about the rationale for developing her list of potential four-year transfer options. Jenna sought out institutions with strong physical therapy programs. She used her peer networks and internet research to construct a list of local undergraduate training programs related to her career interests.

Thematic evidence from this study illustrated the importance of individual level factors on African American students formation of four-year transfer choice sets. In addition, these findings shed additional light on African American students' post-high school educational decisions. Participants revealed their major and career choices played a prominent role in the construction of their four-year transfer choice sets. The instrumental nature of this process seems intuitive; however, previous research has not indentified major and career choice as factors in the community college transfer process. The introduction of major and career choice into the transfer process marks a new contribution in our comprehension of African American students' college choices.

African American community college students' road to the baccalaureate is mined with a number of potential challenges. Organizational, social, cultural, and individual factors can influence students' educational trajectory. Findings from this study have illustrated the complexities of African American students' educational choices. Thematic evidence supports previous research that found finances, proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines, influenced African American students' college choice outcomes. In addition, this study revealed that African American students used community colleges as preparatory spaces to prepare for transfer to four-year colleges. Students also revealed that their major and career choice influenced the construction of four-year transfer choice sets. Lastly, students discussed the role of psychological variables in their college choice process. African American students revealed that academic self-efficacy played a role in their educational experiences.

Academic Self-Efficacy

Psychological variables receive a great deal of attention in research related to decision-making. The importance of psychological factors is well established in areas ranging from career to consumer choice. Previous college choice research focused on psychosocial variables that influence students' college choice decisions. To date, individual psychological variables have received minimal attention in the investigation of students' college choice and transfer decisions. Results from this study provide a renewed focus on African American students' educational decisions and illustrates the importance of psychological variables. Thematic evidence from this study revealed that students' academic performance didn't match their perceived levels of academic ability (*academic self-efficacy*). In addition, participants discussed that enrolling in community

college had a positive influence on students' perceptions of their ability to succeed at four-year institutions (college self-efficacy). Thus, community colleges improved African American community college students' perceptions of their ability to succeed at four-year colleges and universities.

Participants in this study revealed that students' perceived levels of academic self-efficacy didn't match their actual academic performance in the classroom. Students discussed they could have done better in the classroom than their current grades reflected. This thematic finding was pervasive throughout all participants and even high achieving students expressed similar sentiments. Melissa, a Tesla College student, discussed the incongruence between her perceptions of her ability and her GPA while in high school. Melissa talked about this here,

> I mean I tell myself all the time that I really, I really did see myself at a four-year college right out of high school, just because I know I could do way better than I'm doing now. I know I probably could have done a lot better. My home life. And it was hard to, it's hard for me when I have so much stress and everyone you know, to really focus on what I need to be focused on and you know I just, it's more like everything is on me to do good pretty much. Yeah, I mean I don't know just having like your family situation be so horrible. It's like kind of I don't know but a lot of people do it and they still, I know that's probably no excuse, but I know if my situation was different I probably would have done a little better….I know I always tell myself, you know why you got this grade and you know what you could have done to do better…And it's hard for me because all through like junior high and even the start of high school I always took honors classes always was in my, you know, the higher, I was always like in honor roll and stuff like that. I mean, I know I could have done better but I'm okay with you know what I did.

Similar to many students in this study, Melissa was adamant that she could have done better in school than her grades reflected. Melissa's high school GPA was 2.5 and she referenced that difficulties at home played a role in her academic performance. Melissa's mother moved her family to three different cities during high school and she

155

had trouble maintaining a stable household. During this time Melissa struggled to keep

up her once stellar academic record. Melissa took ownership of her disappointing grades,

but she also felt that she could've performed at a much higher level in high school. For

Melissa, her perceptions of her academic ability didn't match her performance in the

classroom. Melissa is now performing at a higher level in community college and has a

GPA of 2.9; however, she still feels like she could do better and she hopes to improve her

academic performance in the future.

Regardless of the rationale, students in this study were overwhelmingly consistent

in their beliefs about their academic ability and GPA. While Melissa, attributed her low

academic performance to her home life, other students discussed their own lack of effort.

Specifically, many students indicated they were lazy or just slacked off during their

senior year of high school. Some students even blamed their lack of effort on

"senioritis." Michele, a Fisker College student, discussed how her perception of her

academic ability didn't match her classroom performance. Michele talked about this

disconnect here,

> Yeah I coulda done better, but I was just lazy like just being lazy and not
> really studying or like trying, just doing the bare minimum just to get by
> or to pass yeah. Cuz I was just like, I was just trying to get through or
> I don't know I was just trying to get through it, so I wasn't really thinking
> like you know I was just like okay well you just have to get this done and
> then you're done and you can do whatever you know and after that you
> can have your fun but yeah. No, I always knew that, well I knew I wanted
> to go college but that was it yeah. I didn't even think about that. I didn't
> think about that. Because, like I don't know it just, it wasn't good I think
> I can do like better than that you know. Cuz, I sort of slacked off and like
> being lazy when you know you that you shouldn't be or should be studying
> and you're not like yeah. That's were I think I messed up bad. Like, well I
> did hang around like the girls that I was always hanging around with, they
> did have like higher grade point averages, but I wouldn't be like, oh could
> do better I just, I was happy for them though but, I was just trying to get
> through it, like okay well.

Michele was a high achieving student in high school and held a 3.0 GPA. Despite this record of academic achievement, Michele still felt like she could have done better in school. Michele cited her own laziness as the reason she "slacked off" during high school. Michele often referenced her time in high school as something she needed to "get through" or "get over with" and she was not concerned with earning high marks in the classroom. However, Michele was efficacious about her academic ability and she did feel like she could've earned a higher GPA in high school. Like other students in this study, Michele's perceptions of her academic ability didn't match her performance in school. Similar to research on African American students' degree aspirations and achievement, students in this study aren't performing at a level that is in congruence with their perceptions of ability.

It was interesting that students were so explicit about their justification for what they perceived to be a disconnect between their academic performance and perceptions of their own academic ability. Students went so far as to attribute their GPA to "senioritis," a condition known to plague seniors. Patrick, a Fisker College student, talked about his senioritis and the fact that he could have done better academically,

> Yeah. I think that I could do it (GPA) way better, it's just senior year I got senioritis. Honestly, I didn't go to classes that often because I didn't have to. I started just not going at all and I was a teacher's aid inside of the office. I had to work inside of the attendance office, and meaning I did the attendance. Meaning that if I did not have to go to class and they were not gonna call at home and definitely, especially looking back now. It kind of matters a lot of the times where maybe I've been lazy or maybe I could have like just got more work done because now, I don't know how that can work mindset or just get it done and back then, it was more of a procrastinated and if I didn't get it, oh well, it was one project or it was two projects, it's not going to hurt that bad. And seeing the grade, it was like a B or a C or it could easily be an A, so just, yeah, I know I could have done better.

The most surprising aspect of this thematic finding is just how consistent this phenomenon was across all students. Even high achieving students with above average academic profiles felt like they could do better than their GPA. Thus, students who didn't demonstrate incongruence between their perceptions of academic ability and their GPA still expressed that they could have done better academically. Rania, a Tesla College student with a 3.92 GPA in high school, was also the class president and held a part-time job. Even with those additional responsibilities, Rania felt that she could have achieved a 4.0 in high school. In fact, it was a goal of hers because she was a 4.0 student in junior high school. Rania talked about this here,

> I definitely could have done better. Yeah. Since I took on a lot of stuff,
> I guess I knew a lot of people and so I went out a lot. Like I wasn't like,
> you know, like books, nerd like in my books all the time. I kind of and
> I had a job at the same time too. So, I probably could have put more time
> into everything and towards my senior year, I kind of just ditched a lot of
> school. I mean because I knew at that point, I knew like I cannot go to
> school and I can still get a passing grade. And so, when I figured that out,
> I just didn't go anymore. But I was still there enough to get things done.

Rania represented a handful of highly efficacious students who performed at a high level, but still felt like they could have done better. This finding was present at both campus locations and was not gender specific. It is surprising that high achieving African American students would still feel that their academic potential was unfulfilled. Evidence from this study demonstrated that African American students incongruence between their perceptions of academic ability and academic performance, is consistent across all achievement levels.

The level of honesty expressed by African American students in this study was another interesting component of this phenomenon. Students were forthright and explicit about their lack of effort and the role that played in their GPA. Paired with their highly

efficacious beliefs about their academic ability, it is clear that African American students in this study had little doubts about their academic potential; but it is perplexing why this incongruence was so prominent. Thematic evidence demonstrated that African American students' perceptions of their academic ability didn't always translate into high levels of academic performance in the classroom. McKenzie, a Tesla College student, discussed her perceptions of her academic ability and the disconnect between these perceptions and her high school GPA. Mckenzie talked about this here,

> I didn't feel like it (high school GPA) represented my academic ability, but it represented the work that I put in. So I mean I knew that I was way smarter than a 2.6 GPA, but, I mean it matched the work that I turned in. I wasn't okay with it because I was upset with myself like…Wow! I just wasted like 2 years. I could have, you know, put more work in and just had fun and partied later or more time to have to party but, yeah I was upset with myself, I perceived myself to be like a smart person. Like I'm a pretty smart person. But I think I was just so easily distracted. That I just kind of didn't try. So my perception of myself, I mean it didn't really play a role in it. But then again I could say that it did because I mean….I thought I was smart, I mean not meeting my own standards, I kinda got upset. And when I would do poorly on a test or a get a poor grade in a class, I would kinda like give up like, "Oh well, D in that class, like there goes a four-year university right there," you know, so I kind of just this was like, well give up all hope kind of thing. It was in a sense it was sad because I like knew that I was capable of so much more and then seeing the outcome and then being upset with myself. I don't know, I just I can't deal with being upset with myself for something that I could have had control of. The ones closest to me that knew that my academic ability, they were disappointed….yeah, because I felt like I could make in these, you know, these colleges but my perception of myself did not reflect in my GPA or my SAT scores of being average, I thought I was pretty smart, I am above average. But, it had a major role in the colleges that I thought that I was gonna go to. I feel like there's always room for improvement and there's always a need to better myself as a student, but I felt like it's pretty accurate. My perception has changed because there was a certain time when I felt like I was smart and that like I just…I could never see myself like getting a bad grade or being comfortable with getting a bad grade. so, like now my perception is, "okay, I'm smart, but I know that like I have the ability to get a bad grade." And so, I'm not invincible to bad grades so now I'm a little more focused in making sure that I maintain my GPA, my right grades.

McKenzie was transparent about the quality of effort she exerted in high school. She had no illusions about the reasons behind her 2.6 GPA and felt that it measured her level of output. Despite her low GPA, Mckenzie was highly efficacious about her academic ability and felt like she was "way smarter" than her GPA would have me believe. Mckenzie also discussed that her reaction to receiving bad grades early in the academic term would often dictate her level of effort. If she received a poor grade, McKenzie would react negatively and not act to improve on her performance. Instead she would resign herself to a bad grade and reduce her effort in the classroom. Mckenzie indicated that she no longer reacts that way as a college student and now she increases her effort level upon receipt of a poor grade. Mckenzie's new reaction strategy has yet to pay off; she is currently maintaining a 2.7 community college GPA.

Thematic evidence illustrates that African American community college students are highly efficacious about their academic ability. Students readily discussed they were smart, capable, and able to achieve at a high level in the classroom. In fact, only a handful of students expressed non-efficacious beliefs about their academic ability. Despite these perceptions, students indicated that their academic performance in the classroom didn't match their perceptions of academic ability. Students consistently expressed they could have "done better" than their GPA. Even high achieving students discussed incongruence between their GPA and perceptions of their academic ability. While many of these students discussed their high school GPA, evidence suggests this incongruence is also present at the community college level. In addition to believing they could perform better, African American students also discussed their perceptions of ability as it relates to being "ready" for their transition to four-year institutions.

160

College Self-Efficacy

Akin to self-efficacy, students in this study held certain beliefs about what it took to succeed at a particular endeavor (Bandura, 1986). In the context of this study, community college students held beliefs about their ability to succeed at a four-year institution. These beliefs can be characterized as college self-efficacy. While attending a four-year institution is an academic related task, students in this study also referenced non-academic tasks when discussing their future transition to four-year institutions. Students' perceptions about their ability to succeed at a four-year institution included, but were not limited to: study habits, distance from home, institutional size, social and academic climate, and generally feeling efficacious about attending a traditional college or university. Participants revealed that community colleges prepared them to take the next step in their educational career. In fact, students in this study explicitly referenced that community colleges helped them feel more "ready" for four-year institutions.

As previously discussed in this study, college readiness referred to students' level of preparedness (social and academic) for four-year institutions. Participants expressed that enrolling in a community college positively influenced their perceptions about their ability to succeed at a four-year institution (college self-efficacy). Thematic findings from this study revealed an interesting dynamic about college self-efficacy. Some students entered the community college setting already feeling efficacious about their ability to succeed at a four-year institution, and this experience only solidified their perceptions of college self-efficacy. Meanwhile, other students entered this educational setting with lower perceptions of their college self-efficacy and used the community college experience to improve their perceived levels of college self-efficacy.

161

Joe, a Fisker College student, discussed how his perceptions of ability to succeed at the four-year level improved since enrolling in community college,

> I feel more confident because they expect more out of you, so you give em' more. You try harder. If you automatically have em' saying, you're a college student, the whole, you're in college, it's just like everything is done. The games are over, I was confident in high school but in college, you know it's a whole nother type of level. Yeah. Because it's like it's more work. It's more of a responsibility and you know more time for you to make a decision in school. I wasn't, you know, I wasn't ready for all of that. Because I wasn't making those decisions in high school, I was just going to class, going to practice, and that was it.

Prior to attending Fisker, Joe was efficacious about his ability to succeed at a four-year institution. He always felt like he could adjust to a four-year college and didn't feel intimidated by the many unknown aspects of college life. However, his community college experience also played a role in the development of his perceived levels of college self-efficacy. Joe noted that not only did his level of personal responsibility increase since high school, but he also realized that attending college was similar to a job. Joe also made reference to community college being a more challenging experience than high school and that more was expected of him in and out of the classroom.

Prospective college students often express concern about their ability to succeed in a college environment. This is especially true for community college students who tend to be first generation college students. Attending community college and "getting a taste" of college life can assist students as they prepare for transfer to four-year colleges and universities. Melissa, a Fisker College student, who had always been efficacious about succeeding at a four-year institution, talked openly about how her own perceptions of her ability have grown in just one academic term at a community college. Melissa talked about this growth here,

Over time it has (efficaciousness), just because you know, in high school,
well, I know I could. I've always known I could do good. But you know
when you're a little younger like junior high and in the beginning of high
school I always knew I was totally smart and capable of doing everything
but then now that I'm in college and a little older and knowing that I could
do good 'coz when I actually came to school, I knew it's a very challenging
place and it was you know, well I thought in my head, "Well, can I really
do this?" and then I talked to myself "you know, you can," coz I know
when I put my total complete effort and you know, focus on something,
I'm gonna do it no matter what…I feel way more confident just because
it was so new to me last year, jumping right into it from high school. You
know I had fun in high school but I knew it's time to really get serious
and now I know I can't mess up and I wanna do better for myself and I
have way more confidence now that I can do that.

Melissa was the first in her immediate family to enroll in college and she was both efficacious and fearful of attending a four-year institution directly after high school. Even with just one academic term of enrollment, Melissa talked about the important role that community college played in nurturing her perceived confidence to succeed in a four-year college or university environment. The development of students' college self-efficacy in the community college setting is an important aspect of their college experience. Students' perceived levels of college self-efficacy could also provide insight into transfer rates to four-year institutions.

The importance of students' perceived levels of college self-efficacy can't be understated. Similar to academic self-efficacy in other aspects of education, it is plausible that community college students' college self-efficacy and their perceptions of ability could influence their future likelihood of success in that endeavor. In this scenario, success would be measured by a community college student's ability to transition to a four-year college or university. Thus, college self-efficacy could play a role in students' community college choice and transfer. In addition, students' perceived level of college self-efficacy could also play a role in the college choice process.

163

Throughout this study, participants were explicit about the important role that attending a community college played in furthering their perceptions of college self-efficacy. Many students attributed this growth to the academic and social experiences that accompanied their enrollment in community college. Academically, students discussed the importance of getting familiar with college norms as they related to coursework. Socially, students often referenced adjusting to the new social climate at a community college. Brandon, a Tesla College student, talked about how attending community college improved his college self-efficacy.

> I think I also have, you know, the support of the teachers and peers.
> I think also I have more confidence in myself to do well. I think I can
> do well because this is in a different environment with new faces and
> all that kind of stuff compared to here, where I feel like a lot of things
> are kind of like dragging me down. I think it will take a while to get
> used to before I think I can succeed, but I think I can do it.

The academic transition to college can be difficult for many students. This is especially the case for first generation students with minimal exposure to college norms. For these students, community college represents their first exposure to the college environment. Brandon expressed that prior to enrolling in community college, he was efficacious about attending a four-year institution. However, his transition to four-year college life would be aided by the community college experience. Students like Brandon discussed how their confidence level increased since they attended community college and they felt more prepared for the transition to a four-year college or university. For these students, the community college experience strengthened their perceptions of college self-efficacy. These students were already efficacious about their ability to succeed at the next level and community college provided an additional means of acquiring higher levels of college self-efficacy.

164

Students in this study also revealed that the community college experience was the driving contextual force in their development of college self-efficacy. For these participants, enrolling in a community college provided them with a first hand account of what college life would be like. Prior to attending community college these students were unsure of their ability to succeed at a four-year institution; and now they feel more efficacious about attending a traditional college or university. Jason, a Tesla College student, discussed how his perceived levels of college self-efficacy influenced his initial college choice. Jason also talked about how his enrollment at a community college influenced his development as a student. Jason talked about this here,

> I don't think so. I really think if I just felt that I could just do it. There would just be no worries and, whatever, I think I would have attempted or not attempted to but applied to a four-year university. I would think, I would honestly really think that it's just me having a fear of not doing well. I wish it wasn't like that but I just had this confidence issue. You know I'd rather start slow and rush from there. I would say I matured a little more…It's good. It's a lot better. I got used to it, you know, the whole. I wouldn't say this is completely independent because I still am at home, you know. Moms is still cooking me food and all that stuff but I got my grades back and I was happy. I was happy with that. The work load wasn't too bad. I mean confidence level definitely boosted. If I keep doing what I'm doing and getting the grades and hopefully I get better grades, I gonna be flying you know I will be feeling good so I just kinda keep working. I can't get distracted. I think pretty well you know the more confident, I'll be like you know I would say the better, I don't know...if I'm really confident at a point let's say A's or B's, you know, I'm not gonna say let's go to Stanford. I'm gonna say, alright, I'm feeling good, but I gotta catch myself and say it's all right if I go here, I gotta make sure I could do well there so I mean definitely confidence level is going to come in to play when it comes to what schools I would transfer to. I'm just kind of scared about it you know, 'coz the whole, yeah, definitely I'm pretty sure the whole confidence will come into where I want to go for college.

For Jason, it was evident that his perceived levels of college self-efficacy played a role in his college choice process. During high school, Jason considered attending four-year institutions, but he wasn't sure he could succeed at that level. In fact, Jason

suggested that if he felt like he was ready for a four-year institution, he would have

pursued that endeavor. Prior to enrolling in community college, Jason wasn't efficacious

about succeeding at a four-year institution. Jason indicated that since enrolling in

community college, his is more efficaciousness about attending a four-year institution.

For Jason, his community college experience played an important role in acquiring

college self-efficacy. Lastly, he also discussed that his level of college self-efficacy

would also play a role in the formation of his list of four-year transfer destinations.

Students' perceived levels of college self-efficacy influenced the community

college choice process of students across various GPA levels. Chris, an average Fisker

College student, talked about how he initially didn't believe he could succeed at the four-

year level; and that influenced his initial college choice decision. Similar to other

students in this study, Chris also discussed how community college played a positive role

in the development of his college self-efficacy. Chris talked about the changes in his

perceptions of his college self-efficacy here,

> My confidence was very low, so it would really affect me like, even I
> really, I guess, I was kinda afraid of the UCSW like I don't know if I
> could, first I would like, I don't know if I can get in to UCSW. I don't
> know how it will work, like I don't know I just, I just, like UCSW was
> like a powerful school, like UCSW. You have to be like more successful
> to get to that school and back then I am talking to the counselors about
> how to get to this school and was like, this kind of grade point average
> and oh, just wasn't quite there and it was like, I said I just even now I
> feel like very confident, very, very confident. I know I could really, if
> I really wanted a 4.0, I could get a 4.0. I know that deep down inside
> and I know the I am smart person.

Chris was eager to attend UCSW, a prominent public research university, but his

perceived level of college self-efficacy precluded him from submitting an application

after high school. UCSW was one of his top choices for college and now that Chris has

spent time at a community college, he talked about how his perceptions of college self-efficacy has increased. As a second-year student, Chris is so confident about his ability he is only considering applying to two highly ranked four-year institutions. Chris always aspired to attended UCSW and UDC; however, he now feels more efficacious about his ability to succeed at a four-year institution. For Chris, the community college experience provided him with an organizational space to test out the college experience and improve his perceptions of college self-efficacy.

Findings from this study improved our understanding of the important role of college self-efficacy in African American students' college choice processes. Enrolling in community college aided students who were already efficacious, and those who weren't efficacious, about their ability to succeed at four-year institutions. Similar to the previous student, Kerri, a Fisker College student, also used community college as a venue to improve her perceptions of college self-efficacy. Before she attended community college Kerri was unsure about her ability to succeed at the four-year level. Kerri talked about the development of her perceptions of college self-efficacy while attending a community college,

> I was not that confident because, like the material was different than back home, so it was kind of challenging but if I didn't understand some lines, I used to stay after school, go to tutoring like study with my friends, if they got their material…Now I feel good because I got the study material down and right here it's just like they give you the material and you just go out and study with classmates. Study before exams, prepare, it's just like they give you the material, but you have to prepare, but in high school they help you through it.

Another student discussed how attending a community college helped her grow on several levels. Tammy, a Fisker College student, talked about how the college experience increased her perceptions of college self-efficacy here,

Well, it (Fisker) helped me grow actually, it helped me find myself pretty much. I think Fisker is a really, really good school. I mean I know I have really put in the effort and the school really, really allows students to make something of themselves and do offer a lot of workshops and opportunities to get somewhere. There is a lot of help being here I think it has shaped me to the person and I am going to be like, as far as friends, social life, educational life, you know. I learned a lot you know and I really feel more confident now, now that I know college is time consuming to put in the work. You got to put in time to get the grades you know. You cannot escape through college like high school, you know, something like that you know. It is just way different in high school, as you have to put work in, you know, and you cannot really just do enough just to get by.

Similar to other students in this study, Tammy's community college experience played a prominent role in the maturation of her college self-efficacy. This second-year student has another year before she transfers to a four-year institution, and she attributed this growth to the social and academic experiences at Fisker College. Given Tammy's positive development as a student, it is possible that her level of perceived college self-efficacy may also influence her post-transfer success at a four-year institution.

One of the more important aspects of self-efficacy is its effect on outcomes. Research has shown that individuals who are efficacious about a specific endeavor are more likely to achieve that task (Schunk, 1989; Schunk & Hanson 1985). The application of this principle to community college choice and four-year transfer would shed some additional light on enrollment gaps in postsecondary education. Evidence in this study supports the notion that African American students use community colleges as a tool to improve their perceptions of college self-efficacy. Which in turn could influence their potential for successful transfer to four-year institutions. McKenzie, a Tesla College student, discussed how her enrollment at a community college influenced her own perceptions about her likelihood of success at a four-year college or university. Mckenzie discussed these changes here,

My perception has changed because there was a certain time when I felt like man, if I failed in high school like, you know, like not going to those big four-year universities, like I gotta step it up and redeem myself, you know, so I feel like I have to do better now that I'm here. Now that I have an opportunity to make it, you know, to a four-year university through the transfer system so now, like I'm a little more focused in making sure that I maintain my grades. I feel like I have to do better, I feel confident, I feel comfortable going to college, like it seems reachable now.

Mckenzie discussed how her experience at Tesla College has improved her perceptions of college self-efficacy, as it relates to attending a four-year institution. Mckenzie indicated that since she enrolled in community college, she now feels she is able to transfer to a four-year college. In addition, McKenzie expressed that she feels the need to "step it up" and improve her academic performance (now that she is enrolled at Tesla). Similar to McKenzie, other students discussed how the community college experience increased their belief that attending a four-year college was an attainable goal.

Thematic findings revealed that college self-efficacy plays a role in African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Participants in this study discussed how their perceptions of their academic ability didn't match their academic performance in the classroom. African American community college students were efficacious about their academic ability, but this was not reflected in their GPA. Students indicated they could do better than their previous or current GPA and their academic performance didn't match their perceptions of their own academic ability. This finding was present across all participants; low, moderate, and high achieving students indicated there was incongruence between their GPA and perceptions of their academic ability. African American students in this study were clearly efficacious about their academic ability, but these perceptions didn't translate into high levels of academic performance.

Findings from this study also illustrated that community colleges influence students' perceived levels of college self-efficacy. Participants revealed that community college enrollment had a positive influence on the development of their college self-efficacy. In this study, students' college self-efficacy relates to community college students' perceptions about their ability to succeed at the four-year college level. African American students discussed that community colleges help prepare them for the social and academic transition to four-year institutions. Thus, community colleges help strengthen African American students' perceptions of their college self-efficacy. This finding is not surprising; in the previous research finding African American students indicated they were efficacious about their academic ability to succeed at a four-year institution. Thematic evidence from this study revealed that African American students were efficacious about their ability to succeed in the community college environment. However, these same students are not as efficacious about their ability to succeed at the four-year college level. In fact, African American students were using community colleges to increase their reported levels of college self-efficacy, as it relates to four-year college success. Evidence from this study outlined the complex nature of African American students' perceptions of their academic and college self-efficacy in their community college choice and four-year transfer processes.

In chapters four, five, six, and seven, I discussed descriptive and thematic findings from this qualitative investigation of African American students' post-high school educational decisions. In the following chapter, I provide a summary of these findings, discuss a revised conceptual framework, contributions of this study, and review limitations of the findings. I conclude the next chapter with a discussion of implications

this study may have on educational policy and practice, and offer suggestions for future research on African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes.

Chapter VIII

Discussion

This study sought to increase our understanding of African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Previous research on community college choice and transfer focused on majority student populations or Latino/a students. In addition, previous research investigated these two phenomena as separate functions of the college choice process. The decision to attend a community college and the selection of a transfer institution are separate decisions; however, they should be conceptualized as a continuum of linked decision processes. This study also utilized qualitative methods to investigate community college choice and transfer, whereas previous research primarily used quantitative methods to investigate these phenomena. Previous research in this line of inquiry also lacked theoretical application and this study used a theoretical construct to anchor this examination. Self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy were used to help explicate how African American students' experiences in community college influenced their perceptions of their ability to succeed at four-year institutions (college self-efficacy).

This study also investigated a facet of college choice research that is grossly understudied. To date, there is no published research on African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. This study made a significant contribution to the literature on Black students' community college choice and four-year transfer decisions.

Summary of Findings

Results from this study identified organizational, social and cultural, and individual and psychological factors that influenced African American students' community college choice, and formation of their four-year transfer choice sets. Organizational thematic findings revealed that community colleges acted as a preparatory space for African American community college students. Social and cultural thematic findings revealed that finances, proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines, influenced African American students' decision to attend community college and their formation of four-year transfer choice sets. Individual and psychological findings revealed that major and career choice influenced African American students construction of four-year transfer choice sets. Students also revealed that their academic performance didn't match their perceived levels of academic self-efficacy. And attending community college increased African American students' perceptions of college self-efficacy.

Descriptive evidence demonstrated that the majority of African American community colleges students are the first in their family to attend college, have moderate high school GPAs, have substandard community college GPAs, and in some cases, took the necessary steps to attend a four-year institution after high school. In terms of transfer, students tend to list three institutions in their list of potential transfer destinations. Students were also considering transfer to four-year institutions that were in close proximity to home. Findings also showed that African American community college students tend to be employed while in school and have high degree aspirations. African American community college students also had annual incomes under $20,000 and resided in families with annual incomes between $20,000 and $75,000 (see Table 4.1).

Organizational

Organizational level variables play a role in African American students' college choice processes. Research has shown that organizational variables such as high schools, HBCUs, teachers, counselors, and school racial composition, influence African American students' **four-year college** decisions (Bateman & Hossler, 1996; Freeman, 1999b, 2005; Frost, 2007; Goldsmith, 2004; Hearn, Griswold, Marine, & McFarland, 1995; Horvat, 1996; Irvine, 1990; Kao & Tienda, 1988; McDonough & Calderone, 2006; Pitre, 2006; Qian & Blair, 1999). Organizational variables influence African American students' decision to attend college (predisposition), search for colleges (search), and their selection of a college (choice). Previous research provides some insight into African American students' four-year college choice decisions; however, the same cannot be said about their community college choice and transfer processes.

Findings from this study shed some light on the influence of organizational variables on African American students' community college choice decisions. Thematic findings found that community colleges influenced African American students' decision to attend community college (see Table 8.1). Participants in this study discussed how community colleges provided them with an educational space to prepare for the social, psychological, and academic realities of a four-year college or university. Participants discussed that community colleges provided them with an opportunity to "prepare for a real college" and get acclimated to the social and academic norms of college life. Academically, students expressed concern about the scholastic challenges that await them at four-year institutions. These findings illustrated the important role that community colleges serve for African American students.

Table 8.1

Summary of Thematic Findings

Individual/Psychological	Social/Cultural	Organizational

Individual/Psychological	Social/Cultural	Organizational
Major and Career Choice	Finances	Preparatory Space
Academic Self-Efficacy	Proximity	
College Self-Efficacy	Family Members	
	Timing and Deadlines	

African American students in this study revealed that community colleges acted as preparatory spaces. After completing high school, participants felt unprepared for the social and academic expectations of a traditional four-year institution. Students used their enrollment in community college to prepare for their eventual transfer to a four-year college or university. This finding marks a significant contribution to college choice research and adds community colleges as an organizational factor in African American students' college choice processes (see Figure 8.1).

While this finding provides some insight into African American students' four-year college choice processes, there is still a gap in our comprehension of African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. We are still unsure about the degree to which community colleges improve African American students' admissibility to four-year institutions. For instance, do successful African American transfer students resemble those who would have been admitted to four-year institutions directly after high school? The evidence provided in this study offers a preliminary glimpse into the role of community colleges on African American students' college choice and four-year transfer processes.

Figure 8.1

Revised Conceptual Framework
African American Community College Choice and Four-Year Transfer

Stage 1

Stage 2
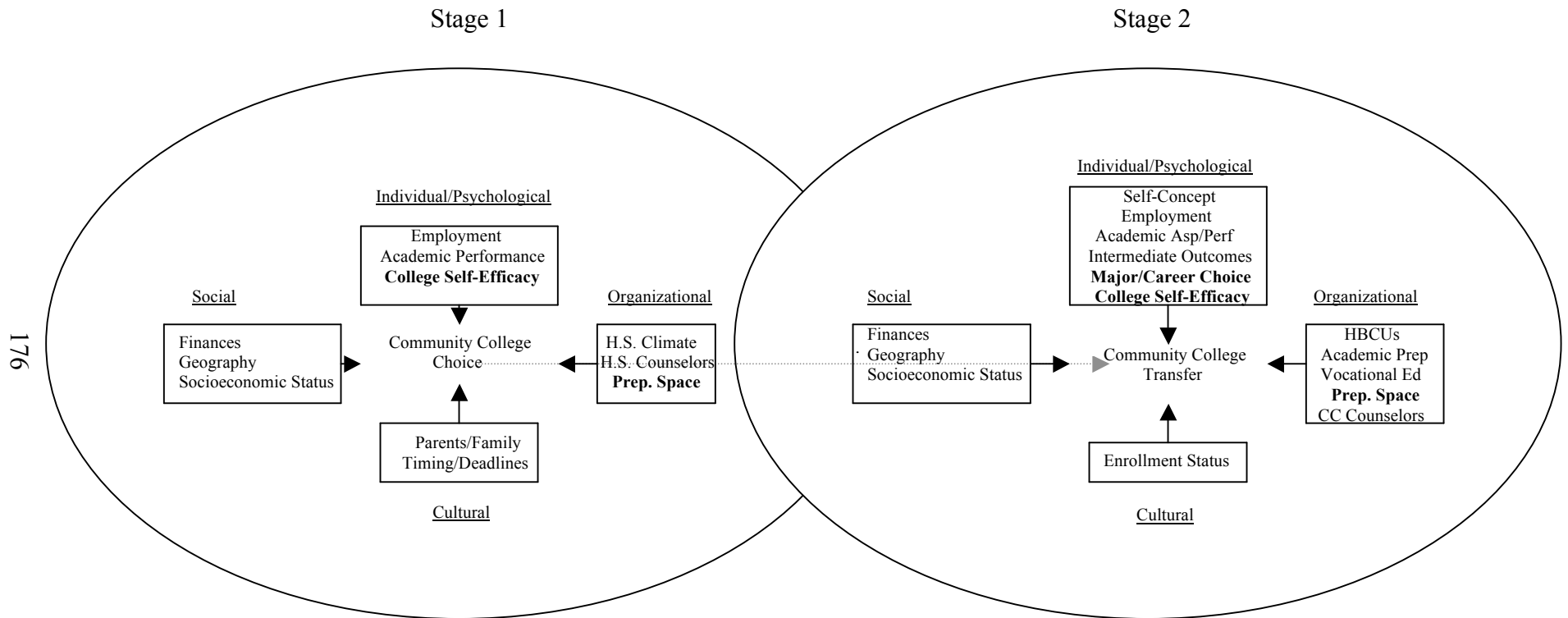
Social and Cultural

Social and cultural level variables also play a role in African American students' college choice processes. Previous research demonstrated that finances and geography influenced the **community college choice** and **transfer** process for students from all racial backgrounds (Bers, 2005; Bers & Galowich, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006; Martinko, 1976; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Monroe, 2002; Stokes & Somers, 2004; Tinto, 1973, 1975). Meanwhile, previous research demonstrated that family members and timing and deadlines, influenced **four-year college** choice outcomes for **African American students** (Freeman, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Hurtado et al., 1997; Litten, 1982; McDonough et al., 1997; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Social and cultural variables influence African American students' decision to attend college (predisposition), search for colleges (search), and their selection of a college (choice).

Qualitative evidence in this study supports the notion that African American high school students face the same challenges as their community college counterparts seeking access to four-year institutions. Thematic findings illustrate that financial factors such as personal and family finances, macro level economic forces, four-year tuition costs, financial aid, and low community college tuition, influenced African American students' decision to attend community college (see Table 8.1). Students in this study also cited proximity as a factor in their decision to attend community college and in the formation of their potential four-year transfer destinations (see Table 8.1). Students expressed a desire to remain in Southern California and that decision limited their college choice options to a few local colleges and universities.

In addition to financial and geographic variables, family members also play a role in African American students' community college choice processes (see Table 8.1). Thematic findings from this study revealed that family members influenced African American students' decision to attend community college. Participants in this study relied on family members who had either attended or graduated from college. For African American students, family members with experience in the college going process served as vital resources for students' acquisition of "college knowledge." Meanwhile, family members without a college education encouraged African American students to attend college. Family members included parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family, and their roles ranged from advisor to campus facilitator.

Thematic findings from this study also found that timing and deadlines influenced African American students' community college choice and transfer processes. Student participants discussed how the timing of their decision negatively influenced their postsecondary options (see Table 8.1). Participants in this study discussed how a late college search process limited their postsecondary options. Students also revealed that missing application deadlines further constrained any decisions they could make about their college options. The importance of timing and deadlines was particularly influential for African American students who lacked familiarity with the college going process, and were first generation students.

Social and cultural findings from this study provided evidence to support what we already know about African American students' college choice processes (see Figure 8.1). However, these findings do show that social and cultural level variables have a similar influence on students' two and four-year college choice processes.

Individual and Psychological

Individual level variables play a prominent role in students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Previous research demonstrated that employment and academic performance, influenced students' decision to attend community college (Bers & Galowich, 2002; Cohen & Brawer, 2002; Kurlaender, 2006; McPherson & Schapiro, 1994; Stokes & Somers, 2004). In addition, research found that employment, enrollment status, academic aspirations, economic perceptions, and performance, influenced community college students' transfer to four-year institutions (Adelman, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Holmstrom & Bisconti, 1974; Kinnick & Kemper, 1988; Kraemer, 1995; Lee & Frank, 1990; Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wang, 2010). Community college research has provided a comprehensive overview of individual level variables and their influence on students' community college choice and transfer processes. The same cannot be said about African American students' community college and transfer related decisions.

Findings from this study shed some light on the influence of individual variables on African American students' four-year transfer processes. Thematic findings suggest the formation of community college students' four-year transfer choice sets were influenced by their major and career choice. Participants aligned their major and career pathways with four-year institutions that would support their academic and professional interests. Previous research has not indentified major and career choice as factors in students' community college transfer process. The introduction of major and career choice into the four-year transfer process marks a new contribution in our comprehension of African American students' college choices (see Figure 8.1).

Psychological variables also play a role in students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Previous college choice research focused on psychosocial variables that influence students' college choice decisions. To date, individual level psychological variables have received minimal attention in the investigation of students' college choice and transfer decisions. Findings from this study found that college self-efficacy is a useful construct to understand African American students' decision to attend community college. College self-efficacy can also be used to understand the influence of their social and academic experience in the community college setting.

Thematic evidence from this study revealed that African American students' academic performance (GPA) didn't match their perceived levels of academic ability (academic self-efficacy). Students discussed they could have done better in the classroom than their current grades reflected. Even high achieving students expressed similar feelings. Evidence from this study demonstrated that African American students incongruence between their perceptions of academic ability and academic performance is consistent across all achievement levels. This finding demonstrates that African American community college students are highly efficacious about their ability to perform in the classroom (GPA).

In addition to believing they could perform better than their GPAs reflected, African American students also discussed other aspects of their perceived levels of self-efficacy. African American students in this study revealed that college self-efficacy played a role in their community college choice and four-year transfer processes (see Table 8.1).

Academic self-efficacy is related to an individual's perceptions about their ability to perform a variety of academic tasks (Zimmerman, 1995). Previous research found the following variables influenced students' academic self-efficacy: stress related school transition, teacher engagement, increased student competition, academic motivation, effort, and achievement; student persistence, goal setting, and adjustment to college (Chemers et al., 2001; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Elias & Loomis, 2000; Harter, 1996; Lent et al., 1984, 1986; Lyman et al., 1984; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Salomon, 1984; Schunk, 1981, 1989, 1991; Schunk & Hanson 1985; Vrugt, 1994; Vrugt et al., 1997; Wood & Locke, 1987). Research on African American academic self-efficacy has mixed results, but studies agree that Black students had lower perceptions of academic self-efficacy than White students (Britner & Pajares, 2001; Graham, 1984; Hacket, et al., 1992; Pajares & Kranzler, 1995; Okech & Harrington, 2002). Previous college choice research has not identified academic self-efficacy as a factor in African American students' college choice decisions.

Thematic findings from this study found that college self-efficacy plays a role in African American students' community college choice and transfer processes (see Table 8.1). Participants expressed their enrollment in community college influenced their perceptions about their college self-efficacy. In this study, students' college self-efficacy relates to community college students' perceptions about their ability to succeed at four-year institutions. African American students discussed that community colleges help prepare them for the social and academic transition to four-year institutions. This finding increased our understanding about African American students' community college choice processes and is a new contribution to the literature (see Figure 8.1).

181

Results from this investigation improved our understanding of African American students' college choice processes. Through the lived experiences of students, I was able to gain insights into their educational choices. Evidence from this study further demonstrates the complexity of African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer decisions. Thematic findings allowed me to answer four pertinent research questions: Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community colleges, what factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to, what role do community colleges play in preparing baccalaureate degree seeking African American students for their transition to four-year institutions, and how do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions?

Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community colleges?

Thematic evidence found that finances, proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines, influenced African American students' decision to attend community college. Income, tuition costs, and other financially related factors played a role in African American students' decision to attend community college. Students in this study also cited proximity as a factor in their decision to attend community college. Student participants in this study also discussed how family members influenced their decision to attend community college. Family members included parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family. Lastly, students discussed how timing and application or financial aid deadlines negatively influenced their postsecondary options. Specifically, students would tend start the college search process in their senior year and would miss admission related deadlines, thus limiting their college options.

182

What factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to?

Thematic evidence demonstrated that proximity and major and career choice, influenced African American students' formation of four-year transfer choice sets. Students in this study expressed a desire to remain in Southern California after they transferred from community college. Participants cited staying near family and friends and an appreciation for San Parnard, as reasons for wanting to remain local. Students revealed that their future major and career choices influenced the formation of their four-year transfer choice sets. Participants aligned their major and career pathways with four-year institutions that would support their academic and professional interests.

What role do community colleges play in preparing baccalaureate degree seeking African American students for their transition to four-year institutions?

Thematic evidence found that community colleges served as a preparatory space for African American students. Students discussed that community colleges help prepare them for the social and academic transition to four-year institutions. Participants in this study discussed how community colleges provided them with an educational space to prepare for the social, psychological, and academic realities of "real college" (four-year college or university).

How do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions?

Thematic evidence found that community college enrollment positively influenced students' perceptions about their ability to succeed at four-year institutions. Enrolling in a community college provided students with a space to develop their perceived levels of college self-efficacy.

Conclusion

Community colleges were originally founded to provide students with an educational venue to "hone" their academic skills before enrolling in a four-year college or university (Witt et al., 1994). The transfer function of community colleges explicitly noted this new institutional type would prepare students for the academic rigors of traditional college life. Evidence from this study demonstrates that community colleges continue to honor their original mission. Baccalaureate degree seeking African American students are using community colleges to prepare for their transition to four-year institutions. On the surface, African American enrollment in community colleges is a positive social indicator; however, their exceedingly high levels of enrollment are also a cause for concern. In California alone, 70% of African American students choose community colleges as their primary entry point into postsecondary education (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2009). This concern is particularly troublesome given African American students likelihood of successful transfer to four-year institutions.

Findings from this study provided useful information about why baccalaureate degree seeking African American students choose to enroll in community colleges, what factors influence which four-year institutions they will consider transferring to, and how community colleges prepare them for four-year institutions. Social and cultural variables such as finances, proximity, family members, and timing and deadlines, supported previous research in this area. While these results could be considered non-emergent, three key findings extend our conceptualization of African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Thematic findings regarding

timing and deadlines, the role of academic and college self-efficacy, and preparatory space, provided insight into the challenges that face prospective African American community college students.

Timing and deadlines are important, yet often overlooked factors in the college choice and transfer process. Prospective college students face strict timelines and application deadlines if they are seeking admission to a four-year college or university. Many college application deadlines are as early as October and as late as March of students' senior year in high school. Missing these application deadlines can leave prospective students with minimal options for attending college immediately after high school. The timing of students' college search can also have a negative influence on their college options. The importance of timing and deadlines is especially influential for African American students who lack familiarity with the college going process.

Findings from this study demonstrated that the college search process is critical for African American students enrollment in college. Evidence in this study clearly demonstrated that African American students leave themselves with limited postsecondary options when they start the college search process in their senior year. In fact, African American students tend to start the college search process when their White peers are deciding which college to attend (Hossler et al., 1999). Timing and deadlines are an important facet of the college choice process and African American students appear to be disadvantaged in this area.

Preparatory space and the role of academic and college self-efficacy in African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes were also important findings. Results from this study present an interesting paradox. Thematic

185

findings demonstrated that African American students were highly efficacious about their academic ability (academic self-efficacy). These students believed they could perform better than their GPAs reflected. Yet these same students enrolled in community college so they could improve their perceptions of college self-efficacy. It is important to remember that self-efficacy is contextual in nature and domain specific. High levels of self-efficacy in one domain do not equate to high levels of self-efficacy in other or related domains (Bandura, 1997; DiClemente, 1986; Hofstetter, Sallis, & Hovell, 1990). In this case, it appears that African American students are efficacious about their academic ability (GPA) in high school or community college. However, they were not efficacious about their ability to succeed (academically and/or socially) at the four-year college level. Evidence from this study supports Bandura's (1986, 1997) notion of self-efficacy being a domain oriented construct.

Thematic evidence regarding students' perceived levels of college self-efficacy extends our conceptualization of African American students' educational decisions. Similar to academic self-efficacy in other aspects of education, it is plausible that community college students' college self-efficacy and their perceptions of ability could influence their future likelihood of success in that endeavor. Research has shown that students' belief in their ability to succeed in a domain can also influence their approach and success in that endeavor (Bandura, 1986, 1997). In other words, if African American community college students believe they are equipped to handle the social and academic transition to a four-year institution; they will be successful in that particular endeavor. Thus, college self-efficacy could play an important role in facilitating the four-year transfer process of African American community college students.

Bandura (1986, 1997) also outlined that individuals acquire self-efficacy from four primary sources: personal mastery of experiences within the respective domain, vicariously through the experiences of others, verbal influences of others, and physiological reactions and emotional states. Evidence from this study demonstrated that African American students appear to be using the community college experience as a means of acquiring college self-efficacy through a mastery of experiences. Community colleges can often be viewed as less rigorous and competitive than four-year colleges and may represent a destination for students who are not efficacious about succeeding in college. After "mastering" the community college level, African American students were more efficacious about their ability to succeed at the four-year college level. In fact, it appears that African American students show evidence of this as early as their first year in community college. Participants in this study were comprised of only first and second-year students, yet they were explicit about the impact their community college experience had on their perceptions of their college self-efficacy.

African American students in this study used community colleges as a venue to prepare themselves for four-year institutions. Despite these claims, students didn't mention specific subject matter or cite general academic preparation while discussing "preparing for a real college." Students openly talked about other variables related to preparation, but references to math, writing, and social or hard sciences were absent. On the surface this is perplexing; however, it is plausible that students in this study weren't as concerned with the academic aspects of college. Two key points may help explain students absence of concern regarding academic preparation. Participants in this study were efficacious about their academic ability, and one could posit that students had yet to

be challenged in their current coursework. Given previous research that demonstrates the pervasive influence of "transfer shock" in community college transfer, it is possible these students have yet to experience a difficult academic climate (Glass & Harrington, 2002; House, 1989; Nolan & Hall, 1978).

Another aspect to consider when discussing results of this study is African American students' self-assessment of their ability to succeed at the four-year college level. Participants apparently relied on internal and peer-based comparisons to determine if they were "ready" to succeed at four-year institutions. Students didn't use additional resources to assess their likelihood of success. This is especially confusing since the majority of students in this study were first generation college students and they were unfamiliar with the college going process. African American community college students in this study had minimal exposure to four-year colleges, yet they relied on their own assessments of ability to influence their college choice processes. It is also possible that African American students relied heavily on their peers' academic experiences as an assessment tool. In fact, several students referred to their relatives' or friends' college experiences when discussing their own ability to succeed at four-year colleges and universities. The various ways in which students assess their college self-efficacy was not addressed in this study, and additional research in this area would further our understanding of African American community college students' college choice and four-year transfer processes.

Although not explored in this examination, evidence from this study may also shed light on the role of college engagement in students' transfer processes. Research has found that student engagement is an important component for college students'

success; and this is especially the case for community college students (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, & Associates, 2005; McClenney & Greene, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Thematic findings from this study found that African American students sought out community college environments as a way to prepare for four-year colleges and universities. Students who intentionally choose this institutional type for the purpose of further academic, social, and psychological preparation, may exhibit different levels of college engagement than students who chose to attend community college for other reasons. For example, these students may expose themselves to more engagement-related activities, and their level of engagement may have a positive influence on their transfer outcomes.

Thematic evidence from this study made a significant contribution to the literature on African American students' college choice processes. Despite these advancements, two limitations remain for this study. The timing of participant interviews and the lack of an academic or college self-efficacy scale. Participants in this study discussed educational decisions that preceded their interviews. It is possible that thematic findings were convoluted by students' rationalization of their community college choice decision. For example, a student could have decided to attend community college because of finances, yet they explained their decision as a way to prepare for a four-year college or university. Since only a handful of students actually had the option to attend a four-year college, it is difficult to know if students attributed their college choice decision to other factors. Lastly, this study did not use an instrument to measure students' academic and college self-efficacy. Instead, I used verbal statements of students' perceptions of their academic and college self-efficacy to inform this investigation.

Implications

This study broadened our conceptualization of African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Findings from this study can assist policy stakeholders and practitioners to improve educational experiences and outcomes for African American students. Results from this study yielded additional evidence about the negative effect of timing and deadlines on African American students' college choice decisions. In addition, we now know that academic and college self-efficacy play an important role in African American students' educational choices. We also know that community colleges help prepare African American students for their transition to four-year institutions. Lastly, community colleges also increase students' perception of their ability to succeed at four-year college institutions (college self-efficacy). These findings have implications for policy and practice.

In the policy arena, these findings can aid stakeholders in crafting programs and services that reduce the negative effect of timing and deadlines. Federal, state, and local constituents can develop educational materials, workshops, advertising campaigns, and incentives, aimed at informing African American students about the importance of timing and deadlines. In the federal context, the U.S. government could amend Title IV policies to support the development of admission workshops that stress the importance of timing in college admissions. These workshops could be geared to high school freshman in predominantly African American communities. On the state level, California could offer incentives for high school students to think about the college admission process in their freshman year. For example, high school students who complete an online "admissions module" before their sophomore year could receive an application fee waiver for up to

five public colleges and universities. This admissions module would cover both admissions and financial aid information that could aid first generation students with increasing their "college knowledge." And a statewide initiative could develop college search programs that allow students to visit campuses in their freshman year. These activities could help attract African American students to four-year institutions.

Practitioners can also benefit from these findings. Teachers, counselors, staff and administrators at the high school and community college level now know that African American students' educational trajectories are influenced by their college self-efficacy. These organizational agents can develop educational programs and services that are designed to increase African American students' belief in their ability to succeed at the four-year college level. Campus administrators can provide workshops for teachers and counselors and train them on the importance of African American students' self-efficacy (as it relates to succeeding at the four-year college level). In addition, it is vital that workshops stress how efficacy in one academic domain does not equate to efficacy in another area. It is common for teachers and counselors to assume that smart or capable students are efficacious about their ability to succeed at four-year institutions. More importantly, administrators can also develop workshops that demonstrate the various ways in which students acquire college self-efficacy.

In addition to acting as organizational agents, schools can also develop programs and services for parents. It is important that African American parents are also made aware of just how vital college self-efficacy is to their children's success in and out of the classroom. These services could be in the form of workshops that provide parents with the tools necessary to help foster and develop college self-efficacy in the home.

Future Research

This qualitative study answered important questions about African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. Thematic findings provided answers to: why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community colleges, what factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to, what role do community colleges play in preparing baccalaureate degree seeking African American students for their transition to four-year institutions, and how do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of ability to succeed at four-year institutions? Despite these answers, many questions remain about African American students' decision to attend community college and their formation of four-year transfer choice sets.

African American students in this study resided in low-income households and were first generation college students. Findings from this study helped improve our knowledge about students from these background demographics. This knowledge is helpful, as stakeholders seek to improve the educational trajectory of low-income and first-generation students. Anecdotal evidence suggests there is also a new class of students enrolling in California's community colleges. As competition for seats in the UC system increases, affluent students with subpar academic records are enrolling in community colleges to improve their academic profile. These students are using community colleges to increase the likelihood of admission to highly selective four-year institutions, whereas low-income students are using them to gain access to any four-year school. Future research should investigate the community college choice and search process of high-income African American students.

Thematic findings from this study also found that African American community college students believed they perform better academically than their GPAs reflected. This finding was pervasive across all levels of academic achievement. While this finding was an important contribution, several key questions remain. Does the incongruence between African American students' GPAs and perceptions of academic ability persist after they have transferred to four-year colleges and universities? Is it present in earlier grade levels? Is this incongruence only related to GPA and perceptions of academic ability? Or is this symptomatic of a larger issue related to self-worth, self-esteem, or other psychological or social constructs? Future research should investigate African American students' self-reported incongruence to help improve our comprehension of this phenomenon.

Questions also remain about the influence of African American community college students' degree aspirations. In this study, 48% of students indicated they have graduate degree aspirations. Previous research has demonstrated that degree aspirations influence four-year transfer for the general student population. In fact, research has shown that community college students with higher degree aspirations were more likely to transfer to a four-year college or university (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Holmstrom & Bisconti, 1974). These findings have not been replicated for African American students and perhaps graduate degree aspirations have a similar affect for African American students? Specifically, are African American students with graduate degree aspirations more successful in the four-year transfer process? Future research should investigate the relationship between African American community college students' degree aspirations and their transfer to four-year institutions.

Lastly, we should also ponder the extent to which findings from this study are solely related to students' racial/ethnic background. It is plausible that thematic evidence from these participants could extend to low-income and first-generation community college students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Future research should investigate the community college choice and four-year transfer processes of all students groups. Results of this work could explicate the role of race in community college students' educational outcomes

In closing, it is clear that community colleges play an important role in African American students' college choice decisions. It is my sincere hope that findings from this study will lay the foundation for future research on African American students' community college choice and four-year transfer processes. More importantly, I hope that institutional agents across the educational landscape will use this research to improve educational outcomes for all student populations.

Appendix A   Student Participant Interview Protocol

Section 1.

Why do baccalaureate degree seeking African American students decide to attend community college?

-Why did you decide to attend community college?
  Probes: 4-year eligibility, academic performance, admissions knowledge, peers and family, SAT/ACT, consideration of 4-year, destination of peers, employment, social and/or academic, differences between 2/4-year.

-How did you go about making this decision?
  Probes: high school or community college staff, peers and family, community members, resources, self.

-What role did financial aid play in your decision to attend community college?
  Probes: tuition cost, financial aid, knowledge of 4-year costs and financial aid, employment.

-How do you feel about your decision to attend community college?
  Probes: transfer rates, reconsider decision knowing transfer rates?

-Why did you attend Tesla (or Fisker) community college?
  Probes: proximity to home, other options, major offerings, career goals, peers and family, transfer agreements, employment, 4-year destinations.

Section 2.

How do students' high school experiences influence their perceptions of academic self-efficacy?

-How was your high school experience?
  Probes: academic performance, parents and peers, location, social, PSAT, study habits, attendance, organization, motivation, participation, test taking, challenge or threat.

-How well do you think you did (academically) in high school?
  Probes: Why, influences, reaction to grades, control over performance, perceptions of ability, peers and siblings, challenge or threat.

-How important was it for you to do well (academically) in high school?
  Probes: done better, confidence, change over time, matched performance, perceptions of others.

-How important was it for you to feel like you could do well (academically) in college?
  Probes: academic fit, similar classmates, achievement, two or 4-year, ability of others.

-How do you think other people perceived your academic ability in high school?
  Probes: influence and importance of perceptions, need other people to believe in your ability, teachers/peers/parents.

-What role did your feelings about your academic ability play in the colleges you considered?
  Probes: type (2-year/4-year), location, rigor, cost, influence of higher perceptions of academic ability.

-What additional comments do you have about your decision to attend community college?

Section 3.

What factors influence which four-year institutions community college students consider transferring to (e.g., four-year transfer choice set)?

-Why do you want a bachelor's degree?
  Probes: associate degree, career, graduate school, peers, family.

-Tell me about the four-year colleges or universities you are considering transferring to.
  Probes: why so few, why so many, types.

-How did you go about deciding which four-year college or universities to transfer to?
  Probes: community college counselors, peers and family, self, schools considering (transfer choice set).

-Why did you decide to apply to XXX? (four-year institutions under consideration).
  Probes: location, finances, major offerings, proximity, resources, peers and family, academic performance, admissions knowledge, employment, social and academic transition, in/out state, what may change list, why not.

Section 4.

How do students' community college experiences influence their perceptions of academic self-efficacy?

-Tell me more about your community college experience so far.
  Probes: academic performance, social/academic transition, school resources, employment, timing of expected transfer.

-How well do you think you have done (academically) in community college?
  Probes: academic adjustment/performance, professors, balancing work and school, GPA, expectations vs experience.

-How important is it for you to do well in community college?
  Probes: done better, confidence, change over time, matched performance, perceptions of others, compared to high school.

-How do you feel about your academic ability in community college?
  Probes: confidence, changed over time, matched actual performance, believe you can do better, belief in ability to do well in college, expectations vs experience, perceptions of others, challenge or threat, compared to high school.

-How do you think other people perceive your academic ability in community college?
  Probes: influence/importance of others perceptions, need other people to believe in your ability, parents/peers/teachers, compared to high school.

-How important is it for you to feel like you can succeed academically at a four-year college?
  Probes: academic fit, similar classmates, achievement.

-What role do your feelings about your academic ability play in the colleges you are considering transferring to?
  Probes: type (2-year/4-year), location, rigor, cost, influence of higher perceptions of academic ability, match choice set.

-What additional comments do you have about the four-year colleges and universities you are considering transferring to?

Appendix B

Research Sites Demographic Data

_____

Tesla College

Total Enrollment 22,180

53% Female*

40% White
19% Latino/a
15% Asian
10% unknown or non-respondent
6% African American
5% Filipino
3% other
1% Pacific Islander
1% Native American or Alaskan native

*Gender enrollment gaps were only found in the Asian, White, and Latino/a student populations.

_____

Fisker College

Total Enrollment 18,426

56% Female**

48% White
20% Latino/a
7% African American
7% unknown or non-respondent
7% Asian
5% Filipino
3% other
2% Pacific Islander
1% Native American or Alaskan native

**Gender enrollment gaps were only found in the White, Latino/a, and unknown student populations.

Appendix C   Student Participant Survey

Male ___ Female ___   Age ____

Academic Standing (2009 - 2010)
_____ 1st Yr   ___ 2nd Yr   ___ 3rd Yr   ___ 4th Yr   ___ 5th Yr   ___
Other_____

Are you currently receiving financial aid? If yes, please indicate your primary source of aid.
___ Federal Pell Grant
___ Cal Grant
___ Other Scholarship
___ Federal Stafford Loans
___ Private Loans
___ Not Receiving Aid

Are you working during the school year?
__not working   __full-time   ___part-time   __Other
_____

On average, how many units are you enrolled in each term?
___0 - 6 units   ___6 - 12 units   ___12+ units   __Other
_____

How many college units do you currently have?
_____units

What is your parents' average yearly income?   What is your average yearly income?
____ Under $20,000   ____ Under $20,000
____ $20,000 - $49,999   ____ $20,000 - $49,999
____ $50,000 - $74,999   ____ $50,000 - $74,999
____ Above $75,000   ____ Above $75,000
____ Other _____   ____ Other _____

Are you a first generation college student?
___ Yes   ___ No   ___ Other_____

What was your high school grade point average?   Community college grade point average?
_____   _____

Which community college are you attending?
_____

When do you plan on transferring to a four-year college or university?
_____

Which four-year institutions are you considering applying to when you transfer?
_____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

What is the highest degree you plan to pursue:
___ B.A./B.S. ___M.A./M.B.A. ___Ph.D. ___M.D./D.D.S. ___J.D. ___Other_____

Appendix D   Student Participant Interview Consent Form

This project is concerned with community college choice and transfer, and will help identify the important variables that increase access to the baccalaureate for this student population. Findings will enable policy makers and practitioners to make informed decisions regarding postsecondary access.

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                                     Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question and may interrupt or end the interview at any point. Doing so will not jeopardize either yourself or this research effort. This interview should take no longer than 75 minutes to complete.

Your responses are confidential and no real names or identifying characteristics will be used in any reports from this study. You can contact the principal investigator should you have any questions or want to receive any information about the results of this research effort.

Please note you are being compensated $40 dollars for participation in this study and your signature below denotes that you have received said compensation. There are no foreseeable risks involved in your participation in this study.

Your signature below constitutes your consent to have this interview audio recorded and research findings may be disseminated for public consumption. Recording of the interview is needed, as each recorded interview will be transcribed for research purposes.

I voluntarily consent to participating in this research study.

_____   _____
               (Signature)   (Date)

_____
               (Printed Name)

The University of Michigan Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board and the Office of Institutional Research at Tesla College and Fisker College have approved this study.

Should you have any questions regarding your rights in research, please contact:

       Institutional Review Board
       540 E. Liberty St. (Suite 202)
       Ann Arbor, MI   48104-2210
       734-936-0933
       email: irbhsbs@umich.edu

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200

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