"Every B Closes the Door": The College Choice Process Among Silicon Valley High School Seniors

by

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PREFACE

Joshua Storm was one of those kids who made me wonder what exactly I spent my high school years doing.

At 17 years old, he possessed the poise of a young man well beyond his years. I met him at his home, where he greeted me wearing khakis, a polo shirt, and a self-deprecating smile. Joshua had grown up in a community just outside Palo Alto. He was a senior at Henry H. Gunn High School, and he showed me his Excel spreadsheets, which comprised data he had gathered about his top choice colleges and what he believed his chances of admission were based on historic trends.

Out of all the participants I would go on to meet, Joshua stood out in my mind as one of the few students who embraced all that Silicon Valley had to offer. Yet at the same time, he was fully cognizant of how much the pressures of the area could grind students down. A member of his school's debate team, he was easy to talk to and exceptionally articulate. I asked Joshua what he had observed among his friends (and their families) when they decide to apply to less elite schools:

> I would say, well, with their families, a lot of disappointment. And a lot of guilt tripping and resentment. And that gets worse and worse. But in an odd vicious cycle, I know that in a way both the parents and the students kind of break each other down at the same time. I'm very close to my friends. They would always vent to me about their family. I would even visit and stay there for dinner and hear some of the crossfire first hand. Or, you know, tear-felt Skypes about what's going on at home. And I know that freshman year…
>
> Let's take Jon. Jon and his mother. Jon is a great guy. Jon is the most down to earth person. He wears his heart on his sleeve. He's a great swimmer. He's so dedicated to it. He's a really smart guy. And he's a little self-conscious. When his friends are going out,

he really will drop anything. He's loyal. He's always there for his friends. And that can be to a fault. Sometimes that makes him fall behind in his work. Like, if everybody's going somewhere, he will always be there. That's a great thing about him. I know that freshman year his mom was like, "Princeton. Jon, you are going." She stays at home, the father owns a dry cleaning store. They're, by Palo Alto standards, dirt poor. Jon would literally crack poor jokes all the time and it was almost comical. He's like "I can't even afford an iPhone." Because that is a staple almost in Silicon Valley. And freshman year: Princeton. "We're going to do whatever it takes. Jon gets all the resources." And then, you know, that's cool. You really start that process with ambition and dream. I remember this myself with Stanford. Like, "I'm going to do this, this, this. This is great."

You put the pedal to the metal and it's harder than you thought it was going to be. It's not like you've still given up on it. But you're still going for it and it's like, "Okay, this is a little more than I bargained for." You go a little further down the line. Maybe it's the end of your freshman year. And you say, "Wow. This lifestyle kind of sucks. I'm really stressed out by this." No, not "by this." You kind of omit that part. "I'm really stressed out all the time. I don't like where my life is right now. And you really lose sight of where you're going or what you're doing it for. And this is, I think, the pitfall where most people's GPAs drop off from the four in second semester freshman year. And mine did too.

Then from there, parents and students have a bit of that crossfire. You know what? Jon didn't get the grades that his mother thought he did. And Jon was very tired of his mother's encouragement. Because that really manifests in pressure and almost guilt tripping. All those resources. It's either that the parents are so earnest it almost breaks your heart not to do everything they want. Or they're so zealous that it's incessant and you can't handle it. Those are the two, really, that I've seen.

And then you go through sophomore year, a little bit of the same process. Maybe your standards are a little lower. And by low standards I mean, Jon's applying to Berkeley now. This is some pretty low balling. It's like, because he's not going to an Ivy League any more. Like, oh, sound the alarms. And that was how sophomore year went. Jon was dealing with a lot of issues fighting his disability of his. And he was still struggling to get the same grades. Throwing himself into his swimming career. He thought that that might be what's going to bank him into what he can do with college. And you know what? At the end of his sophomore year it was clear that he wasn't really going to study for the SAT anymore. I think he was just going to take the ACT. In fact, scouts of University of Hawaii scouted him. And he was going to go to the University of Hawaii for swimming.

Then you go to junior year and things are even a little harder. A little more stressful. APs are starting. Everybody has to take seven.[1] There's only seven classes. I know that the average GPA at Berkeley is 4.3. You think Irvine. UC Irvine is not the most credible of them all. It's 4.0. I didn't take any. I was working with water polo and I didn't take any. And that's put me really far behind compared to a lot of my peers. Even though I have better test scores, GPA is usually — Let's go to Jon here. And you know what? He's

[1] Joshua meant students felt pressure to take seven AP courses, not that this was a requirement.

> pretty sick of swimming. He's dealing with his issues, lot of faults of his friends. A bit of a neurotic episode and relationship drama too. And you know what? Swimming's starting to fall too. And all of those ambitions you had freshman year all start to kind of crumble away. You push so hard at something that it really – for Jon at least – it really didn't manifest in that optimism. It started to like, "I can work this hard today. But can I work this hard tomorrow? Maybe the next day?" And now he's going, most of the friends who followed that exact same story, community college. (1st interview)

Joshua's tale of "Jon" paints a portrait of the gradual erosion of expectations under the weight of social and family pressure. Perhaps part of Jon's downgrading of postsecondary ambitions from Princeton to the local community college is an accurate reflection of his interests and abilities; however, it is clear from Joshua's description that shifts in college destination are part of a social process of peer competition. For example, if a student like Jon is surrounded by classmates taking seven APs, the sense of self that is derived from comparing himself with others suffers when he cannot keep up with his peers. Joshua states that it is just a matter of time for someone like Jon to "break."

Most educators and level-headed adults would agree that students should not have to suffer the gradual slope of downgraded ambitions that Joshua describes. Furthermore, this picture of Silicon Valley adolescence contradicts the stereotype of Silicon Valley that is almost synonymous with success, as its identity is buoyed by all of the legendary tech companies whose mythologies have somehow managed to eclipse the thousands of failed ventures in their wakes.

Success and failure. This kind of black and white meaning making comes naturally to teenagers who've been told all their lives *they can do anything*, which somehow gets transformed into *they must do everything*. This struggle to construct a sense of who they want to be is exacerbated by living among such a high concentration of ostensibly successful people.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF APPENDICES

ABSTRACT

This study examines the college choice process among high socioeconomic status families in Silicon Valley to explore how college admissions has become so filled with emotional distress among this population. The research question guiding this study is: *How do upper-class families in Silicon Valley navigate the college choice process?*

The author conducted interviews with 19 high school seniors and their parents during the 2014-2015 academic year. All of the students aspired to attend competitive four-year postsecondary institutions. Families completed one interview at the beginning of the school year and a second interview after they had made a final college choice decision. The study's findings are presented through four case studies that illustrate how the students took different journeys to arrive at prestigious destinations.

Students faced a number of stressors including expectations for success originating from communities, schools, and families. An inductive approach to analysis revealed three orientations that characterized the way students navigated the college choice process: a) *paralyzed privileged* students struggled to live up to external expectations for academic achievement and success; b) *pragmatic privileged* students assessed the field of competitive college admissions and devised personal game plans that would enable them to achieve their goals; c) *passive privileged* students believed in social expectations that they should attend good colleges, but they were neither as stressed as the paralyzed privileged students, nor as intentional as the pragmatic privileged students. Using self-authorship (Baxter Magolda and King 2012) as a

guiding framework, the author explores how variations in developmental level may account for differences in navigation orientations.

Given their upper-class backgrounds, all of the students in this study were privileged and their competitive college destinations reflected their social class status. Implications for adolescent mental health, family expectations, organizational responses, and future research are discussed.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

On March 12, 2019, a friend contacted me and asked if I had heard the news. Actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman, among others, had been arrested in a cheating scam that purported to guarantee students' admission to top universities like the University of Southern California, Stanford, and Georgetown. According to reporting from CNN:

> Fifty people were charged in the criminal investigation that went by the name "Operation Varsity Blues." Those arrested include two SAT/ACT administrators, one exam proctor, nine coaches at elite schools, one college administrator and 33 parents, according to Andrew Lelling, the U.S. attorney for Massachusetts. The parents, Lelling said, were a "catalog of wealth and privilege," including actors, CEOs, a fashion designer and the co-chairman of a global law firm (Levenson and Morales 2019).

The organization at the heart of the scandal, known as The Key, provided services like cheating on the SAT and manufacturing athletic records that would make students eligible for athletic recruitment. Parents, coaches, and exam administrators were all charged with criminal activities. The affidavit in support of the criminal claim states:

> Between approximately 2011 and 2018, parents paid CW-1 [Cooperating Witness 1] approximately $25 million to bribe coaches and university administrators to designate their children as purported recruited athletes, or as members of other favored admissions categories, thereby facilitating the children's admission to those universities. (Smith 2019)

Of those indicted for using The Key's services, 13 were from the Bay Area including one Palo Alto couple, one Atherton couple, and two people from Menlo Park (ABC News 2019). Dr. Gregory and Amy Colburn from Palo Alto are accused of paying $25,000 to manipulate their son's SAT score. Felicity Huffman pled guilty to conspiracy to commit mail fraud. Lori Loughlin and her husband Mossimo Giannulli pled not guilty to charges of conspiracy to commit

fraud and money laundering for a price tag of $500,000 for their daughters' admission to the University of Southern California.

This college admissions scandal speaks to the stakes, both real and perceived, in the race to attend what the affidavit called "highly selective" universities. It shows the lengths to which privileged parents will go to ensure their children's "success" in their postsecondary pursuits. The scandal also reveals the loopholes in the college admissions process, e.g., "favored admissions categories," that are exploitable by those with the resources to do so. The fact that privileged families use backdoor channels to secure college admissions is not surprising[2]. What is surprising is that the practice has spread from the super wealthy to the merely wealthy (Hinkson 2019). Moreover, the fact that it is parents who are perpetrating these crimes is indicative of how parents' own egos can be invested in where their kids go to college (Hinkson 2019).

Among academics, the college admissions scandal was largely met with a collective *What else is new?* To insiders in the academy, the fact that the wealthy use back channels to secure their children's admission is self-evident[3]. However, the scope and spectacle of the scandal entranced both the traditional media and academic trade publications. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Tom Bartlett interviewed Jerome Karabel, author of *The Chosen*, who said:

> Admissions is more meritocratic than it was in the 1920s or 1930s. It is still the case that the privileged enjoy advantages. The advantages are more subtle. They reside in taking for granted practices that are considered part and parcel of good parenting. A good parent who has resources either sends their children to a private school or buys their way into a suburban district that is known to have good schools. Similarly, such parents will provide their children with subject-matter tutors, SAT tutors, private college counselors whose fees run up to $40,000, and private athletic coaches if they show talent or even interest. So in all these ways, those children come to be considered more meritorious. That is part of how privilege is perpetuated through generations. (Bartlett 2019)

[2] See (Golden 2006).
[3] For a typical response, see *The Annex* podcast recorded on March 13, 2019, "The College Cheating Scandal."

In short, in today's admissions climate, "good" parents buy their children merit. Amidst the speculation about whether the children in the admissions scandal knew about their parents' actions, the deeper question remains -- how does the notion of going to a good college at any cost (literally and figuratively) affect students' self-concept? It will be years before we know about the fallout from this scandal and its effects on both institutions and individuals. Today, we can only try to make sense of what drives families to such extremes in the pursuit of elite higher education. This study begins to unpack this question.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

It was Thursday morning, and I was sitting in a San Jose coffee shop. In my defense, it was a rather crowded coffee shop, so I could not help but overhear a conversation between the older East Asian man and younger East Asian woman sitting next to me.

The man was talking about his son who was a senior in high school – and also in therapy. The boy was getting ready to apply to college, and his father described him as being at the tail end of being competitive for schools like Stanford and Brown. He had a 4.1 GPA but had only taken a total of seven AP courses. This compared with one of his friends who was taking six AP classes in his senior year alone. The father speculated that given his test scores, his son might be competitive at UCLA, but his grades would put him on the cusp. This father was planning to take his son to visit Loyola Marymount University (LMU) and the University of Southern California (USC) as well as UCLA. With the exception of UCLA, which had a 12 percent admissions rate in 2018 (compared to Berkeley's 17 percent), according to the father his son would be applying to second- and third-tier universities even with what could be considered impressive grades and AP profile.

These types of conversations take place in Silicon Valley all the time. When thinking about where to apply to college, people start at Stanford as the top school to aim for and proceed to downgrade their expectations from there. An academic portfolio that might be competitive in other regions is perceived as downright average in Silicon Valley.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that for the students in this study, their college choice process was one of the most critical experiences in their young lives. Certainly, the environmental emphasis on the importance of going to college — and a highly ranked college at that — had socialized them to believe that their next steps after high school represented a monumental step in their pathway to adulthood.

All of the families in this study, compared to, for example, families of first-generation college students, understood the basic formula to get into college, even if individual families put their own twists on it. At minimum, the formula included having a high GPA, getting good SAT/ACT scores, and participating in activities, at least one of which should be related to community service. Taking AP/IB courses, or at least the most challenging academic program as possible, was conventional wisdom.

No one explicitly told me *this is how you get into college;* there was as an assumed understanding between my informants and me that everyone had at least a basic understanding of what colleges look for. Although some families hired private college counselors to make sure no details were overlooked, the fact remains that by senior year, all the students in the study could check off grades, scores, and activities as highlights of their high school careers.

Yet, built into families' commitment to following the well-known formula of college admissions was the acknowledgement that the formula itself was not failsafe. Many parents and students lamented that there were no guarantees in elite college admissions, that admissions was

not objectively fair. More than one person, including a college counselor I interviewed, called it a lottery. Unless students had hooks, like parents who worked at Stanford, there were no discernible patterns to whom might be admitted. Declining acceptance rates in the University of California system were a particular source of angst for the families in the study, who perceived a frustrating lack of consistency in admissions patterns.

When I was designing this study, I was influenced by the attitudes I observed in the forums on websites like CollegeConfidential.com, a site I now know is notorious for its participants' overly competitive commentary. I was also informed by studies of overscheduled childhoods and hyper-vigilant parenting, like Friedman (2013) documents in *Playing to Win*. These images of a cutthroat college application process among those vying for admission to highly ranked schools confirmed the biases that I brought to my perception of the educational culture in Silicon Valley. When I read sensational media accounts of college counselors teaching their clients how to package themselves to be attractive to admissions officers, I assumed that the counselors' clientele would be Silicon Valley overachievers.

However, as I spent more time talking to students and their parents, I learned that student life in Silicon Valley is more complicated than the popular image would have us believe. While I met students who fit the frazzled stereotype, I also met students who were remarkably poised — who knew where they wanted to go and how to get there. This heterogeneity would become a pattern as the study took shape.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Research has demonstrated the economic benefits of earning a bachelor's degree (Brand and Xie 2010; Leonhardt 2014; Paulsen 2001), and though the benefit of attending an elite university is more ambiguous (Gerber and Cheung 2008; Witteveen and Attewell 2017), the low

acceptance rates at highly selective colleges and universities speaks to the widespread desire to attend these kinds of institutions. For example, in 2018, Stanford University received 47,451 applications and admitted 2,071 for an admit rate of 4.4 percent (Stanford Undergraduate Admission 2018). It subsequently announced that it would no longer release admissions numbers "as a small step in reducing the outsized emphasis on the admission rates at U.S. colleges and universities" (Bliss 2018).

Applications are an opportunity for students to define themselves. But given the highly competitive nature of admissions at elite institutions, students are tempted to massage their identity to fit what they believe admissions officers look for (Wong 2018). Students who attend the well-resourced high schools in wealthy Silicon Valley suburbs take this opportunity seriously.

Numerous studies and theoretical essays have documented how the education system generally and postsecondary education in particular, function as sites of social reproduction. Many of these, in turn, emphasize the roles that institutions and institutional contexts play in perpetuating inequality (e.g., Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Karabel 2005; Stevens 2009). The literature has also been heavily dominated by financial and economic explanations for choice (e.g., Crosnoe and Johnson 2011; Kim 2012; Kim, DesJardins, and McCall 2009; Niu and Tienda 2008; Paulsen 1998; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Tierney and Venegas 2009), while the K-12 literature has examined the role of unequal schooling in promoting college readiness and environments that may or may not foster aspiration (e.g., Bryan et al. 2017; Davis and Warner 2015; Pitre 2006; Plucker 1998; Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka 2011). Within sociology, limited research has been conducted on college choice as a family-centric process.

In this study, I investigate the deceptively simple question: *How do upper-class families in Silicon Valley navigate the college choice process?* Popular preconceptions suggest that such

students study institutional rankings and apply to the most prestigious schools they can, often reproducing their parents' own high academic achievement. While this is true to some extent, in fact, it is a much more complex process tempered by how students make meaning of national and local narratives about college going and how they construct a sense of identity vis-a-vis these narratives. Their opportunities are shaped by the trappings of their minds, not, for the most part, financial constraints or lack of college knowledge. The parents of these students want to give them the world and have the resources to do so, which begs a second question: Why are many students so sad (Rosin 2015)?

THE STUDY

To answer these questions, I conducted a qualitative interview study with 19 families during the 2014-2015 academic year. "When did you first start thinking of college?" I asked the participants. Many answered the question along the lines of "my junior year" or sometimes earlier. This was not the answer I expected. Based on my stereotyped image of Silicon Valley, I expected families to have explicitly planned a college application strategy since the beginning of high school, if not earlier. Moreover, I expected them to be intentional in how their educational and co-curricular activities would benefit them when it was time for them to do their college applications. I had anticipated talking to upper middle-class families like those Friedman (2013) studied – parents who enrolled their children in activities so that by the time they were in middle school, they would be well-positioned to be competitive in academic and professional arenas.

Instead, when I asked students "When did you first start thinking about college?" many of them interpreted it as "When did you start thinking about your college applications?" For them, "thinking about college" meant concrete actions such as deciding on a list of schools to

apply to. They glossed over the idea of *thinking* about college because it was second nature to them. They had fully integrated a college-going future as part of their identities.

Thus, the decision to go to college was, practically speaking, a non-decision for the students in this study. Instead, it was the next step in an educational trajectory that started in pre-school, albeit largely unconsciously. Students who applied to private college prep high schools had this trajectory laid out in eighth grade, but by virtue of growing up in this area, all the students were exposed to at least the idea of eventual postsecondary education. Even if this did not take the form of concrete plans until high school itself, the foundation had been established in terms of the taken-for-granted attitudes that students had absorbed into their self-concept. Furthermore, the inevitability of college attendance was disconnected from the prerequisite of academic achievement: the idea that they would not be "good enough" to go to college rarely crossed the students' minds. Even if they articulated a fear of not being able to go "anywhere," they did not really believe this.

I designed my study as an investigation of culture in context. The emphasis of literature in this area has historically focused on upward social mobility and the factors that enable students to achieve better outcomes than what would be predicted from their life circumstances. This study is one of a few extant investigations of the top of the social pyramid, with an eye towards uncovering the ways that the elites maintain class status and avoid downward mobility. I chose college choice as the space where I assumed that families would be intentionally strategic in how they engaged in a contested space.

Contested, in this context, is a resource that is finite and desirable. Although there are thousands of colleges and universities in the United States, many of which have open admissions policies, admissions at the most selective institutions is a zero-sum game. While the discourse

surrounding the idea of a "spot" that one student can "take" at the expense of another is problematic and lacks nuance, there is an underlying reality that the Class of 2023 at Stanford will comprise a set number of students to the exclusion of all others.

The students in this study were living the American Dream of upper-class comfort. By accident of birth, they hit the jackpot by living in two-parent households where both parents were employed or out of the workforce by choice; had financial stability; and resided in neighborhoods with access to excellent public schools. The students in this study were privileged along a number of axes. All were from financially secure households; 16 of the 19 participants were white, seven were male; all were visibly able-bodied. Perhaps most significantly for the purpose of this study, the parents all had the financial resources to pay for whatever institution their child choose at a time when two-thirds of college students receive some form of financial aid (The College Board n.d.)[4].

I learned through my interviews that growing up in Silicon Valley skews one's sense of the possible in terms of academic and career outcomes. "Success" is the watchword, ambiguous as that is. In preparing to apply to college, residents held a curiously bifurcated worldview: students should work hard to be the most attractive applicant possible, while at the same time, acceptance at the most elite schools like Stanford akin to winning the lottery.

Achieving the American Dream in this context is a complex proposition, especially when one's parents have already achieved it. Though, Silicon Valley is a region of high income and low poverty relative to the country as a whole, it is also home to a widening income gap where 30 percent of households do not meet self-sufficiency standards, while on the other end of the spectrum, almost 10 percent of millionaire households in California are located in the region (Massaro 2019). The specter of downward mobility is a real possibility, even if family wealth

[4] Though as I will show, factors likes scholarships and cost played a role in some students' final decisions.

can provide enough of a safety net that the fall would not be too painful. It may seem paradoxical that privilege can constrain the college choice process, but the experiences of students in this high-pressure environment bear this out. Many spend the entirety of high school building an identity around their college destination, struggling to construct a story of upward mobility when there is nowhere higher to go, per se. It's hard to tell a story of excellence when "everyone" else is as good or better than oneself in terms of accomplishments and perceived successes.

I found a complex interplay between how students experienced pressure and how they processed the weight of expectations for success that are products of growing up in Silicon Valley. These expectations come from different directions: parents, peers, and community. Expectations are both explicit, such as parental expectations to maintain good grades, and tacit, like the pressure to apply to the handful of colleges that are considered to be prestigious. As they transition into adulthood, trying to create new, more adult selves, they perform for themselves, their peers, their parents, their teachers, and other adults. Simultaneously, these students are also the audiences for the performances of their peers.

Due to recruitment and hiring practices in Silicon Valley, it is common for people to know the basic information that appears on their colleagues' LinkedIn profiles, especially in technology companies. It is similar to the way that professors know the academic backgrounds of their peers both within departments and at other institutions. In highly competitive recruitment environments, one's pedigree is very much a part of adult life, such that even if it does not overtly figure into the fabric of social interactions, it may unconsciously affect how people see each other. Children pick up on the way that their parents' academic credentials are part of their identities as they navigate the professional world and see them as a cautionary tale for making

sense of what is required to be successful. This kind of unconscious yet ubiquitous messaging shapes the narratives that students are exposed to, and it is difficult to "de-program" by simply telling students that it does not matter where they go to school. It is almost specious to for a parent to say that it is okay if their child doesn't attend an elite institution when they themselves have intimidating pedigrees — something that is common among the Baby Boomer and Generation X parents in Silicon Valley.

In this study, I argue that privileged young people who grow up, go to high school, and apply to college in Silicon Valley navigate the college process according to how they make meaning[5] of and subsequently navigate college admissions as a competitive field. Among the students in this study, I identified three broad patterns in the way students make meaning of the college choice process. The first category consists of students whose privileged positions have given rise to mental models that have the paradoxical effect of constraining their perception of opportunity (*Paralyzed Privileged*). The second category consists of those students who leverage their privileged experiences to strategically inform their college choice process (*Pragmatic Privileged*). The third category consists of students who lack the focus of students in the first two categories, but who end up going to selective colleges because of their class position (*Passive Privileged*). These categories are not absolute, and there is blending across categories.

The transition to adulthood is characterized by children attaining greater autonomy over their thoughts and actions -- that is, becoming the authors of their own lives. Using self-authorship (Baxter Magolda and King 2012) as a guiding framework, I argue that self-authorship is associated with students having a more intentional and less stressful college choice process, as

[5] Unless referring to self-authorship theory, I use the term "make meaning" to describe the epistemological process of knowing. This is distinct from how it is used in the student development self-authorship literature, where "meaning making refers to the strategies students use to understand what and how they are learning" (Baxter Magolda and King 2012:4).

they have begun to develop internal frameworks that allow them to approach external expectations with a critical lens.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

The logics that motivate how privileged families approach college choice are an important yet understudied factor in explaining the educational system's role in perpetuating social inequality. Scholars disagree about how to define social elites. Khan (2012) draws a middle-ground in these debates by defining elite as "those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource…that advantage them" (p. 362). If we apply this definition to access to higher education, its limitations in relation to the upper-class becomes apparent. Social reproduction theory suggests that there is a happy concurrence between privileged families who can afford the accoutrements of concerted cultivation and the children's eventual enrollment at a prestigious postsecondary institution (Stevens 2009). Yet the amount of on-the-ground hustling that upper middle-class families pursue to shore up the appearance of academic merit suggests that even the most privileged and ostensibly powerful have doubts about their ability to be successful in the college admissions game – whether this fear is warranted or not (Friedman 2013; Lareau 2011). This poses a puzzle about how to make sense of the behaviors of individuals who may be elite by virtue of their access to resources but who do not identify with the sense of ease associated with the elite class.

This study bridges the sociological and higher education literatures by grounding an interventionist perspective in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. It contributes to the gap in our current knowledge about how upper-class students make their postsecondary decisions. Finally, this study is about debunking the sensationalism characterizes reporting on teen life in

the Valley. It is about the very real students who grow up there and their experiences navigating their school and family lives as they make one of their first major adult decisions.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION

In Chapter Two, I provide a brief overview of the literature on college choice, Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, and self-authorship. In Chapter Three, I present the study's methodology. In Chapter Four, I describe Silicon Valley, as the students' social context played a critical role in how they made meaning of what their futures should entail. In Chapter Five, I present a typology of college choice navigation orientations and I discuss how I categorized each student in the study. In Chapters Six through Nine, I introduce four students: Joshua Storm, Alyssa Waters, Jessica Snow, and Michael Smith. Each of these students represents one of the navigation orientations, and I demonstrate the linkages between their *orientations* and *meaning making* using self-authorship theory. Strategy here is used in a vernacular sense meaning "a careful plan or method,"[6] which is distinct from Bourdieu's (1977) theory of action as well how it is used in constructive-developmental theory to describe the perspectives that guide meaning making (Baxter Magolda and King 2012:4).

- **Joshua Storm** (Paralyzed Privileged). Having spent his entire life in Silicon Valley, Joshua was deeply immersed in the culture of achievement and success. By the time he was a senior, he had internalized the belief that he must go to an elite college, as he feared the specter of downward mobility. His first choice was Dartmouth, and he applied to a number of other top-tier institutions. He decided to take a gap year and then attend the University of Southern California.
- **Alyssa Waters** (Pragmatic Privileged). Alyssa was the daughter of a first-generation college success, and her parents had achieved significant career and financial success.

[6] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "strategy (*n.*)," accessed July 18, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strategy

She and her sister grew up knowing their mother had gone to Harvard then Stanford, but their stories diverged in how they made meaning of their parents' backgrounds. Alyssa applied to and was accepted at Georgetown University Early Action.

- **Jessica Snow (**Pragmatic Privileged). Jessica's college choice process was clear-cut and did not exact the emotional toll that other students in this study suffered. Because she resisted the pressure to push herself to exhaustion, her academic record was not as strong as many of her peers at Menlo-Atherton High School. Rather than become distressed at this, Jessica chose her colleges based on her internally derived criteria, and her subsequent acceptances bore out the accuracy of her self-regard. She decided to attend Southern Methodist University.
- **Michael Smith** (Passive Privileged). Michael approached high school with a laidback attitude that spilled into his lack of stress as he narrowed down his college choices based on the presence of strong engineering programs. He chose the University of Washington.

In Chapter 10, I summarize my findings across the four cases, discuss implications, and offer suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

THE THEORETICAL TRADITIONS OF COLLEGE CHOICE RESEARCH

In its simplest form, *college choice* has been used to describe the process through which students develop an awareness of postsecondary opportunities and then take steps towards matriculation. McDonough (1997:111) explained: "A student's college choice is the result of a complex relationship between individual agency, family cultural capital, and the structure and organization of the school, to which the student adds the influence of friends, the family's financial situation, an after-school job, as well as numerous other influences." Historically, research on college choice has been led by human capital theory from economics and status attainment theory from sociology (Perna 2006). Status attainment research has generally focused on social mobility issues that have evolved out of Blau and Duncan's (1967) model of occupational structure, and Sewell, Haller, and Portes' (1969) Wisconsin model. More recently, Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) theory of social reproduction has become perhaps the dominant theory undergirding research in the sociology of education.

In higher education research, a number of factors have been identified as integral to college choice; these include: students' background characteristics; academic preparation; family support, both emotional and financial; and school resources (for reviews, see Bergerson 2009; Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Perna 2006). In the classic formulation of college choice theory, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-stage model to conceptualize the process comprising:

- predisposition, or the desire to pursue postsecondary education;

- search, or the development of a set of schools to apply to; and
- choice, or the final matriculation decision.

Each of the three phases postulated in Hossler and Gallagher's model, which was further refined by Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), have inspired a research agenda that has refined the ways that the stages work individually and in conjunction with each other (Harding, Parker, and Toutkoushian 2017; Klasik 2012; Wells, Lynch, and Seifert 2011). A related strand of research has elaborated on Hossler and Gallagher's framework, such as Radford's (2013) *college destination process* and *Iloh's model of college-going decisions and trajectories* (Iloh 2018).

Drawing on Hossler and Gallaher's research, Laura Perna's work on college enrollment and completion has been at the forefront of a new generation of college choice literature. Taking a step away from Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage model, Perna (2006:116) proposed a multi-layered framework that illustrates how college choice is the product of what she calls an individual's "situated context." That is, the interplay of habitus[7], local, educational, and social contexts, affects how individuals calculate the expected benefits and costs of higher education, which in turn informs the decision whether to pursue postsecondary education opportunities. Perna's exceptionally comprehensive model has been used to frame a number of empirical studies on the antecedents of postsecondary enrollment (e.g., Engberg and Wolniak 2009; McKinney and Novak 2015; Squire and Mobley 2015)

One of the primary strengths of Perna's framework is that it integrates economic and sociological perspectives on college access, in effect, bridging two theoretically distinct bodies of research. However, the model's emphasis on the interconnectedness of factors that affect college choice obscures the processes or mechanisms of action that underlie the model. In

[7] Perna (2006) draws on Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) and McDonough (1997) to define *habitus* as "an individual's internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment (p. 113)."

contrast, though Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage framework is overly simplistic and unrealistically linear, it offers a plausible model for explaining how individual actions build on one another to inform enrollment decisions. The different orientations in the two frameworks can be seen in Perna's use of college choice as the *product* of her model, while Hossler and Gallagher (1987) use college choice to describe a *sequence of events*.

Iloh (2018) recently argued that the Hossler and Gallagher model fails to account for the changing landscape in the population of students who pursue higher education, such as students who attend multiple institutions. Using an ecological framework that situates students within the various contexts that affect their college choice, the Iloh model of college-going decisions and trajectories emphasizes the interrelationships among information, time, and opportunity particularly as they affect nontraditional college students like those twenty-five and older.

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS

With the underlying objective of increasing access to college for underserved populations, most of the extant college choice research has focused on historically underrepresented populations, such as low-income students (e.g., Bastedo and Jaquette 2011; Bok 2010; Brown, Wohn, and Ellison 2016; Cox 2016; St. John, Hu, and Fisher 2011; McDonough and Calderone 2006; Roderick et al. 2011); first-generation students (e.g., Cho et al. 2008; Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco 2005; Mitchall and Jaeger 2018); racial minorities (e.g., Espenshade and Radford 2009; Freeman 2016; Hillman 2016; Lijana 2015; Massey et al. 2006; Ovink and Kalogrides 2015; Pitre 2006; Poon and Byrd 2013) [8;] and undocumented students (Perez 2010).

[8] Most of these studies use samples of students with intersecting marginalized identities, such as first-generation ethnic minorities, but I sorted the exemplar studies by one focal identity.

The literature on college choice that focuses *specifically* on high socioeconomic status (SES) high school students is much more limited. That is to say, dozens of studies *compare* college matriculation outcomes between high- and low-SES students, but the focus of such studies is generally on improving access, and the consensus is that high-SES students are advantaged in the educational pipeline. Of the studies that do exist, a common thread throughout the research is the way parents intrude on and manage their children's education (Demerath et al. 2010; Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014). Khan (2011) found a concordance that exists among elite high schools and elite colleges that smooths the way for students like those at St. Paul's School (the site of Khan's ethnography) to transition between institutions. However, even among college prep secondary schools, the prestige of the high school and students' relative social class position within a school affects their college choice process (Weis et al. 2014).

In addition to college choice research that focuses on the actions that students take towards matriculation, a parallel body of literature has emerged that examines the roles that postsecondary institutions themselves play in shaping college admissions. Rhoades (2014) identified three areas where colleges are implicated in students' choice process: cost, physical location, and marketing. Cost has indeed been identified as one of the most important factors in students' college choice process (Hurwitz 2012; Lillis and Tian 2008; McDonough and Calderone 2006; Paulsen and St. John 2002; Tierney and Venegas 2009). Proximity, which is distinct from neighborhood context[9], affects the college choice process of disadvantaged students, who often have no options within commuting distance (Hillman 2016; Ovink et al. 2018; Turley 2009). An entire journal is devoted to marketing in higher education – the aptly named *Journal of Marketing in Higher Education* — which speaks to the disciplinary interest in Rhoades's last observation.

[9] Proximity refers to an institution's physical location, while neighborhood context refers to local culture.

Turning to the particular practices of elite institutions, Karen (1991) found that a host of intra- and inter-institutional interests at Harvard College resulted in certain groups having an advantage in admissions, such as legacies, non-Asian minorities, and high-status women. These kinds of preferential treatment policies have a long and storied history in American higher education. In the most comprehensive work of its kind, Karabel (2005) documented the ways that Harvard, Princeton, and Yale have systematically tinkered with their admissions policies in order to uphold the social status hierarchy – all while operating under the veneer of "merit." Elite colleges extending "preferences" to groups such as legacies and athletes persists today (Espenshade, Chung, and Walling 2004; Golden 2006; Hurwitz 2011; Jaschik 2019).

The college admissions scandal in 2019 brought public scrutiny to such preferential admissions pipelines, just a month after closing arguments were presented for *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.*, v. *President and Fellows of Harvard College.* This case alleged that Harvard's admissions practices discriminated against Asian Americans. Similar accusations had been made in the late 1980s, suggesting that such claims are cyclical and/or unresolved. A review of the history of challenges to affirmative action and admissions policies in higher education is well outside the scope of this paper, but the topic of "holistic" and "meritorious" application review remains a complicated issue (Bastedo et al. 2018; Bastedo, Howard, and Flaster 2016; Killgore 2009)

For more in-depth insight into the institutional side of college admissions, Stevens (2009) was granted behind-the-scenes access to the admissions office of a highly competitive liberal arts college. He concluded that in the era of well-publicized institutional rankings and upper middle-class families' desiring "spots" at top universities, elite institutions receive the most benefit by admitting students whose merits closely map to the kind of educational advantages that wealthy

parents can confer on their offspring. In what he describes as a "web of interdependencies" (p. 247), privileged families in their turn rely on elite colleges to provide the credentials that signal membership at the top of the status hierarchy. The formula is successful: wealthy and privileged students fill seats at high-tier institutions[10], particularly private schools, at disproportionate rates (Soares 2007). Looking at the school-to-college pipeline, the opportunities afforded at elite secondary schools translate into matriculation at prestigious universities (Khan 2010; Weis et al. 2014).

Admittedly, I am painting an overly simplistic picture of complex social and organizational processes. In the years after Stevens completed his data collection, the ability to attract low-income students has become a mark of institutional status, leading to widespread interest in the *undermatching phenomenon* (Bastedo and Flaster 2014; Belasco and Trivette 2015; Rodriguez 2015) and affecting schools' financial aid policies (Dynarski and Scott-Clayton 2013; Farrell 2006; Rivard 2014). Yet demand for admission at highly selective institutions continues to far outpace the number of available seats. Thus, even though college choice theory assumes that individual students are ultimately responsible for planning for and applying to colleges, they do so in highly constrained circumstances and with imperfect information (McDonough et al. 1998). Given their own unique set of circumstances, families are then confronted with the dilemma of how to prepare for the most favorable admissions outcomes.

Research has documented that SES plays a significant role in how families engage in planning for college (Hamilton 2016; Perna 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna 2008). Optimally, students develop the predisposition to attend college by middle school, but in fact many middle-class families begin the process much earlier. In her landmark study comparing the parenting practices of middle-class, working-class, and poor families, Lareau (2011:5) found that

[10] Soares uses *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* tier system.

"worried about how their children will get ahead, middle-class parents are increasingly determined to make sure that their children are not excluded from any opportunity that might eventually contribute to their advancement." Lareau observed that middle-class parents, in contrast with their working and poor peers, inculcating habits of mind and behavior consonant with the expectation that their children would reproduce their middle-class status – a phenomenon calls *concerted cultivation* (Lareau 2011:2). In fact, Lareau found that the difference she observed in parenting style when the children in her study were fourth graders resonated into their young adulthood. The middle-class young adults were more likely than their peers to achieve their aspirations and attend college, thereby reaping the dividends of their parents' early efforts.

And middle-class parents are structuring their children's lives with an eye towards college at increasingly younger ages. Friedman's (2013) study of dance, chess, and soccer revealed parents with children no older than age 12 who actively sought activities that they believed would socialize their children to be competitive in future academic and professional arenas. Though Friedman noted that the parents in her study were not directly preparing their kids for college, she also mentioned a couple of parents who conceptualized their children's achievements in terms of how they might (someday) give them an edge in admission to Ivy League universities.[11] Much as elite colleges' overemphasis on the SAT has been likened to a nuclear arms race (Atkinson 2001), parents may be aware that their educational and extracurricular anxieties are absurd when their children are so young, but they are also unwilling to take the risk of their kids losing a competitive advantage relative to their peers (e.g., Roda and Wells 2013).

[11] They might not be wrong. A Silicon Valley parent who met with a college counselor was told that to be admitted to a top college or university, his daughter, who was a junior in fall 2014, needed to be competitive in swimming at the Olympic level (M. Lightstone, pers. comm., unpublished data).

By the time students have reached the search and choice stages of the college choice process, parents are expected to be heavily involved in supporting their children's educational planning. Again, Lareau (2011) found middle-class parents to be involved with their children's schools throughout the K-12 years, so by the time their children were in high school, the parents were well-positioned to take an active role in developing a choice set.[12] Privileged parents take an "active role" to extreme measures, such that the family project to gain admissions to a prestigious postsecondary institution has been likened to class warfare (Weis et al. 2014). High school-aged children of middle-class parents benefit from the parents' willingness to pay for "shadow education" (Buchmann, Condron, and Roscigno 2010; Park and Becks 2015); hire college consultants (Smith and Sun 2016; Sun and Smith 2017); to make strategically timed contributions to alma maters (Butcher, Kearns, and McEwan 2013); and to make possibly the most significant investment of all – providing funding for their children's college tuition (Elliott and Friedline 2013; Friedline et al. 2017; Hamilton 2013, 2016; Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray 2011; McDonough 1997; Tevington, Napolitano, and Furstenberg 2017).

The students in my study will be positioned between the search and choice phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, but they will also be embedded within the multiple contextual layers identified by Perna (2006). For many of the students, products of some of the most competitive and academically oriented public school districts in the state of California, senior year is just the last lap in a race that began well before high school.

[12] There is an extensive literature on the complexities of parental involvement in education that is beyond the scope of this review. See Robinson and Harris (2014) for a thorough investigation of this subject.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Reproduction Theory

Over the past decade, scholars and practitioners in the field of higher education have promoted an agenda of increasing access and equity in postsecondary education. This emphasis has resulted in significant bodies of research that investigate individual, organizational, and policy factors that affect students' enrollment. In studying issues of access and equity in education, the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu have been particularly influential since they were introduced to English speaking audiences in the 1970s. According to Bourdieu's conception of social reproduction theory, the education system functions as a mechanism of maintaining a power structure that favors those from the upper strata of society. This is related to the fact that historically, success in the educational system has been closely tied to those symbols of culture associated or cultivated by the upper classes in terms of taste, self-presentation, and language (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Winkle-Wagner 2010).

The mechanisms through which social reproduction occurs derive from Bourdieu's theory of power, the primary components of which are individual habitus, the field of power, and the forms of capital, including social, cultural, and institutionalized cultural capital, or credentials (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007; Swartz 1997). Bourdieu's conceptualization of power was derived from his critique of Marxism, specifically that purely economic interests form the fabric of social life (Swartz, 1997). By extending the metaphor of monetary capital to non-material resources, Bourdieu devised an elegant hermeneutic to describe the contested nature of social relations.

Power, in Bourdieu's oeuvre, is most commonly linked to his version of field theory and to his analysis of *symbolic power*. I suggest that the term "symbolic power" is somewhat imprecise, and it may be more useful to consider the implications of *power over symbols*. To

Bourdieu (1989:20), individuals occupy social spaces, each with their own rules (*doxa*), as he says,

> the social world presents itself, objectively, as a symbolic system which is organized according to the logic of difference, of differential distance. Social space tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of lifestyles and status groups characterized by different lifestyles.

In this vein, power is the ability to manipulate the logics associated with the rules of the game active in a given field – what Bourdieu calls the ability to legitimate the social world, or more grandiosely, to be a worldmaker. In terms of Bourdieu's overarching social theory, power enables groups[13] to control the values of the various forms of capital.

In this study, I am interested in how the college choice process functions as a window into the power struggles that motivate the middle class, with a specific emphasis on the *upper* middle-class. One's choice of college and subsequent degree attainment is a critical form of institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu 2007) that grants legitimacy in the labor market (see Collins 1979). Unlike the kinds of objectified cultural artifacts that were valued by the dominant class in France (Bourdieu 1984), cultural capital in its institutionalized state is *not* automatically transferrable, as Bourdieu (2007:92) argues,

> the high degree of concealment of the transmission of cultural capital has the disadvantage (in addition to its inherent risks of loss) that the academic qualification which is its institutionalized form is neither transmissible (like a title of nobility) nor negotiable (like stocks and shares). More precisely, cultural capital, whose diffuse, continuous transmission with the family escapes observation and control (so that the educational system seems to award its honors solely to natural qualities) and which is increasingly tending to attain full efficacy, at least on the labor market, only when

[13] Among his vast contributions to social theory, Bourdieu produced a strain of scholarship dealing with the idea of "groups" – i.e., how they are constituted and how they cohere to produce the social order. In the broadest terms, the various social classes (I use the term here in a non-technical sense, merely to convey the idea of a social hierarchy.) are examples of groups. However, given the complexity of transferring Bourdieu's concept of social class to the U.S. context (Lamont 2012), I want to emphasize that the language of *class* and *group* is not strictly interchangeable in a Bourdieusian framework. For my purposes, Bourdieu's key insight vis-à-vis groups is that they are relational, in the sense that differences in social location, power, etc. only take on meaning within a field of power (Bourdieu 1985).An analysis of Bourdieu's idea of groups is outside the scope of this project, and in fact education research has seldom, if ever, directed attention to this matter.

> validated by the educational system, i.e., converted into a capital of qualifications, in subject to a more disguised but more risky transmission than economic capital.

In the United States, where a college degree is seen as prerequisite for entrée into (or maintenance of) middle-class status, I argue that many families are keenly attuned to the risks that Bourdieu alludes to in the passage above. Success in the labor market and concomitant economic capital, heavily depends on performance in the educational system – and there is no foolproof way to guarantee that one's children will be successful in attaining the kinds of academic credentials that confer social opportunity.

Even solidly middle and upper-middle class families may approach college planning with trepidation because competitive college admissions (i.e., postsecondary institutions that are not open enrollment) occur within a contested field comprising a number of subfields (e.g., nationally ranked "top 10 schools"; elite liberal arts colleges; schools catering to geographically bound students) with their own forms of symbolic power. Here, I invoke Bourdieu's concept of the field as "a mesolevel concept denoting the local social world in which actors are embedded and toward which they orient their actions" (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007:24). In his review of field theory, Martin (2003:20) situates Bourdieu's use of the term within what he Martin calls "a conception of 'fields of organized striving.'" Moreover, Martin specifies that fields refer to "self-contained realms of endeavor" (p. 23). Since the forms of capital, or power, only becomes active given a field's *rules of the game* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), it is entirely possible that a family's worldmaking power in one area may not be transmissible to the field of college admissions.

Individuals' understanding (or not) of the rules of the game and facility playing it is entrenched in their *habitus*. Habitus is one of the most contested concepts in Bourdieu's theoretical toolkit (Lizardo 2004; Reay 2004). In her seminal work on college choice,

McDonough (1997:9) defined habitus as "a deeply internalized, permanent system of outlooks, experiences, and beliefs about the social world that an individual gets from his or her immediate environment." I defer to McDonough's authority to the matter insofar as it is relevant to the college literature with the caveat that researchers debate the extent to which habitus is "permanent" (Reay 2004; Swartz 1997). More importantly for this study is the specification that like power, habitus "becomes active only *in the relation* to a field" (Bourdieu 1990:116 emphasis in original). Thus, the conceptual point of interest for this study is the ways that a student's habitus influences how he or she navigates the field of applying to college.

Bourdieu's conception of habitus evolved over time, and he was notoriously inconsistent in the way he deployed it, leading to many contemporary theorists' reminder that DiMaggio (1979:1464) once called habitus "a kind of theoretical deus ex machina." It is also worth noting that Bourdieu turned to the term, "habitus" as an alternative to the even more ambiguous idea of "culture" (Bourdieu 1968). Habitus is regarded as the mediator between structure and action, in the sense that strategic action is derived from it, but there is little consensus as to how habitus transmutes into practice (Lau 2004). For example, Bourdieu was emphatic in his contention that habitus is collective in that "individuals who internalize similar life chances share the same habitus" (Swartz 1997:105). Yet this formulation fails to account for the reasons why students from similar backgrounds may make dramatically different life choices. To elucidate some of the psychosocial processes that govern action and that Bourdieu's theory fails to account for, I turn to self-authorship theory.

Self-Authorship

The self-authorship theoretical framework is a way describing how individuals reflect on and ascribe meaning to experiences. For the students in this study, deciding where to go to

college was one of the most significant experiences thus far in their lives. More than one student mentioned feeling like they had been preparing for college their whole lives. Self-authorship theory has its roots in the work of Robert Kegan (1994), who first developed his model to explore how individuals navigate the demands of daily life. Subsequent researchers, such as Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King, extended his model to the study of student development. A common thread among self-authorship researchers is that development occurs across the lifetime, including the college years. Using the example of the development of cognitive and moral judgment, King (2009:599) argued:

> (a) individuals actively construct and organize their interpretations of experience; (b) there are discernible age-related patterns in the ways individuals organize their thinking; and (c) development occurs in context, in interaction with one's environment, and thus is highly variable from individual to individual.

With roots in constructivism and developmental psychology, self-authorship was proposed by Kegan (1994) in his theory of self-evolution. Drawing on his observations as a psychologist, teacher, and researcher, he posited that human development occurs over the lifespan, as individuals gain the capacity to understand experiences using increasingly complex meaning-making structures. He called each developmental phase an *order of consciousness.* There are five orders of consciousness of which self-authorship is the fourth. Movement through the orders is characterized by shifts in what individuals are able to hold as object versus what they are subject to, i.e., "we *have* object, we *are* subject" (p. 32). Through each progressive order, what was formerly subject becomes object. Development occurs in three dimensions — cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal — though not necessarily linearly or concurrently (Baxter Magolda and King 2012).

Kegan asserted that children and teenagers rarely develop beyond the second order, as they are centered on themselves and satisfying their own wants and needs. They make meaning

of experiences through their own lens in what Kegan calls the "durable categories" of self and other. Durable categories are a form of mental organization characterized by "the ability to construct a mental set, class, or category to order the things of one's experience (physical objects, other people, oneself, desires) as property-containing phenomena" (Kegan 1994:21). Most adults only reach the third order, which is characterized by interdependence. In the third order, individuals can make meaning of experiences by taking into account multiple perspectives or engaging the duality of self and other. In the fourth order, or self-authorship, individuals exhibit the ability to take responsibility for their own lives without being subject to the demands of external influences. This does not mean self-authored individuals ignore others; rather, they can balance multiple demands, including their own. The self-other duality evolves into systems of interconnected and interdependent relationships. Baxter Magolda described this order as having "the ability to reflect upon one's beliefs, organize one's thoughts and feelings in the contexts of, but separate from, the thoughts and feelings of others, and literally make up one's mind" (Baxter Magolda 1999:143). The fifth order of consciousness, *self-transformation*, describes the capacity to relate the interconnectedness among systems to each other, and by extension, to the self.

According to Kegan, human development occurs across three dimensions: "knowledge (how one knows), identity (who one is), and relationships (how one relates to others)" (Baxter Magolda and King 2012:11). Baxter Magolda extended Kegan's original framework to develop a theory of self-authorship using a sample whose "journey to self-authorship" she has been tracking for over 30 years. Baxter Magolda (2001) proposed four sequential phases of development: Following Formulas, the Crossroads, Becoming the Author of One's Own Life,

and Internal Foundation. The phases and how they map on the three dimensions can be found in Table 1 and are described in more detail below.

Table 1 Four Phases in the Journey toward Self-Authorship

	Following Formulas	Crossroads	Becoming the Author of One's Life	Internal Foundation
Epistemological: how do I know?	Believe authority's plans; how "you" know	Question plans; see need for one's own vision	Choose own beliefs; how "I" know in context of external knowledge claims	Grounded in internal belief system
Intrapersonal: who am I?	Define self through external others	Realize dilemma of external definition; see need for internal identity	Choose own values, identity in context of external forces	Grounded in internal coherent sense of self
Interpersonal: what relationships do I want with others?	Act in relationships to acquire approval	Realize dilemma of focusing on external approval; see need to bring self to	Act in relationships to be true to self, mutually negotiating how needs are met	Grounded in Mutuality

Source: (Baxter Magolda 2001:40)

The complex relationship between self and other evolves over individuals' life journeys. Taylor (2008:229) calls this a "dynamic interplay":

> As one looks from the first to the fourth point on the journey, he or she sees the individual move ever more to the foreground and the social environments move ever more to the background. A dynamic interplay between the individual and his or her social environments never ceases to exist, yet as the individual develops an internal voice, he or she gradually gains the developmental capacities necessary to reflect on, critique, and shape his or her social context.

In the first phase, Following Formulas, individuals turn to various external voices, such as trusted adults or cultural messaging, to make meaning across the three dimensions. In the C rossroads, individuals rely on a combination of external and a burgeoning internal voice to guide meaning making. This phase is characterized by dissonance and questioning, as flaws in previously held formulas for understanding become apparent. Becoming self-authored means

actively choosing how to construct a sense of self. Baxter Magolda (2008) further refined the internal foundation phase into three stages: trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitment.

Transitions between phases seems to occur in the context of disequilibrium, in which individuals face dilemmas that illuminate the inadequacies of their current meaning-making structures to meet the situations' demands (e.g., Barber, King, and Baxter Magolda 2013; King, Baxter Magolda, and Masse 2011). Developmentally effective experiences challenge individuals in ways that promote growth across the cognitive, interpersonal, and interpersonal dimensions (King et al. 2009). Moreover, developmental growth occurs in the interplay across dimensions, for example, a change in one's epistemology can affect how one thinks about oneself.

In their Interactionist Model of College Student Learning and Development, a holistic student development theoretical framework, King and Baxter Magolda (King and Baxter Magolda 2019:18–19) proposed that development occurs through the coaction among individuals' personal characteristics; contextual influences; experiences and their effects; and the meaning-making structure:

> As students develop, some of their personal characteristics changed, they were exposed to different kinds of challenges and supports from individuals and across contexts, approached and engaged in new experiences differently, learned different lessons from their experiences (reactive and content effects), and increased their meaning-making capacity to understand contextual forces and make discerning judgments (developmental effects). From this we observed that these elements interacted in reciprocal and cyclical ways over time and in response to contextual influences.

"Students" in this theory refers to college students, but students do not enter college as blank slates; their development has been affected over time by all of the elements King and Baxter Magolda cite. The transition to college can be considered a change in context rather than the starting line of an entirely new process. "Experiences" comprise what students participate in as

well as what they observe. An experience is considered *developmental* if it initiates a change in "how to think, be, and interact with others in more complex and effective ways" (p. 17).

The journey to self-authorship has been explored primarily using qualitative methods, including Baxter Magolda's (2001) ground-breaking longitudinal study, but there have been attempts to measure self-authorship using quantitative scales (Pizzolato 2005; Wawrzynski and Pizzolato 2006) The most comprehensive study assessing self-authorship to date is the Wabash National Study (WNS), a multi-institution, four-year longitudinal study of self-authorship and liberal arts education outcomes. Three hundred fifteen participants[14] completed reflective interviews where they discussed significant experiences, how they affected them, and how they made meaning of them (Baxter Magolda and King 2007; King, Baxter Magolda, and Shim 2011). A research team summarized each interview and assessed the students' meaning-making capacity at each point of contact. Using grounded theory methods, the study yielded a ten-point scale for evaluating self-authorship level ranging from Solely External to Solely Internal Meaning Making (Baxter Magolda and King 2012)[15]. A summary of the positions can be found in Table 2.

[14] Due to study attrition, only 177 of the original 315 students participated in interviews by Year 4.

[15] I generally use Following Formulas and Solely External Meaning Making interchangeably. However, where applicable I reference the sub-phases that fall within Solely External Meaning Making (i.e., Trusting External Authority, Tensions with Trusting External Authority, and Recognizing Shortcomings of Trusting External Authority), which reflect how the theory and its assessment has evolved.

Table 2 Journey toward Self-Authorship

EXTERNAL	CROSSROADS	INTERNAL
Ea: Consistently and unquestioningly rely on external sources *without recognizing* possible shortcomings of this approach.	**Predominantly External**	
	E(I): Continue to rely on external sources despite *awareness of the need* for an internal voice. Realize the dilemma of external meaning making, yet are unsure how to proceed.	
Eb: Consistently rely on external sources, but *experience tensions* in doing so, particularly if external sources conflict.	**E-I:** Begin to *actively work on constructing* a new way of making meaning yet "lean back" to earlier external positions.	
	Predominantly Internal	
	I-E: Begin to *listen carefully* to internal voice, which now edges out external sources. External sources still strong, making it hard to maintain the internal voice consistently.	
Ec: Continue to rely on external sources but *recognize shortcomings* of this approach.	**I(E):** Actively work to *cultivate* the internal voice, which mediates most external sources. Consciously work to not slip back into former tendency to allow others' points of view to subsume own point of view.	
		Ia: *Trust* the internal voice sufficiently to refine beliefs, values, identities and relationships. Use internal voice to shape reactions and manage external sources.
		Ib: Trust internal voice sufficiently to craft commitments into a *philosophy of life* to guide how to react to external sources.
		Ic: Solidify philosophy of life as the *core of one's being;* living it becomes second nature.

Source: (Baxter Magolda et al. 2012:422)

Baxter Magolda and King noted that the journey to self-authorship is not linear and may progress in fits and starts, steps forward and steps backward (King and Baxter Magolda 2019; Pizzolato 2003). Development may also occur at different rates across the three dimensions (cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal).

Most empirical work studying self-authorship has been conducted with adults, often within a college setting (e.g., Barber and King 2014; Baxter Magolda and King 2012; Creamer and Laughlin 2005; Torres and Hernandez 2007; Wawrzynski and Pizzolato 2006). Almost nothing is known about what a self-authorship journey might look like in individuals younger than college-age. However, Year One of the WNS study found that 86 percent of the sample

(N=197) were externally defined, which is akin to a Following Formulas meaning-making framework (Baxter Magolda et al. 2012). From this finding, we can extrapolate that it is unlikely that many students achieve any kind of internal definition prior to college. Thus, most high school students rely firmly on following formulas.

However, students from marginalized backgrounds have exhibited evidence of self-authorship prior to college, leading researchers to hypothesize that students who are marginalized by virtue of racial identity (Torres and Hernandez 2007), sexual identity (Abes and Jones 2004), and multiple dimensions of minority status (Pizzolato 2004; Pizzolato et al. 2012) may develop elements of self-authorship prior to college.

A study of academically "high risk" students — defined as high risk of failing or withdrawing from college — found pre-college evidence of self-authorship that regressed upon entry to college (Pizzolato 2003). This same study found that privileged students — identified by the ready ability to apply to and pay for college — did not exhibit self-authorship development at the same rate as their less-privileged peers. The researcher concluded:

> Self-authorship is a process that can be temporarily shut down by privilege. Thus development of self-authorship requires provocative experiences,[16] and also student willingness to cognitively engage in the self-authoring process, along with appropriate scaffolding, as opposed to merely providing high levels of privilege. (p. 808)

She further argued that the kinds of support the privileged students in her study experienced "crossed the line into protection" such as "having to figure out how to apply to or pay for college, and from considering the implications of their going to college on their sense of self" (Pizzolato 2003:808). What could be considered excessive coddling from the adults around them created an environment lacking sufficient challenges that could have promoted identity development. They thus lost out on potential growth opportunities.

[16] A *provocative experience* "challenged students' current ways of knowing and conceptions of self" (Pizzolato 2003:3).

Less developed levels of self-authorship have been found to be associated with maladaptive coping strategies in stressful situations (Wakefield 2013). However, coping is both a function of age (Aldwin 2011) and perception (Lazarus 1966). According to the seminal transactional theory of stress and coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), coping comprises both thought and action: individuals appraise a situation, determine whether it is stressful, and enact a coping action accordingly (Biggs, Brough, and Drummond 2017). Similarly, Pizzolato (2004) suggested there may be two elements to self-authorship — action and reasoning — whereby there is a bifurcation between an individual's ability to make meaning of a situation versus the ability to act according to self-authored ways of knowing. Thus, the ability to articulate a self-authored vision does not necessarily translate into the ability or will to enact it.

The students in the current study all had high levels of what Pizzolato (2003) called c*ollege admissions privilege* and were thus vulnerable to the type of over-attentive support that may delay the evolution of more complex meaning-making structures. Developmentally, they tended to rely on external formulas such as grades and peer-regard to establish a sense of self. Based on this body of research, their age and external meaning-making structures suggest that privileged teenagers applying to college likely lack the internal resources to cope with the stressors associated with elite college admissions. This could lead to the kinds of maladaptive coping strategies such as disengagement or giving up altogether that Wakefield (2013) observed in her research. In short, the misalignment among stress, unhealthy coping mechanisms, and external self-authorship orientations may have a negative effect on privileged high school students applying to elite postsecondary institutions.

Together, self-authorship theory and Bourdieu's work on social reproduction inform the research design of the current study that examines how upper-class students navigate the college

choice process. This is one of the few studies that specifically addresses the decision-making process of high SES students since McDonough's (1997) landmark book, *Choosing Colleges*, which is now over twenty years old, and Weis, Cippollone, and Jenkins's (2014), more recent *Class Warfare*. Neither of these two studies brings a psychosocial lens to the study of college choice. By examining students' college choice within the context of their families, schools, and communities, this study will make a meaningful contribution to the spare research base that focuses on privileged high school students.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The guiding research question for this study was: *How do upper-class families in Silicon Valley navigate the college choice process?* I argue that there is heterogeneity in the ways upper-class high school students navigate the college choice process. Students in this demographic have always known they would go to college; however, their experience of choosing a final destination depends on how they make meaning of multifold expectations about what it means to be successful. Understanding the overlapping contexts wherein these students are situated is critical for understanding the toll in time and energy that choosing a college has on these students. In this chapter, I outline the study's methodology and potential limitations.

BACKGROUND

When I started telling people that I was thinking of completing my doctoral research on higher education in Silicon Valley, I began hearing stories. Everyone seemed to know someone who had a connection to a high school-aged student in one of the many communities that comprise the Silicon Valley region. I heard about high-achieving students on the brink of collapse as they prepared to apply to the top postsecondary institutions in the United States. I heard about the children of Asian immigrants who were raising the standard for academic achievement in their high schools — a stereotype that has been partially documented in the literature (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013).

In popular culture, Silicon Valley is often written about in the most extreme terms ("When Silicon Valley Took Over Journalism," *The Atlantic*, September 2017; "A Retreat From the World They're Disrupting," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2017; "Silicon Valley Can't Destroy Democracy Without Our Help," *The New York Times,* November 3, 2017), in effect, creating a mythology about it that helps shape the way residents make sense of their community and roles in it. Living in Silicon Valley, a hair's breadth away from some of the most powerful companies in the world, makes greatness seem ordinary, and ordinary success seem trivial.

Given my academic interest in the educational experiences of Asian American students, I designed this study to compare the college choice experiences of Asian and non-Asian families. I intended to hold class constant and compare the experiences of white and Asian families. I chose the family as the unit of analysis based on a series of pilot interviews I conducted in Ann Arbor. These interviews, along with relevant literature (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Lareau and Weininger 2008; Perna 2006; Weis et al. 2014), suggested that college choice is a shared decision among parents and students in families with significant cultural and social capital.

Based on media accounts, anecdotal evidence, and my own highly biased vision of the region, I envisioned the student population in Silicon Valley as overrun with "tiger mothers,"[17] helicopter parents, and burnt-out geniuses. I designed my study to investigate this population as an example of an extreme case study. However, to my consternation, I couldn't find any of these people once I began recruiting participants for my research. Apparently they exist – I collected many anecdotes that fit the stereotypical mold – but I failed to encounter my image of a high

[17] "Tiger mother" is a reference to Amy Chua's (2011) eponymous *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which became infamous for its unapologetic, no-holds-barred parenting style that she associates with families of Chinese origin. Chua's parenting strategies include "ironclad bans on such Western indulgences as sleepovers, play dates, and any extracurricular activities except practicing musical instruments…which *must* be the violin or piano (emphasis in original)" (Corrigan 2011).

school student in Silicon Valley. This caused me to question the environmental assumptions that were the backbone of my study as well as the validity of the study's central research question. I relied heavily on my personal networks and subsequent snowball sampling methods to recruit participants. My initial contacts were white parents of high school-aged children. After several weeks of recruitment, it became clear that I was not tapping into networks comprising families of Asian descent.

Silicon Valley locals, primarily people I knew through my personal network who were interested in my research, as well as participants in off-record chats, speculated that Asian families might not want to participate in the research for several reasons. One was that families were simply too busy to make time for the research. This seemed like a logical source of resistance, although it did not account for why non-Asian families would have more time at their disposal. There was speculation that this discrepancy may have been related to the tiger mother image that Amy Chua's (2011) book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, has popularized. The tiger mother hypothesis was two-fold: a) tiger parents were unwilling to distract their children from their academics even though the interviews were only supposed to take two hours out of the school year; and/or b) tiger parents were ashamed of their parenting practices and did not to make themselves vulnerable to an outsider's critique. I think that there is merit to both arguments if one assumes that some form of tiger parenting lay at the heart of the problem. After receiving an initial recruitment email, I was contacted by a Chinese girl who was interested in the study. After telling her more about what was involved, she subsequently told me that her parents were not interested in doing the study. I can draw no specific conclusions from this one example, but this is the one case where a student who initially expressed interest in the study had to bow out because of parental wishes.

In addition to race, nuances in social class position also faded into the background, as it became clear that there was little variation in the study participants' socioeconomic backgrounds. Social class is a contentious issue in the United States, and there is disagreement among social scientists regarding how to conceptualize class (Bourdieu 1987; Lareau 2011; Mills 2014; Reay 1998; Savage et al. 2013). Household income, in and of itself, is not necessarily indicative of a family's sense of economic well-being (e.g., Conley 2009). Quantitative studies of college choice commonly include multiple variables for socioeconomic status, but there is not consensus on what factors should be included to reflect a robust measurement (Perna 2006). In modern parlance the "1 percent" has become a symbol of wealth. Sommeiller and Price (2018) found that the family income for the top 1 percent in the San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara metropolitan area — the region where most of my participants lived — was $1,149,224 — the fourth highest metropolitan area in the country. Nationally, in 2017, the annual wages for the top 1 percent was $718,766 while the earnings for the top 5 percent were $253,109 (Economic Policy Institute 2019). The difference between these two numbers gives a sense of how wealth and class function on a relative level; that is, although the top 5 percent of earners could statistically be considered the upper class, someone in the 97th percentile may feel middle class compared to someone in the 99th percentile. Furthermore, context affects whether one feels wealthy or upper class relative to one's neighbors (e.g., Dewan and Gebeloff 2012).

When my sampling method did not yield an adequate number of participants to compare the college choice process of Asian and non-Asian students, I had to pivot and reconceptualize my research question. Ultimately, this study became an exercise in leveraging the flexibility that most qualitative methodologies enable: the ability to allow the research to evolve by adapting to unexpected events and findings once in the field.

METHODS

In order to understand the way upper-class families navigate the college choice process, I proposed to use a multiple case study design (Merriam 1998) focusing on a community as the analytical context and families as the units of analysis. Silicon Valley, the setting for this study, is an exemplar of a wealthy, suburban enclave that has thrived through a combination of economic successes, a dense concentration of well-educated workers, and a compelling public relations narrative (Davidson 2011; Saxenian 1996). It is perhaps best known for its hypercompetitive and meritocratic reputation, where the hard-working are rewarded with success (Marwick 2013). The combination of these factors has resulted in an unusually achievement-oriented academic environment, often to the detriment of students' mental health (Children's Health Council n.d.; Nguyen, Bott, and Villarreal 2019).

The primary data included a series of phenomenological interviews (Seidman 2013) with a sample of 19 high school seniors and their parents conducted over the course of the 2014-2015 academic year. Phenomenological interviewing is particularly suited for understanding the process of college choice because it "focuses on the experiences of participants and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman 2013:16). I planned to conduct three interviews with each family, at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year. However, due to difficulty recruiting family participants, I did not finish completing my first round of interviews until December 2014. Thus, after consulting with my dissertation chairs[18], I decided to adapt the study such that the content of the second and third interviews could be collapsed into one interview at the end of the school year, after the final college choice had been made.

Interview participants comprised student-parent dyads, where the student was a college-bound senior. For families to be eligible for the study, both the student and at least one parent

[18] At the time of my data collection, I had two dissertation co-chairs.

must have consented to be interviewed. Students who were not yet 18 years old received consent to participate from a parent/guardian and had to personally assent to be in the study. Students received a $30 cash incentive to participate in each interview. I did not offer parents a cash incentive, but I gave them a $10 Starbucks gift card during our second interviews.

The issue of student incentives became an inadvertent yet interesting introduction to youth culture in the population I hoped to study. As part of my research recruitment materials, I created an electronic notice that could be posted in online forums or forwarded via email. One of the outlets I used was the Silicon Valley Brown Alumni email list (a Yahoo group of over 1200 Brown alumni in Silicon Valley), which I joined upon relocating to the area. In a bid to help a fellow alum out, one member of the list mentioned that although he and his son fit the eligibility criteria for the study, it would not be worth his son's time since I was only offering $20/one-hour interview. He cited his son's time constraints and the pressure of senior year as deterrents. I had initially decided that $20 per interview was reasonable after consulting with the high school seniors in Ann Arbor who participated in my pilot interviews. Minimum wage in California at the time was $9/hour, so $20 did not seem unreasonable for a student's time. However, since I was running into difficulties in finding families to enroll in my study, I decided to take the alum's advice and raised the incentive to $30/interview.

A Palo Alto resident suggested that I offer students community service credit to participate in the study. This would not have been feasible, given Palo Alto Unified School District's guidelines for service, not to mention the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board. However, I thought it was notable that residents in my study region thought that students valued their time more than money. Having conducted interview studies with a number of college students for other research projects, I have observed that $20 for an hour's worth of

time is a significant incentive for many young people. These Silicon Valley teenagers were representative of a privileged population with which I had little previous experience.

Sample

I used variations of *purposive sampling* to select participants for the study. Purposive sampling refers to:

> the deliberate seeking out of participants with particular characteristics, according to the needs of the developing analysis and emerging theory. Because, at the beginning of the study, the researcher does not know enough about a particular phenomenon, the nature of the sample is not always predetermined. (Morse 2004:885)

Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability case selection and may refer to a variety of sampling strategies including snowball sampling and theoretical sampling (Morse 2004; Palys 2008). According to Maxwell (Maxwell 2011:94):

> the guiding principle in selecting settings and participants for a qualitative study is usually not to ensure representativeness or comparability, but, first, to identify groups, settings, or individuals that best exhibit the characteristics or phenomena of interest, and second, to select those that are most accessible and conducive to gaining the understandings you seek.

I sent recruitment materials to parent-teacher organizations at the public high schools in the Palo Alto and Sequoia School Districts; neighborhood housing associations, and personal contacts. All of these strategies have been found to be successful in recruiting interview participants among similar populations (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013; Lacy 2007). I also posted flyers in local Starbucks and libraries (See Appendix B). I used snowball sampling to extend my pool after I began meeting with families. Details about the final sample can be found in Table 3.

Table 3 Overview of Student Participants

Student[a]	Parent(s)	Gender	High School	GPA[b]	Destination
Sarah Ambrose	Melissa Ambrose	F	Menlo-Atherton	3.7	University of Washington
Madison Flowers	Karen Flowers	F	Menlo-Atherton	4.108	University of California-Davis
Emily Garcia	Lisa Baratheon	F	Gunn	3.4	San Diego State University
Taylor Goldstein	Mika Bloom	F	Public	4.182	University of Miami
Nicholas Hill	Amy Hill	M	Paly	3.0	American University
Ashley Kaplan	Mary Kaplan	F	Private	3.72	Washington University in St. Louis
Hannah Kim	Michelle Kim	F	Gunn	3.929	University of Texas-Austin
Alexis Katz	Michael & Julie Katz	F	Public	4.12	University of Michigan
Samantha Lewin	Jennifer Lewin	F	Public	3.861	University of Wisconsin-Madison
Vihaan Patel	Anika Patel	M	Menlo-Atherton	4.079	American University
Matthew Pyke	James & Angela Pyke	M	Private	3.8	Brandeis University
Elizabeth Rivers	Susan Rivers	F	Menlo-Atherton	4.333	The Ohio State University
Sofia Rossi	Mariabella Lentini	F	Menlo-Atherton	4.3	University of California-San Diego
Jacob Sand	David & Patricia Sand	M	Private	3.7	Lewis & Clark College
Michael Smith	Kimberly Smith	M	Public	3.65	University of Washington
Jessica Snow	Tammy Snow	F	Menlo-Atherton	3.624	Southern Methodist University
Christopher Stone	Pamela Stone	M	Menlo-Atherton	3.245	Denison University
Joshua Storm	Laura Storm	M	Gunn	3.8	Gap year/University of Southern California
Alyssa Waters	Christine Waters	F	Public	4.18	Georgetown University

Note. For High Schools: Gunn = Henry M. Gunn High School (Palo Alto Unified School District); Paly = Palo Alto High School (Palo Alto Unified School District); Menlo-Atherton = Menlo-Atherton High School (Sequoia Union High School District); Private = Other private high school in region; Public = Other public high school in region

[a] All names are pseudonyms

[b] Self-reported

All students had at least one parent who attained at least a bachelor's degree, so no students were technically first-generation college students. However, Sofia Rossi's and Michael Smith's parents were first-generation immigrants to the United States and completed their postsecondary

education in other countries. The parents in both families felt disadvantaged relative to their peers in terms of having no experience with the American higher education system. The Patel parents were also first-generation American immigrants, but they both attended college in the United States. Data about the parents' backgrounds is presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Parental Educational Attainment and Occupational Status

Student	Father's Educational Background	Mother's Educational Background	Father's occupation	Mother's Occupation	Estimated home value [a]
Sarah Ambrose	Bachelor's from Michigan State	No postsecondary education	Business owner	Executive recruiter for non-profits	$8,062,335
Madison Flowers	Bachelor's from UCSD	Bachelor's from UCSD; MFT	President of sales	Educator	$4,076,945
Emily Garcia	Bachelor's from the University of Wisconsin; MBA[b]	Bachelor's from UCSD	CEO	Business consultant	$3,558,723
Taylor Goldstein	Bachelor's and Master's in electrical engineering from Rice	Bachelor's from University of Michigan; Master's from Syracuse	__ [c]	Realtor	$2,609,201
Nicholas Hill	Bachelor's and Master's from Cornell	Bachelor's from University of Michigan; Currently enrolled at Santa Clara University	Computer engineer	Student	$3,215,163
Ashley Kaplan	Bachelor's from UCSB	Bachelor's from CSU-Northridge	CFO	Unemployed	$3,506,390
Hannah Kim	Bachelor's from University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign; MBA from Dartmouth	Bachelor's from University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign	Financial analyst	Stay at home parent/Volunteer/Artist	$2,697,922
Alexis Katz	Bachelor's from UC-Berkeley; JD from American	Bachelor's from CSU-Chico	Lawyer	Photo editor	$1,329,466

Samantha Lewin	Undergraduate and JD from Vanderbilt; LLM from New York University	BFA from Ithaca College	Attorney	Stay at home parent	$3,105,261
Vihaan Patel	Bachelor's in India; Master's from North Carolina A&T; Master's & MBA from Santa Clara University	Bachelor's from Santa Clara University	Business executive (marketing)	Real estate	$2,151,319
Matthew Pyke	Bachelor's from MIT	Bachelor's from Simmons	Chief architect	Stay at home parent	$8,244,259
Elizabeth Rivers	Bachelor's from Marshall University; MBA from Aquinas College	Bachelor's from Ohio State; JD from University of Akron	President of Fortune 500 company	Stay at home parent	$6,936,156
Sofia Rossi	Undergraduate and PhD in Italy	Undergraduate and PhD in Italy	Engineering director	Development at Stanford	$2,641,993
Jacob Sand	Air Force; Bachelor's from CUNY; MBA from Golden State University	Bachelor's from San Jose State University; Master's from Boston College	Vice president of tech company	Accountant	$2,090,484
Michael Smith	Undergraduate at Cambridge University; MBA from Stanford	Undergraduate at Cambridge University; Master's from San Francisco University	Business development	Marketing at Wells Fargo	$2,881,775
Jessica Snow	Bachelor's from Bradley	Bachelor's from Arizona State University	Portfolio manager	Stay at home parent	$4,274,739

Christopher Stone	Bachelor's from UC-Berkeley; MD from New York Medical College	Bachelor's from Berkeley; Master's from Columbia	Chief medical officer	Stay at home parent	$4,282,245
Joshua Storm	Bachelor's from Yale; MD from Stanford	Bachelor's from UC-Berkeley; MD from Stanford	Trauma surgeon	Internal medicine physician	$5,224,514
Alyssa Waters	Bachelor's from University of Minnesota; Master's from Stanford	Bachelor's from Harvard; Master's from Stanford	Clinical Trial Manager	Venture capitalist	$6,022,194

[a] Based on Zillow's estimated market value as of May 2019
[b] Stepparent
[c] I missed Mr. Goldstein's occupation.

All of the students lived in two-parent households in single-family homes. Since Blau and Duncan (1967) introduced their status attainment model, education, occupation, and income have been used in social science as signifiers of class status (Miller and Salkind 2011). All of the employed parents worked in white-collar occupations, many at the executive level. Almost all of them (N=37) had at least a bachelor's degree, and over half (N =23) had some kind of post-graduate education. The number of single-earner households (N=8) is notable because the cost of living in the area is so steep that the ability to live off one income, particularly as a homeowner and with college-aged children, is an indicator of significant wealth (Hess 2017). In addition to occupation and education level, I included the families' estimated home value, as property value has been recently proposed as a proxy for socioeconomic status in educational research (Ware 2017).

Interview structure

I conducted the semi-structured interviews at individual family's residences at the participants' convenience (See Appendix C). Due to scheduling, sometimes I interviewed the student and parent on the same visit, and other times, I conducted the parent and student interviews on different occasions. There was also variation in whether I interviewed the parent prior to the student or vice versa. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. I completed the first round of interviews December 2014 and the second round in May 2015.

I intended for the student and parent interviews to be conducted separately, because the results of my pilot interviews suggested that there might be tensions in the parent-child relationship that the college choice process exacerbated. Therefore, I thought both parties would be more comfortable talking to me in confidence. However, I was not able to achieve complete

privacy in all instances depending on the parents' level of comfort in my talking with their children. For example, Michelle Kim hovered in the background making dinner during both interviews with her daughter, Hannah.

Although the danger of their parents overhearing their interviews may have affected the students' responses, all 19 of the students in the study seemed to have little to hide from their parents, at least according to the student's own accounts. Indeed, I was impressed with the close relationships I observed between parent and student. When students did not know the answer to one of my questions, such as the timeline of the college search, they had no problem seamlessly integrating their parents' input into the answers. In fact, though I honestly expected some amount of griping on the students' parts as they approached one of their first milestones in young-adulthood, not one student raised complaints about the parent I interviewed. (There were a couple of cases where I interviewed the mothers, and the students offered critiques of their fathers.) Instead, students expressed widespread appreciation for their parents' support throughout the difficult process. I was frankly surprised at the harmony I observed between the student and parent dyads, as they did not mesh with my own memories of that stressful period in my life. I speculate that I was witnessing the close parent-child relationships that have been documented among Millennials (Pizzolato and Hicklen 2011). Alternatively, despite the confidentiality of the interviews, students may have felt uncomfortable disclosing instances of conflict, knowing that I would also be speaking with their parents.

Though the research design stipulated that families agree to one parent and the student being interviewed, there was some flexibility in how families interpreted participation. With the Katz, Sand, and Pyke families, both parents were present for all or part of the interviews. With the Snow family, the student's elder sister, Rachel, happened to be home from college during

both occasions that I was at the family's house. Since Rachel was interested in the research, she sat in on her mother's interviews and offered her own perspectives on the issues raised. In all of these cases I thought that the presence of additional respondents enriched the data, so I did not object to their unanticipated participation.

I conducted background interviews with a number of community members and alumni of the high schools that I recruited participants from. I also attended meetings and kept abreast of local media coverage on educational issues, especially pertaining to the 2014-2015 teen suicide cluster in Palo Alto.[19] These interviews, ethnographic observations, and media reviews were not included in the formal analysis. However, the insights gleaned from these secondary data sources undoubtedly enriched the way I approached the analysis of the family interviews.

Data Analysis

All interviews were professionally transcribed. Quoted material has been cleaned for reading clarity. Using Nvivo, I first analyzed all the interviews through a process of open coding each transcript (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Because my research question was still evolving when I began analysis, I used the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to discern categories that cut across the corpus (Kelle 2007). This approach was particularly suited to examining the college choice process, as constant comparison "facilitates the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change pertaining to organizations, positions, and social interaction" (Glaser and Strauss 1967:114). For example, different contexts for expectations emerged early on in the analysis, and the constant comparison allowed me to explore across the families how expectations function as a social process. I used inductive reasoning and focused coding to organize the results of my open coding into themes, which means I extrapolated

[19] Four Palo Alto teenagers committed suicide during the 2014-15 academic years, following six Palo Alto teenagers committing suicide during the 2009-10 academic years (CBS News 2016).

concepts from the individual cases' data (Charmaz 2006). I debriefed with colleagues throughout the analysis and writing processes to confirm that my conclusions were true to the data. One colleague in particular had recently completed a study similar in structure to mine but with a completely different population, and we discussed the theoretical implications of the similarities and differences in our findings.

Self-authorship Assessment

After I coded and analyzed all of the interviews, I reexamined each case in-depth to test the applicability of my emerging theory. At this point, I realized I lacked an organizing theoretical framework for describing how the individual participants made meaning of the college choice process. To fill this gap, I turned to self-authorship theory. Self-authorship holds particular relevance for this study, as it is largely concerned with how people manage multiple, often competing, expectations (Kegan 1994). Because I integrated self-authorship theory into this study a posteriori, it informed the data analysis, not the data collection. Thus, this study cannot be considered a self-authorship study. The assessment of self-authorship is its own specialization that requires a rigorous interview protocol and a structured analytical framework (see Baxter Magolda and King 2012). However, based on my training and extensive research experience assessing college students' self-authorship through the WNS, I felt confident in assigning most students to one of the three broad phases in the journey to self-authorship (i.e., External, Crossroads, and Internal), though I did not collect enough data to use Baxter Magolda and King's ten-step meaning-making continuum. Nor did I have the data to assess students' meaning making across the three (Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, and Cognitive) dimensions. Once I completed my assessments, I integrated self-authorship with the themes that emerged during focused coding to arrive at a new theoretical framework.

Reporting of Findings

When data analysis was complete, I sorted the sample by the navigation orientation each student displayed. In Chapter Five, I present an overview of the orientations and evidence for how I categorized the students. Chapters Six through Nine are devoted to an in-depth examination of four cases that illustrate the three navigation orientations. I chose the focus cases based on the richness of their data and the clarity with which they represented each orientation.

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations to the study's design, the most relevant I would argue to be the selection bias among the research participants. My difficulty in recruiting families suggests that the families who *were* willing to participate may have been atypical of the region's population. Indeed, the number of similarities among the experiences of the families I studied that differed from what I expected to find is indicative of several possibilities: a) my media-informed vision of parenting and education in the Valley was off-base; b) the families in the study were not representative of the region; or c) reality conforms neither to what observers think about residents of the Valley, nor what residents think (and are willing to share) about themselves. Because I was not able to assemble an adequate number of participants to draw group comparisons, I have limited basis on which to draw conclusions of the representativeness of the sample.

As the focus of the research evolved as a result of unanticipated events, namely a rash of student suicides in the Palo Alto area from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015, the desirability of comparison groups faded in importance. Rather than observing differences in the college choice process that varied by family background, I found that geographic and demographic factors seemed to be more salient.

I also speculate that there might have been a significant amount of self-censoring among the participants, even if they tried to be as honest with me as possible. More than one student mentioned that maintaining a positive and carefree persona is a social expectation that they face in their day-to-day lives. Although I tried to make the interviews a safe space where participants could feel comfortable revealing their true thoughts, the habit of placing a positive public gloss in their self-expression may have tempered their responses. However, the students' desire to look good both to their families (in the cases where parents hovered in the background) and to me may have affected the rectitude or comprehensiveness of their responses.

Another limitation of this study of college choice was my decision to examine only what the process looks like from the families' perspectives. To this end, although I consulted some local college counselors and school personnel to gain their professional insights into the families they worked with, I did not interview anyone from postsecondary institutions themselves. This design choice was the result of my interest in seeing the choices that families made based on what they *believed* to be true about college admissions. As I learned, these beliefs were primarily grounded on what they read in the media or online, or passed along through word-of-mouth. Therefore, I chose to focus more on the local narratives about applying to college, rather than any evidence that might have been confirmed (or not) by those actually reading the applications. Furthermore, as the researcher, I wanted to place myself in the role of the families themselves, who choose their postsecondary destinations with imperfect information and a touch of blind faith in the process.

POSITIONALITY AND RESEARCHER SUBJECTIVITY

Most of my previous research has emphasized social justice and structural inequality. By turning my research lens to one of the wealthiest enclaves in California, I had shift my interest to

families who were most likely privileged compared to the kinds of students I had previously encountered. This was far outside my comfort zone. I chose this research subject because I wanted to explore mechanisms by which inequality is perpetuated, rather than challenged – though I was open to the possibility that my assumptions about the residents of Silicon Valley might be false. In fact, without exception, the participants in my study were lovely people, humble in outlook even if they regularly encountered the rich and powerful. My goal as a researcher has been to represent them with as much truth as possible within such a subjective arena. I conducted a number of interviews with alumni from the high schools I focused on to serve as member checks in my analysis (Jones, Torres, and Arminio 2006). Though validity is a laudable yet elusive goal in qualitative research (Jones et al. 2006; Maxwell 2011), I believe I offer a credible analysis of the events I observed and insights I gleaned during the period of my data collection.

Throughout my interview process and subsequent data analysis, I became sensitized to distinguishing between facts and rumors about college admissions. I was steeped in the same media environment as my participants and also subjected to the popular hyperbole attached to competitive college admissions. I constantly had to check my analysis to discern the entanglements among facts, common knowledge, and beliefs about applying to college that I seemed to encounter in every interaction. For example, in discussing how she would work with her second son as he went through the college choice process, Anika Patel said:

> From what I hear they're [admissions officers] taking so many more kids early decision. Because it makes sense. Then they're done, they fill in their numbers. Otherwise they would still have to, you know, now it's their turn to stress. Will they take everyone or not. Are we going to fill our numbers? So I think that's the way a lot of schools are going. So they're trying we're trying to tell [second son] work your hardest by junior year and do that, get that early decision done. (2nd interview)

To echo Anika, her understanding of benefits of early action "made sense" to me as well, since it conforms to the kind of advice you hear from college counseling professionals. I have "heard" these same rumors that offer families some kind of logic they can hang on to vis-à-vis the seemingly opaque process. Thus, I didn't always interrogate these kinds of assumptions in the interview settings to the extent that I probably should have, because I did not immediately recognize them *as* assumptions.

My identity as a graduate student from the University of Michigan also made me question the accuracy of the kinds of schools I consider "elite." I did not consider Michigan to be a highly ranked destination for out-of-state undergraduates, and I learned, to my chagrin, that it is actually one of a number of "public Ivies" that were not as prominent when I was a Massachusetts resident applying to college. When I was recruiting participants, "Michigan" was a calling card that made people at least take notice of the study. My East Coast bias was also made evident when I did not quite understand the extent to which Stanford University loomed as the pinnacle of achievement among area residents. Luckily, the pro-Stanford discourse is so pronounced in the Valley that I quickly caught on to the overwhelming local narrative about the institution.

Finally, I have to acknowledge my "outsider" status in the communities I studied. I moved to the Bay Area for personal reasons as well as the express purpose of conducting this study. Returning to how I opened the section, I held both positive and negative preconceptions about the region and its people. I explore some of these images of Silicon Valley in the next chapter. This project was a process of growth for me, both as a researcher and a resident in a culture that in many ways felt foreign given my middle-class, East coast background. I remain appreciative of all the families and community members who were patient with me as I found my footing in this new environment.

CHAPTER 4

Silicon Valley

Silicon Valley is a mindset, not a location. - Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn

Context plays a key role in determining students' college choice narratives and how they make meaning of these narratives. I chose Silicon Valley as the location of this study because of the unique space it occupies in the American imagination. It is the site of the modern gold rush, where fortunes are made in the form of successful technology companies; it also upholds the myth of meritocracy – that these fortunes are the result of hard work and/or genius. Children growing up in this environment adopt the belief that hard work is necessary if they want to sustain their standard of living. In this chapter, I describe the setting for this research – Silicon Valley and the communities it comprises. I focus particularly on Palo Alto, as the city receives the lion's share of attention as a symbol of the Silicon Valley ethos. I conclude with a discussion of how students experience college-going culture while growing up in the Valley.

Silicon Valley refers to the region of California that roughly covers San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. It is notable for the significant number of technology firms that have based their headquarters there. The successes of many of these companies – including for example, Apple, Google, and Facebook – have led to its reputation as the preeminent center of technological innovation in the United States today (Saxenian 1996). I found that Silicon Valley comprised both the physical space occupying a geographical region, as well a cultural mythology of meritocracy and inclusion.

Silicon Valley is an exceptional area according to a number of common metrics. According to the *2018 Silicon Valley Index*, as of 2018, the median household income for Silicon Valley was $110,000, compared to $67,169 (2017) in California and $61,372 (2017) nationally (Fontenot, Semega, and Kollar 2018; Massaro 2018). Also, 51 percent of the adult population has attained at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 32 percent in California and 21.9 percent nationally (Massaro 2018; U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Silicon Valley is also notable for the large proportion of highly educated immigrants who are, by some accounts, transforming the culture of the valley (English-Lueck 2011; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013). The percentage increase in population growth driven by foreign immigration far outpaces that of the rest of the country (Massaro 2018). Silicon Valley's atypical social indicators are easily identifiable, but the character of the region sheds more light on why it is an unusual community in the United States. For residents, living in Silicon Valley tells its own story of affluence and the cost of success.

LIVING IN SILICON VALLEY

When talking to locals about my study, I referred to my interest in learning about the educational culture of "Silicon Valley." No one ever asked me for clarification about the term, Silicon Valley, as though it is more of an idea about place and space than a strictly defined geographically defined entity. While Silicon Valley refers to a geographic region, it also evokes a lifestyle and sense of identity that is familiar to those who live there – what Hoffman called in the opening quote, a "mindset." Families used words like "successful," "competitive," and "high-pressure" to describe their cultural milieu. David Sand described the prevailing attitude as one that is "very focused on what you can do. What you can succeed at." Even when participants claimed they were the exception to the rule in regard to the relentless push to do more, to *be* more, they acknowledged that this was the reality of their world.

Time after time, I heard that the "culture" of Silicon Valley lies at the root of all of its successes and, conversely, its pathologies. *Culture*, among the highly educated families I interviewed, is a broad term used to describe the ethos of the environment. Respondents varied in their willingness to blame Silicon Valley's culture for the rash of local suicides during the 2014-2015 academic year, even if they admitted that certain aspects of it were problematic.

I live in Silicon Valley and I can testify that there is a real sense that you are part of a grand project committed to discovering the Next Big Thing that will change the way humans live. There is a sense of exceptionalism that pervades the Valley, and the best and brightest engineers migrate to Silicon Valley, the center of technological innovation in the world. The range of nationalities represented in the area is impressive, particularly in the tech industry, where 37.8 percent of the population is foreign born (Massaro 2018).[20]

The sheer concentration of educated, white-collar people, coupled with widespread income inequality within Silicon Valley has created social bubbles where the rich and the poor seldom mix. The notion of a social "bubble" usually has a positive connotation, as if the bubble surrounds something precious. Students in this study invoked this image with a hint of embarrassment, acknowledging the privilege attached to a middle-class form of isolation. Hannah Kim, a high school student who grew up in Palo Alto, recognized both factors in her community:

> You're kind of in a bubble. We know it's a bubble, but you still, when you go outside of the bubble you still can be very surprised at the things that you see and the things that you hear and the way people act. And you… we're exposed to a lot of these things, and we're taught about them. But then when you see them first hand it's kind of a whole different experience. Especially because you don't see a lot of things such as, you don't see as much racism or sexism or just people saying rude things in general. We try and… they teach that it's wrong. And then you see it in the rest of the world and you kind of get taken aback by it. And I guess people are very… I mean, it is an affluent area around here. So people… You might not always know someone has money. But the fact that

[20] Among the families in this study, the Patel and Smith parents were born outside of the United States.

> everyone here, you think that everyone does kind of changes the way that you live your social life in a way. It's hard… I would assume it's hard if you didn't have a lot of money to fit in. Because everyone always has the newest iPhone, newest gadget, nice clothes, drives a car. Everyone's very privileged. And even though we know that, we kind of get caught up in it, I guess you could say. And so growing up, all these things that you take for granted almost, because you've had them all your life, you don't realize the full extent of how much it can actually mean to someone else. So you grow up just being kind of, you're grateful for it, but at the same time you're not fully aware of how much it really can mean to someone else who doesn't live in such an affluent place. (1st interview)

Hannah evoked the image of a bubble to describe isolation both in terms of taken for granted affluence and values. She lapsed into the language of "everyone" when referring to who had access to material goods. The result of living in class-segregated pockets is that children grow up with a skewed version of the kinds of occupations and outcomes they can expect in adulthood. It is very easy for them to look around and feel like everyone has an advanced degree – even though in reality, less than a quarter of the adult population in Silicon Valley has completed postgraduate education (Massaro 2018).

Despite the metaphor of transparency, a bubble traps whatever is inside it, and in the Silicon Valley bubble, ideas about the necessity of attaining a highly pedigreed academic record are (re)circulated with regularity. For a region that prides itself on innovation, the public discourse offers few alternatives to postsecondary life beyond attending college at the most prestigious university possible. The counternarrative in the Valley (and the broader tech community) touts the anti-college path and holds up icons like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs as geniuses who could not be constrained by formalized education. Students are caught between these two extremes, and it is counterintuitive that children from privileged families, who have the resources to do whatever they want, grow up feeling so trapped by the limited possibilities the world seems to offer.

Michael Katz was the father of one of the students I interviewed. He grew up in a town just north of Palo Alto, and after college, law school, and marrying his high school sweetheart, he returned to the area to raise his family. Both his and his wife's parents remain in the area. Given his family's strong local roots, he had almost half a century's perspective on how the tech industry had changed the Bay Area. He had seen how the area's wealth has changed people's expectations for education and career success:

> I think part of the American culture has been you could do better than your parents did. If people just, to take an example, came over as half of my ancestors did around the time of the Holocaust in the 40s or late 30s and came over here with nothing but the jackets on their back, didn't have a college education, started some kind of business, made enough money for the next generation to go to college, my father and mother's generation and then the kids after them, the next generation in my case went to law school. At some point your kids can't really do better if you're doing really well.
>
> Alexis is probably going to do better than any of us ever did because I do think she's a very talented kid. Who knows? I think when you've got a house in Silicon Valley that's worth $10 million, how is your kid really going to expect to get a house that's going to be worth $30 million? I just think these kids probably feel a lot of internal pressure to be as successful or more successful than their parents, and then you're in this cesspool of kids that are all probably feeling the same pressures. Some of it's internal, some of it's from their parents, some of it's from society. (2nd interview)

The culture of Silicon Valley is imbued with the narrative of meritocracy and social mobility. People gravitate to it from all over the world to live out the dream of doing better than one's parents. There is a saying that something in the water makes the kids so geared towards achievement. This sentiment is often accompanied by a rueful smile, as if to say *What can you do about it?* As it emerged that there might be something unhealthy in the area itself, this little social commentary became less a joke than matter of soul searching: *What makes the children in this area so bent on achievement*? Sofia Rossi, a student from Menlo-Atherton High School, attributed the pressure to unspoken expectations by virtue of contextual cues:

> If you're in advanced classes you don't see anyone else. It's kind of competitive too, school-wise. Just because growing here, all of our parents have been very educated. We

> have Stanford right there. We've all kind of been told, we all have very high hopes for ourselves and each other. Definitely now. Every two seconds it's like, "So where are you applying?" And I'm like, "I don't want to tell you. Please stop asking me. You're stressing me out." (1st interview)

The contextual cues Sofia alluded to here include school isolation as a result of tracked courses, the preponderance of well-educated parents, and the psychological impact of Stanford. By senior year, this pressure, even though it may be self-imposed, culminates into an intrusive, stressful discourse about college destinations.

The concentration of highly visible companies in the area narrows students' perceptions of the kinds of career opportunities that do not directly relate to technology. As in other one-industry-dominant cities like Washington, DC (government) or Los Angeles (film/television), Silicon Valley children grow up with knowledge of the tech industry woven into their daily interactions. Particularly in wealthy areas like Palo Alto or Menlo Park, it is common to know someone who knows someone who became rich from cashing out stock or selling his – yes, almost always a man – start-up. Vihaan Patel's father switched jobs over the duration of my data collection, and he has a history of moving around to different companies. Vihaan explained to me that this was par for the course among his peers' parents:

> [*after Skype bought a company his father co-founded*] Then he moved on to other work. That's kind of what he does. That's kind of what a lot of people do here. I'd say most dads here do that in the Menlo Park area where they work at a company, do their time, move on to another startup, another company and kind of administration stuff. If you live in Atherton you've sold your company and you made tons of money off of it. Or you're in stocks and you've made a ton of money off of it. (1st interview)

Vihaan was an exceptionally articulate and observant student, and I have no doubt that he believed that the lifestyle he described aligned with what "most dads" do. That said, his assessment of the area revealed a narrow vision of adulthood, whereby people spend their careers

moving from startup to startup until they make their "tons of money." As Vihaan transitioned into adulthood, this narrative would be familiar and, perhaps, one he would naturally aspire to.

Given the preponderance of local tech companies and exposure to parents who are employed by them, interest in Science/Technology/Engineering/Mathematics (STEM) is inevitable. Moreover, there is a tacit belief that STEM careers will lead to broad success and well-being. David and Patricia Sand described their son, Jacob, as "counterculture" due to his interest in studying English in college as well as for his lack of interest in money, prestige, or position. They did not mean counterculture as a reference to hippie-era rebellion, but specifically counter to Silicon Valley culture. They speculated that Jacob's ability to divorce himself from the money-oriented culture around him has made him less stressed than many of his peers.

It is important to note that the region of Silicon Valley, which I have characterized as high-achieving and success-motivated, is not homogenous. There is significant variation in the cultures at the community level that in turn trickles down to the public high school environments. In a number of interviews, I heard Silicon Valley overall described as intense but nothing as culturally extreme as Palo Alto. In the next section, I focus on the City of Palo Alto, the site of four of the teen suicides that occurred in Santa Clara County during the 2014-2015 academic year.

PALO ALTO

Palo Alto is home to two of the most highly regarded high schools in California. *U.S. News & World Report* ranks Henry M. Gunn High School ("Gunn") 33rd and Palo Alto High School ("Paly") 44th in California out of 698 ranked schools. The Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD) is considered one of the best in California, and both Gunn and its crosstown rival, Paly, have strong reputations for sending students to elite colleges and universities, and yet

some parents still opt to enroll their children at considerable expense to private high schools (M. Berger, pers. comm., unpublished data).

Like Santa Clara County at large (Baxter 2010), Palo Alto comprises two primary populations. The first are the long-time residents who bought their homes during the post-World War II housing boom. A number of bungalows characteristic of mid-twentieth century architecture grace the neighborhood landscape when driving through the city. The property values of such homes have skyrocketed over the past few decades, and it is common for residents to joke about their houses being their retirement plans. In August 2016, Amy Hill shared that a home in her neighborhood recently sold for $2 million as a teardown[21].

A second major constituency in Palo Alto is composed of the residents who moved to Silicon Valley following the tech boom and ensuing job opportunities. These families tended to be younger and more educated than the long-term residents. They were also likely to have been born outside of the United States. Jessica Snow, a student from Menlo Park, described the population as "new money," earned through hard work. Among immigrant populations, Palo Alto Unified School District is highly regarded. Lisa Baratheon, Emily Garcia's mother, was on Palo Alto's district PTA council, and she recalled an incident where residency was discussed:

> Most school districts can track their enrollment by watching birthrates at the hospitals, and Palo Alto can't because people move here for kindergarten. Because that's when the kids are starting school. So the people that are moving here, and I've been in meetings where people are like, "I'm that person. I moved in in kindergarten because I wanted my kid to go here." And actually, the guy that sat up and said it in the most recent meeting, he said, "I'm Indian and this is what my culture is. And, yeah. We're going to bring them to the best school district and we're going to pressure" – he didn't use pressure – "but we're going to encourage," whatever the euphemism is, "to be that straight A." (1st interview)

[21] "Teardown" in this context refers to a property that is purchased for demolition, usually to rebuild on the same site.

Lisa's anecdote suggested that moving to Palo Alto for the school district came up in multiple meetings. She also alluded to the perception that ethnicity plays a role in creating an environment where students feel pressured to achieve high grades.

There is a success mythology about Palo Alto that trickles down into its public culture. The presence of Stanford University along with real-life examples of companies started in a garage (e.g., Hewlett-Packard) have linked the community to a technology-focused version of the American Dream. Highly skilled workers are drawn to Palo Alto for its job opportunities and public schools. Among my own acquaintances, I know of couples who bought homes in Palo Alto despite the astronomical prices, believing that the economic costs would be secondary to the social benefits of living in such a high-achieving environment.

The social costs, however, can be profound. Julie Lythcott-Haims, a former dean of freshmen and undergraduate advising at Stanford University and author of *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success* (2015), recounted this experience in her book:

> In the spring of 2013 I attended a board meeting for an organization that provides financial support to Palo Alto's public schools. In casual conversation afterward as the parents were taking one last piece of coffee cake and heading out into their day, a woman who knows of my work pulled me aside. "When did childhood get so *stressful*?" she pleaded with a faraway look. I put my hand on her shoulder as tears slowly filled her eyes. Another mother overheard and came toward us, nodding her head. Then she leaned in, asking me, "Do you *know* how many moms in our community are medicated for anxiety?" (Lythcott-Haims 2015:8)

These were the concerns of mothers at the ends of their ropes, who were invested enough in the school system to participate in raising funds for it, but who acknowledged that something was different about their children's lives compared to their own childhood experiences.

The children of these mothers observed their parents and drew their own conclusions about what it takes to lead a good life. In a community like Palo Alto, where high achievement is

an expectation, students are surrounded by adults who have traversed similar paths that have yielded success. According to Hannah Kim, a student at Gunn, the economic realities of living in Palo Alto color the importance that students place on attending college. In her mind, there was a clear linkage between education, career opportunities, and quality of life:

> The reason most people live here is because they want a good education. Because they want to go to a good college. And a lot of people believe that if you go to Gunn you can get into a good college if you do well at the school. And then since a lot of kids here are like, we live more comfortably, we wouldn't want to give that up. So we're kind of driven by the fact that if you can get into a good college and get a good job then you can continue living like this, or better, after college. That's just the logical thing. That's been ingrained kind of like, if you go to a good school, you can get a good job. And then after you get a good job you can become successful. (1st interview)

There were a number of causal assumptions in Hannah's statement that convey that logic driving the impetus to achievement. As I wrote earlier, Hannah told me growing up in Palo Alto felt like a bubble – Hannah referred to it as "the Palo Alto way of living." Thus, the pathway she outlined – good education, leading to good college, leading to a good job, leading to success – is one of a limited number of narratives describing adulthood that Hannah had been exposed to. It was the one closest at hand, however, as modeled by the adults around her, her parents most prominently, until it has been "ingrained." Note, however, that this is a limited narrative of social mobility, as Hannah attributed the compulsion she and her peers felt to maintain their *current* standard of living. There is an implicit recognition of privilege here, in that she does not feel driven to do *better* than her parents. Yet at the same time there was the awareness that at minimum, the good college-to-good job transition is necessary to reproduce her parents' lifestyle.

Palo Alto students grow up in the literal shadow of Stanford University, and Stanford is many students' introduction to the idea of higher education. When Hannah was in middle school, her casual plan was to go Stanford, because that was what she knew. Stanford's physical

presence has had both direct and indirect effects on the surrounding communities. In the next section, I discuss how Stanford plays an outsized role in setting the benchmark for postsecondary aspiration.

PRESENCE OF STANFORD

Sofia, who admitted to having exceptionally stressful junior and senior years, reflected on what it was like to grow up in the area:

> A friend and I were talking about, like, we would never want to raise kids here. It's a great place to live, but it's just so stressful. I guess really anywhere. Because both of us want to live in large cities. And I was like, it's probably going to be just as stressful there. But we'd like to think that it's not going to be as stressful as when Stanford is two minutes from your door. (2nd interview)

Sofia's mother, Mariabella, worked in development at Stanford, so the institution was a fixture in the family's life. Neither Sofia nor her mother could remember exactly when they first started talking about college, as it was woven into the very fabric of their lives. As Mariabella put it, "Stanford is always here. She was going to preschool at Stanford. There was just kind of no doubt that she was going to college and more." Mariabella described Stanford as inescapable for the residents in the area, many of whom either currently worked at Stanford or had graduated from Stanford. When I asked her how her peers ranked institutions, Sofia said:

> I definitely think it's Stanford and the Ivies are more collectively bunched together. And then you have Berkeley and UCLA. Yeah, Berkeley, UCLA, Duke probably too. And then I think you start getting, like, UC San Diego. I can't really think of off my head where I'd rank everything. It's more of just, if you give me two schools which one do *I* personally think is better. And a lot of it is very subjective on what subject you're going into. Because I have friends that like, between UCLA and San Diego, most people would be like, 'oh, the obvious choice is UCLA.' But for bio San Diego has a better program and so there are people that are considering San Diego over UCLA. (2nd interview)

Having grown up on the East Coast, I was initially surprised to hear that Stanford edged out the Ivies to occupy its own spot at the top of the institutional status pyramid. However, after spending more time in the community, I came to understand the sheer overwhelming presence of

Stanford in the collective imagination, such that the Ivies seem more like symbols of status than actual desirable destinations for admission (not that most students would turn down an acceptance at an Ivy League school).

The obvious problem with setting Stanford as the benchmark for achievement is that it is ridiculously challenging to gain undergraduate admission. For the Class of 2022, the acceptance rate was 4.3 percent, the lowest in its history (Stanford News 2018). This creates a paradox where the institution simultaneously feels both within and out of reach. At Henry M. Gunn High School, one of the two public high schools in Palo Alto, it is common for half of the graduating class to apply to Stanford. When we were discussing who from her class had been accepted to Stanford according to the rumor mill, Hannah Kim and her mother recalled:

Johanna: The reason I asked is I'd heard that half of the Gunn class usually applies to Stanford.

Hannah: That's true. Pretty much everyone just applies to apply.

Johanna: I mean, that's really unusual. I grew up in the Boston area. People didn't just apply to Harvard because it's there.

Hannah: Yeah. Well, people feel entitled to get in because they live here.

Johanna: You think?

Hannah: Yeah. They feel entitled to get into anywhere good just because they go to Gunn.

Johanna: Were a lot of people disappointed in the end?

Michelle: I have to agree with Hannah. A lot of parents feel entitled for their kids to get into top 20 schools because they go to Gunn. (2nd interview)

A feeling of entitlement to go to school where fewer than one in 20 students are admitted is not conducive to a healthy attitude towards applying to college. It sets unreasonable expectations that

for the vast majority of students will end in dashed hopes. In more extreme cases, the interchange between thwarted entitlement and unrealistic expectations can lead to acute stress and mental health problems, as will be seen in one of my case studies. However, because so many residents are themselves alumni and because legacy status is thought to confer a competitive advantage[22], there is a community feeling that Stanford is an achievable goal. Expanding this expectation to the top twenty schools is hardly a concession to the odds stacked against students applying to schools with historically low admittance rates. It is notable that Michelle cited the *parents* as feeling entitled for their children to get into top schools. It is precisely this attitude that sends parents down the path of trying to buy their children's way into college. This sense of entitlement, that Gunn students are more deserving than others to go to elite postsecondary institutions, feeds the negative images of Palo Alto that other valley residents hold for the city. I discuss this in more depth in the next section.

OUTSIDER PERCEPTIONS OF PALO ALTO

In talking to people, particularly parents, about education, those who did not live in Palo Alto often cast Palo Alto in a negative light compared to their own communities. Having a good high school without the stressors believed to exist at Gunn and Palo Alto High School was a point of pride. Michael's attitude was typical:

> I will bet you, I know in fact, there are kids at Alexis's high school that are delighted to have gotten into UC San Diego. I even view UC San Diego as a terrific school. Just delighted to have gotten in, whereas that would be like the rubber chicken for some kid at Gunn or Palo Alto High School where it would be like, oh well you didn't get into Cal, you didn't get into UCLA, you didn't get into the Ivy Leagues, you ended up at UC San Diego. (2nd interview)

Though I would not consider Michael at all to be an overtly smug man, this attitude among Palo Alto non-residents is indicative of a kind of repressed superiority – i.e., unlike the status-

[22] There is some truth to this. According to Maisel (2013), legacies are guaranteed two read-throughs of their application, whereas most applicants only get one read.

obsessed people in Palo Alto, *I* can see the worth of a public education – that I found to be prevalent in the Valley.

Residents of Silicon Valley at large regarded Palo Alto as a symbol of the best and worst of Silicon Valley culture. Academically, Palo Alto has a national reputation for its stress-inducing environment. This can be seen in a cover story that *The Atlantic* ran in December 2015 – "The Silicon Valley Suicides" – focusing on the suicide cluster during the 2014-2015 school year. This sparked a national debate about academic pressure and mental health among teens. Internet searches easily turn up articles unpacking the etiology of the suicide cluster – along with articles touting Palo Alto School District's impressive academic rankings.

It is curious why the suicides in Palo Alto became the subject of national attention. The 2014-2015 teen suicide cluster was unfortunately the second time the community had had to deal with such tragedies. An earlier cluster of suicides occurred during the 2009-2010 academic year. Though a detailed study of the changes that were implemented in the community after the first suicide cluster is outside the scope of this study, Palo Alto developed an extensive suicide prevention program in its wake. Part of the fascination with the Palo Alto suicides may have been due to the sheer horror of the events: In both clusters, some victims opted to die on the local Caltrain track that runs through the town. Indeed, there is something unutterably devastating about a 13-year-old with such little hope that she chooses to step in front of a train, as Catrina Holmes did in August 2009, right before she was due to start her freshman year at Gunn.

The Palo Alto suicides were also symbolic of a generalized anxiety about the health costs associated with academic achievement. This counternarrative to the admonition to do well in school in order to be successful has been documented in such films as 2018's documentary, *The Edge of Success*, and *Race to Nowhere*, released in 2009. The Facebook page for *Race to*

Nowhere is titled "Race to Nowhere, the Dark Side of America's Achievement Culture." Silicon Valley prides itself for being the epitome of meritocratic achievement, and Palo Alto is ground zero for this cultural ideal. The city's teen suicides are emblematic of this "Dark Side" that chips away at one of the cornerstones of the American Dream. Doubting Palo Alto's success narrative calls into question the very roots of the cultural framework upon which the United States operates.

For many teenagers growing up in Palo Alto and the surrounding communities, their college destination is the first milestone in their transition to an adulthood that is encumbered by pressure to fulfill social expectations. Yet, once their college applications leave their hands, the outcome is out of their control. This helplessness can result in a process that leaves them vulnerable to mental health issues. Paradoxically, when individuals prone to depression perceive an event to be out of their control, they nonetheless blame themselves for failure (Benassi, Sweeney, and Dufour 1988). The prevalence of mental health disorders among Silicon Valley students speaks to the challenges they face as they make this transition.

THE CULTURE OF COLLEGE GOING

The college-going culture is deeply entrenched among the Silicon Valley elite and their children. For most of the students in the sample, college was never a choice: it was an expectation. Jacob Sand briefly considered the Peace Corps but not seriously. He attended a private college prep high school where postsecondary education was normalized. Melissa Ambrose, a student at Menlo-Atherton High School, elaborated on this assumption:

> I always wanted to go to UCLA basically because that's the only other school I knew of. There was never ... I know my mom didn't go to college, but there was never a time where I thought I wouldn't go, or I didn't want to go because that's what people do around here. They go to college. That's the next step after high school, at least in my friend group. (1st interview)

Melissa was one of the more critical students in the study, as she did not completely espouse the belief that achievement must be pursued regardless of cost. Yet, she fell in line with her peers when it came to the next inevitable step after high school. The prevailing narrative of what students could look forward to was, in my mind, depressingly predictable. There was no reason for me to expect rebellion, especially given how deeply entrenched the college-going habitus — the uncritical predisposition to attend college — was within the sample. Students could rattle off what they were expected to accomplish given their upper-class status with ease, even if intellectually they could see its limitations. Madison Flowers, a student at Menlo-Atherton High School, explained to me what it is like to grow up steeped in this narrative:

> This area is very set on, you have to go to high school, get great grades. You have to go to a four-year college. Then you either have to go to grad school or get a really good job. There's not really any talk about taking a gap year and traveling or going to community college for two years. That's all very frowned upon. You say that to people and they're like, oh, I wonder what went wrong. Which I don't think worldwide is how a lot of communities are.
>
> I think community college is a great option for people that need it. Taking a gap year is great for people that need it. It's a very high-pressure area being so close to Silicon Valley and all of the tech explosions. Even my parents, both went to a four-year university. My mom has her Master's. My dad's in tech. It's been a very ... that was the path we had to take. There wasn't really any other option. (1st interview)

In both my interviews with Madison, I was impressed with her grasp of privilege and broader social issues that did not come up organically when I talked with her peers. Here, she used the language of compulsion – you *have* to go to high school, you *have* to go to a four-year school – to emphasize the inevitability of postsecondary education at a four-year institution. Madison's use of the word "path" suggested a one-way route forward.

Several students alluded to this continuous forward-thinking orientation, in which they were encouraged and even pressured to always think about the next milestone. Ashley Kaplan,

who attended public elementary and middle school and then went to a private high school, described this momentum towards the future:

> I guess it's just the schools that I've gone to. I didn't really think about college much until I got to high school. But in middle school it was always like, you have to be ready for high school. It's always, get ready for the next thing. And then as soon as you get to high school it's like, you have to get ready for college. And it's like, wait a minute. Can we just be in high school first? So it's always next step, next step. You're constantly moving forward. (1st interview)

In this passage, Ashley attributed her unconscious gravitation towards the college track to her experiences at school. I interpret Ashley's use of "school" here to mean the culture of the schools she attended, and in fact she attended a prestigious college prep high school. The message that she should always be preparing for the next phase of her life was woven into her everyday interactions with school officials and fellow students. Ashley expressed some doubt here about why she couldn't just enjoy her time at high school without thinking about the future. Yet, her social world was so closed that she had no other models for postsecondary life that she could draw upon.

A prevalent theme was the role that expectations from various sources played in shaping decisions for both students and parents. In the most general sense, students were well-aware that they were expected to attain what would be considered elite postsecondary education, as Madison Flowers said, "There's this vibe in Silicon Valley that you've got to go to an Ivy. You have to go to Stanford. You have to go to UCLA. I definitely felt that picking Davis over Berkeley. There's a lot to the name, and there is a lot to how people view the school." Madison specifically chose Davis because of its pre-veterinary medicine track, which is not offered at Berkeley. Given her career interests, Madison completed one of the most targeted college searches that I observed in my sample, and Davis was probably the best possible choice for her. At the same time, she was aware that her choice to attend Davis over Berkeley was difficult for

others to grasp. Notably, a number of peers from Madison's school were rejected from Davis in the 2015 admissions cycle, thereby making it seem more desirable than in earlier years. While I do not believe that this affected Madison's final choice, I cannot help but wonder whether it eased her decision somewhat.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of the college-going culture is that the process unfolds under a community microscope in which students are asked point-blank about their applications and the local rumor mill fuels narratives about so-called successes and failures. An exchange with the Snow family (Jessica was the student and Tammy was the parent.) illustrated the public nature of what should be personal information:

Jessica: [student] couldn't get into USC, but he got into UCLA.

Tammy: Yeah.

Johanna: That's crazy.

Tammy: Yeah, we have a friend, he does have straight As, he did very well on his SAT, I don't remember his exact score. I think 2200-ish range.

Jessica: He has over a 4.0.

Tammy: Yeah, he does.

Jessica: Then he got rejected from USC.

Tammy: He got rejected at USC, and got into UCLA. He got rejected at a bunch of Ivies also, which isn't so unusual. USC should've been a safety for him, so it's interesting how these schools figure this stuff out.

Johanna: Yeah, UCLA was like the holy grail this year. It was very hard for people to get in.

Tammy: Yeah, he got in.

Jessica: We got a lot of students this year.

Tammy: Yeah, they did get a lot.

Jessica: I think six people are going.

Tammy: In the end it turned out to be his only option.

Jessica: Not his only.

Tammy: Pretty much.

Jessica: Not the sole one he wanted to.

Tammy: I think so, of all the great schools. He applied to a lot of really great schools, and that was really his only choice.

It was striking how many details about this student's academic record that Jessica and Tammy were privy to even though he was a friend. This type of casual conversation around students' personal data was common even within the parameters of a confidential interview. Jessica used the word "we" when she spoke of the six students from her high school who were accepted to UCLA. This illustrates the way college admissions is a public project that reflects on the community at large as a shared experience. The college-going culture is not limited to students; it is a referendum on Silicon Valley's own values.

Growing up in Silicon Valley afforded all of the students in my sample privileges in the form of strong educational institutions, both public and private; access to college prep resources; and financial capital such that they could choose their destinations with little regard for cost. The flip side of these privileges was the expectations that students could and should achieve at a level that would be considered "successful" within the high-pressure local narrative.

CHAPTER 5

Overview of Navigation Orientations

By virtue of living in their safe, upper-middle class neighborhoods, attending academically rigorous high schools, and experiencing stable family lives, all of the students in this study could be considered privileged[23]. The families considered scholarships to be compelling but not deal-breaking, mostly as a signal of how much the school wanted the student. Vihaan Patel chose American University in part because he was offered a prestigious full scholarship, but a minority of students talked explicitly about finances playing a role in their final decisions. Otherwise, parents had the resources to send their children to the school they wanted to go to, not the one that they could afford, regardless of whether cost was a consideration in the student's choice calculus.

Additionally, all the students in my sample had the privilege of living in the Silicon Valley "bubble" as I described in Chapter 4. The sample comprised individuals who were guided by both family and organizational habitus (McDonough 1997) such that postsecondary education was an inevitable outcome of their high school experiences. The students were surrounded by adults who were college-educated. Most students took a number of AP classes or were otherwise enrolled in tracked courses where they interacted with college-bound peers.

Bourdieu used the metaphor of a field to describe a competitive space where actors compete over valued resources that he denotes as types of capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992;

[23] I am primarily concerned with class privilege, though it cannot be discounted that all of the students were U.S. citizens; 16 out of the 19 students were white; seven were male; and all were visibly able-bodied. These categories barely scratch the surface of how intersecting identities affects access to coveted resources like higher education.

Swartz 1997). Fields have self-contained logics that Bourdieu compared to games with specific rules (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In this chapter, navigation orientation refers to the ways students make meaning of the field of competitive college admissions given its rules and their individual habitus. The students' orientations guided the strategies they enacted in their college choice process. My use of the word "competitive" here refers to schools that *U.S. News & World Report*[24] ranks among the top 100. Participants often used the term "top twenty" to refer to the schools that were most desirable to attend. It was not clear what list these twenty schools topped. Rather, it was self-evident to respondents what these twenty schools were. When I asked what schools ranked among the top twenty, Stanford, the Ivy League schools, University of California-Berkeley and the University of California-Los Angeles were most commonly mentioned. In the absence of a consistently mentioned ranking system, I chose to use *U.S. News & World Report* because of its popularity and documented impact on students' matriculation decisions (Bowman and Bastedo 2009; Griffith and Rask 2007). However, my use of the *U.S. News* rankings should in no way be considered an endorsement of rankings as an objective measure of how "good" a school is. Rankings are problematic at best and harmful at worst (Challenge Success 2018), but they also function as a metric to compare how institutional prestige is recognized in the media and general population.

The underlying factor determining how I organized the students' navigation orientations was their response to the interplay between expectations and pressure. All of the students in the sample faced expectations, whether through the experience of growing up in Silicon Valley, the culture of their schools, and/or from family dynamics. They varied in how they made meaning of expectations, which in turn affected how stressful they found the college choice process.

[24] 2019 rankings

In Table 5, I put forward a framework that shows that within this sample there was heterogeneity in the way students navigated the college choice process. I identified three primary orientations, which I designated *Paralyzed Privileged, Passive Privileged, and Pragmatic Privileged*. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe each of these orientations and briefly discuss how I categorized the students in the study.

Table 5 Overview of Navigation Orientations

Characteristics	Orientation
• Believed in the rules of the college admissions game • Felt pressured to attend prestigious postsecondary institutions • Attempted to "check all the boxes" to produce compelling applications • Experienced high levels of stress • Used external meaning making	Paralyzed Privileged
• Believed in the rules of the college admissions game • Chose schools based on prestige and/or fit/subjective criteria • Pursued moderate to rigorous courseloads and extracurricular activities • Moderate to low levels of stress • Used external meaning making	Passive Privileged
• Understood rules of the college admissions game but were not subject to them • Chose schools based on academic programs and/or fit/subjective criteria • Pursued moderate to rigorous courseloads and extracurricular activities • Moderate to low levels of stress • Used late external to early crossroads meaning making	Pragmatic Privileged

Paralyzed privileged students shared the belief that they needed to attend the most competitive colleges possible in order to achieve that intangible benchmark known as "success." To this end, they crafted high school careers that they thought would be appealing to admissions committees. This resulted in high-pressure, stressful high school experiences. Using the metaphor of college admissions as a game, students in this category adhered to the rules of the game and had difficulty reconciling their sense of self with the possibility of not "winning" the game.

The largest group in my sample were those who fell in the *passive privileged* category (N=10). Passive privileged students were similar to the paralyzed privileged students in that they, too, believed in the importance of attending highly competitive institution. However, they tended to not find the process to be as stressful as the paralyzed privileged students. This reflected their identity and sense of self-worth not being tied to their college destination. They were better able to question the narrative about the importance of attending an elite school than the paralyzed privileged students, but ultimately they took the path of least resistance to apply to schools the way they were expected to. They tended to take AP classes and moderately rigorous courseloads where their peers expected to attend college. Students whose main criteria for choosing a school was its prestige and/or because they liked the "feel" of the campus fell into this category. With the exception of Ashley Kaplan, whose final choice was Washington University in St. Louis (ranked at 19 by *US News & World Report*), the passive privileged students ended up at competitive (top 100) but not top-tier (top 25) schools. They did not approach high school with the level of intensity that led to paralysis. Yet, because of their family backgrounds and school environments, their habitus made going to college an inevitability. All of the students who attended private college preparatory high schools fell into this category.

There were two broad trends among the *pragmatic privileged* students. The first was having very specific and personalized criteria for what influenced their final choice, such as academic programs that would lead to clearly defined career objectives. The second trend was the ability to view the college choice process through a critical lens such that they were not subject to the narrative they must go to the most elite college possible for the sake of prestige. Again drawing on the metaphor of college admissions as a competitive game, the pragmatic privileged students were cognizant of the rules of the game and played strategically to achieve outcomes they desired. As a group, they tended to fall within the range of Late External/Early Crossroads in their self-authorship development.

In Table 6 I present an overview of the sample including each student's destination and their navigation orientation for their college choice.

Table 6 Students' Navigation Orientations

Student	Destination[a]	Representative quote
Paralyzed Privileged		
Elizabeth Rivers	The Ohio State University (56)	I'm an extreme perfectionist type A person. I have been stressed my entire life. Even when I was in elementary school I would stress over the smallest things. There's just a lot of pressure and stress from everyone around here. I think especially because there are so many extremely brilliant people here. I mean we're living next to Google and Apple and all of that, so you better get an A+ in your math and sciences. A lot of that is just pressure I put on myself too. My parents are like, "Elizabeth, get a B, like chill out," they're very great about that, but I don't know you just feel a lot of pressure and everyone compares themselves to each other, so that's what it's like.
Joshua Storm	Gap year/University of Southern California (22)	Everybody is trying to exaggerate their achievements, myself included. How hard they're working. The kind of people who say, "Oh, I spent eight hours studying last night."
Passive Privileged		
Nicholas Hill	American University (78)	There are some people who senior year they take five APs and they're applying to a bunch of schools. Really prestigious ones like Ivy Leagues. So there's that pressure. And then they're involved in a bunch of stuff outside of school. And then there are some people who do not much of anything outside of school, don't have a full schedule, like, they have a couple of preps and don't necessarily take challenging classes. Just sort of kick back and relax and enjoy the rest of high school while they still have it. (*And you fall in between?)* Yeah, somewhere in between.

Ashley Kaplan	Washington University in St. Louis (19)	(*Are people competitive at [high school]?*) I think subconsciously, probably. It's not like, "I'm going to beat you on this test. Ha ha." But it's like, "I need to be better than everyone so that I can get into this school and I can be better and just have a better GPA." And I think people are sort of subconsciously competitive but it's not outwardly aggressive.
Alexis Katz (Pragmatic)[b]	University of Michigan (27)	I went into this thinking, "I'll get into some but not into others." It was not necessarily low, it's above average, but it's not where some schools are looking for. You look at a school like Michigan and their average SAT is around a 2100, I only have 1870. It's like, going into that, "I don't think I'll get into here." Same with USC. I got into both. I was so surprised and the fact that I got into Santa Barbara, Davis, and San Diego, also really hard schools to get into, I predicted ... My dad and I were talking, we thought we'd get into at least one of those three and I got into all three. That was like, I don't really know how but I did. Schools obviously liked my application. I have a lot of friends who had the exact opposite, where they applied thinking, "I'll probably get in here," and they didn't. I guess I'm in the lucky situation where things went my way and the schools, on that given day, read my application and said, "I really like this person."

Hannah Kim	University of Texas-Austin (49)	A lot of people look at name. Just like the name of the school. I know one friend, her dad's making her apply to all the Ivies. And just things like that. People are very… I think it's not so much people that have lived here. Especially if their parents have lived here. But if your parents came here when they were older, I guess, and didn't go to school here, I think they think that you have to go to, you *have* to go to a big-name school. And so I know a lot of kids that their parents came here when they were adults, they got a lot of pressure to apply to all the big-name schools and do well on all the tests and stuff. But then even if your parents grew up here they still want you to go to a good school, I guess. That's just the culture of it. People just strive to go to a good school because that's just…I think it's kind of like one person does it or a bunch of people do it. And then so everyone else kind of follows.
Samantha Lewin	University of Wisconsin (49)	[*How did this get ingrained in your mind that this is what you do to get into college?]* I don't know. I think it kind of just feels like the culture, maybe. That's what people assume. I guess I just assumed that because what else would you write about? And also I've just always thought, okay, extracurriculars are *for* college. And other than journalism, which was really kind of the first thing for me, I started that because for college. But then I really enjoyed it. That was one of my only extracurriculars that weren't for college necessarily. Everything else I've done, hey, this looks good. I'll just do it. Whatever. Which kind of is cheating at the game. But what else are you supposed to do?

Vihaan Patel	American University (78)	I always thought I was going to go to college. I think that's just a… It sounds kind of arrogant to say, but I think that when you've grown up in this kind of environment with two parents who've gone to college and more or less a sheltered kind of environment here in Menlo Park, you kind of feel like – and I was always high academically achieving – I was going to go to some higher education. I didn't know where. I never thought I was going to be a *very* high achieving student. I don't even know if I am compared to other people. But I always thought I was going to continue after high school.
Matthew Pyke	Brandeis (35)	(*What would you say your school is like?)* It's not too strenuous. It's kind of laid back for a college preparatory school. There's kind of a pattern, like, just kind of generally of complacency, I feel.
Jacob Sand	Lewis & Clark (68 – National Liberal Arts Colleges)	I kind of tuned them [school college counselors] out, to be honest. I was like, I don't want to do this right now. You know, I was too… And now looking back, now I'm here and it feels like [snaps fingers] a second between it. So I feel like I should have started a little bit sooner than I did. Like seriously considering it. I didn't seriously look at the whole college situation until maybe a few months ago.
Michael Smith	University of Washington (59)	Most of the time I can really just kind of get by by just kind of coasting. But there are a lot of instances where I actually study to be able to maintain my GPA

Christopher Stone	Denison University (43 – National Liberal Arts Colleges)	*(So at what point did you realize that lacrosse was going to be a big factor in where you went to college?)* Really early on. I think that when I was little first playing, I always, I thought that. Well, my coach would bring in other coaches. And they had all played in college. Everyone who was teaching me had all played in college. So I just thought that's what you do. You just play in college. And so I just kind of grew up wanting to. I just never really wanted to stop playing either. That's the other thing. I just liked it.
Pragmatic Privilege		
Sarah Ambrose	University of Washington (59)	I have a larger perspective than most high school students would, because I realize that it's just high school. It's not going to dictate the rest of our lives, even though I want to do well. I just don't stress out about it. Nor do I stress out about the college process, because I knew I was going to get in somewhere good based on my grades and my test scores. I was pretty confident that I'd go somewhere where I fit in, and even if I was like Boulder, that was still a good school for me and the education was how I was going to make it for myself. Not how the reputation of the college was.

Madison Flowers	University of California-Davis (38)	It [putting together applications] definitely a lot of soul searching. I think the whole process really makes you figure out what is your intrinsic worth, regardless even if you get denied at all these schools. How do you still judge yourself based on what you've accomplished? For some kids they feel really badly about everything that they've done in the past 17 years and other kids feel really good. [*This idea of soul searching, is that something that you feel that you've done?]* I've spent two years in my wildlife department. I started as a volunteer, became an intern. I want to go back to work for them. I want to go into wildlife veterinarian medicine. It's definitely been my track. I've poured hundreds of hours ... and so for me it's been a really great process to figure out who I am regardless of this college process, regardless of where I go. This is my passion. This is what I'm good at.
Taylor Goldstein	University of Miami (53)	I had to do all this research at the end of junior year and the beginning of senior year and those are like the hardest semesters. It was really hard and I don't deal with stress well. But I also it's like super important to me that I do this myself because I don't want to be that person that has their mom write their essays and their mom do all the research for them. Also it comes down to it's my decision, where do I want to go to school? I'm the one that put in all the research. At the school I had a college counselor so she would help me like find where to research and find what I was looking for so I definitely have a lot of guidance. But I would say at the end of the day that I did it myself.

Sofia Rossi (Paralyzed) [c]	University of California-San Diego (41)	We've [Sofia and her friends] known since our kindergarten that we're all going to college. (*How did you know that? Did your parents say that?)* Well, it was just kind of assumed. I never met anyone that hadn't gone to college. I've never met another girl that hadn't gone to college, with the exception of my Grandma. On my mom's side everyone's gone to college. Both my parents have Ph.Ds. Education is just kind of always been there. And yeah. It was never really not an option. I never really thought to myself, oh, I'm not going to go to college. It was always like, if you want to do well you have to.
Emily Garcia	San Diego State University (127)	I don't like Gunn. I think I would have really liked it [high school] had I gone somewhere else. Because the pressure of that, regardless of the fact that I have the attitude that's such that, "I don't care. I didn't fail. I learned a lot" doesn't mean that I'm always comfortable with that. I can say that now, and I can say that with my friends. But when I'm at school I'm like, "wow, I suck." But, yeah, I don't regret my attitude towards high school. I think it was a healthy one for me. I am envious of the people who are way more invested in it, but also my friends who are way more invested in it are not ending up at the schools they wanted to anyway. So I go, what was the point?
Jessica Snow	Southern Methodist University (59)	You're not supposed to show any emotional weakness, so I feel like people definitely have this face at MA [Menlo-Atherton High School] like you're doing all this, and you're still a 100 percent super happy all the time. It's just like you're so exhausted and stressed all the time, but I feel like I've gotten really good at that [managing stress] maybe that's why I don't think I'm over stressed. You just kind of got to keep going.

Alyssa Waters	Georgetown University (22)	The whole, "Where is everyone else?" doesn't concern me. It's not like I need to be better than them. I just need to make sure that I'm doing okay. It's less like ... They want everyone ... It's not enough that I should succeed, it's that everyone else must fail. That's not how Aragon [high school] works.

[a] Numbers in parentheses refer to 2019 *US News & World* Report national institutional ranking unless otherwise specified.
[b] Alexis's navigation orientation was a hybrid of Passive and Pragmatic, but Passive was dominant.
[c] Sofia's navigation orientation was a hybrid of Paralyzed and Pragmatic, but Pragmatic was dominant

PARALYZED PRIVILEGED

Elizabeth Rivers was a dancer who, by her own admission, was a perfectionist - dating back to elementary school. Perfection, in her context, encompassed her grades, extracurricular activities, and social life. Her 4.67 GPA – the highest in the sample – was a testament to how hard she worked to live up to the standard she set for herself. Her parents used to encourage her to not do her homework. She burnt out after junior and ended up making the difficult decision to quit her competitive dance team her senior year because of stress. Her first choice was Northwestern, and she had internalized an image of herself going there. She ended up being rejected at four of the seven schools she applied to and consequently had to recalibrate her sense of self when her choices came down to the University of Washington and Ohio State.

In Chapter Six, I provide a detailed account of Joshua's college choice process. He had the most turbulent experience among the students in the sample, and his story illustrates the perils of growing up under the weight of crippling expectations.

PASSIVE PRIVILEGED

Nicholas Hill was the academically weakest student in the sample, having a 3.0 GPA and 1700 on the SAT. Nonetheless, he had one of the smoothest college choice experiences, resulting in one of the best matches between student and school that I observed. Nicholas developed an interest in foreign relations during high school, and he pursued activities like Model United Nations not because they would look good on his college applications, but because it was where his passion lay. He did not pursue a particularly rigorous courseload, nor was he concerned with fashioning himself a well-rounded student. He only applied to six schools, and of these schools, American was an ideal fit for his interests. In many ways, Nicholas fit the profile of a pragmatic privileged student, as he based his schools on a specific career objective. Ultimately, I did not

place him in this category because he did not make any particularly directed efforts to strategize about his college choice process. He passively participated in the game.

Ashley Kaplan spoke about the inevitability of going to college and following the path laid out for her. She attended a prestigious college preparatory school, and going to a good postsecondary institution was written into the DNA of her life. Her parents needed to exert little pressure on her because she internalized the expectations set at her school. She also had an older brother who attended Northwestern University and who functioned as a model for how to have a successful college choice process. She wanted a medium-sized school with a prestigious name where she would be challenged academically.

I had difficulty placing Alexis Katz within the schema presented here. She displayed strategies consistent with both passive and pragmatic privilege. I decided that on the balance, she belonged among the passive privileged students because she always did what she was supposed to do to get into a top school without questioning the script. For example, she said it was "always a given" that she would take the International Baccalaureate (IB) program because it was most academically rigorous track her school offered. On the other hand, she exhibited elements of pragmatism when she assessed and accepted how strong an applicant she was and tempered her expectations accordingly. She was not subject to the rules of the game, but she also did not challenge them. Her final choice came down to the University of Michigan and the University of Southern California. She chose Michigan because despite being from out of state, it would cost her family much less than the University of Southern California.

Hannah Kim regarded her peers at Henry H. Gunn High School as being highly competitive and sneaky. Nonetheless, she too followed the formula for what she believed would earn her admission at a top school. She started prepping for the SAT after freshman year and was

initially disappointed with her 2160 because her college counselor told her she needed a 2250 to get into an Ivy League school. Dartmouth was the only Ivy she ended up applying to, and the rest of her list was a mixture of target and safety schools. She was interested in attending a college with a cheer team and Greek life and was able to try out for the cheer team when she visited the University of Texas-Austin, which was her final choice.

Like Alexis, I categorized Samantha Lewin as passive privileged because she always did what she was supposed to do to get into a good college without thinking critically about the process and why she was doing it. She spoke of doing her best throughout high school to get into college, but when I asked her why she wanted to go to college, she said it was because it was the track she was on and that she wanted to get away from home. She was unsure about her career direction and worried about how to make herself look good for college admissions committees.

Vihaan Patel always saw college in his future and prepared accordingly, exerting enough effort to do well in his coursework but not aiming for the top of the class. His mother joked that she wished he had a little stress or sense of pressure. Because he was a student at Menlo-Atherton High School, which has a reputation for academic rigor, the bar for achievement was high, and in fact Vihaan's 4.079 GPA suggests he was not as cavalier about his grades as he claimed. He chose to enroll at American after he was selected for the Frederick Douglas Senior Scholar's Award that came with a full scholarship.

Matthew Pyke and Jacob Sand shared a number of characteristics. They both attended private college preparatory high schools and both pursued theater as their main extracurricular activity. They were also both underachievers relative to their abilities and did not really click with their academics until senior year when their grades improved. Jacob Sand only took one AP class. His high school climate demanded that he go to college, as he said, "There's so much

pressure to go to college that it's like you can't not. Especially if you paid the money to go to Bellarmine [high school] and all of that, they're assuming, hey, you're here because you want to get to college." When he reached junior year and had made no effort to start looking at schools, his parents started arranging college visits even though he "wasn't too happy about it." Despite waiting until the last minute to get motivated about his applications, he was accepted at six of the eight schools he applied to and was offered merit scholarships at five of them.

Matthew Pyke relied on instinct and gut intuition to decide where to apply to college, and perhaps as a result, his feelings about the schools he was interested in shifted between interviews. He was passionate about Reed during our first interview, but ended up going to Brandeis, which he did not mention at all when we first met. He did not believe it needed to be a rational decision, which speaks to his level of privilege as he navigated the college choice process. He said, "As far as I see it, my search for colleges has been just me putting myself out there, specifying where I want to go, and then just seeing where life takes me. And just kind of trusting that it will all work out for the best."

Michael Smith is the subject of Chapter 10. His case illustrates how a student who did not overextend himself academically or in extracurriculars can still be accepted at competitive colleges.

Christopher Stone's college choice process was atypical in that he aspired to play Division III lacrosse. This entailed close communication with college lacrosse coaches who watched him play at tournaments and views his highlight video. He received a verbal commitment to attend Denison the summer before his senior year. Though Christopher had to go through the school's formal admissions process, his academic profile was far less important his

secure footing in the athletic recruitment pipeline. Because he knew where he was going to college prior to senior year, he was much less stressed than many of his peers.

PRAGMATIC PRIVILEGED

Sarah Ambrose was one of the more self-authored students in the study, and her high school experience was marked by her deliberate choices to set internally derived bars for achievement. This was not to say she was an underachiever; rather, she considered herself to be a perfectionist "for herself" (her words), which meant doing the best she could do. She spent 11 years dancing and competing at the national level, but junior year, she quit against everyone's advice because she lost her passion for it. She emphasized that she did not find high school stressful even though she was immersed in the academically rigorous Menlo-Atherton High School environment.

Madison Flowers was one of the students in the study with the clearest sense of direction by the time she reached her senior year. Madison was a self-professed overachiever who wanted to impress her family with her grades. She described herself as "committed," saying, "I made a promise to myself freshman year that I wasn't going to do anything to get into college, I wasn't going to do anything because it would look good on an application. I was only going to do it if I felt good about it." Having a sense of direction insulated Madison from falling among the paralyzed privileged students as she said it gave her launch board that kept her goal oriented. She turned down University of California-Berkeley to attend Davis, which had been her first choice.

Emily Garcia moved from Houston to Palo Alto in time to start high school, and it immediately became apparent that her academic preparation was not on par with the students who grew up in the Palo Alto school system. She went from being a top student in middle school to being below average at Henry H. Gunn High School. It did not take long for her to realize that

she could not compete with her classmates to be at the top of the class. She viewed the culture at Gunn with cynicism, noting that all that seemed to matter to her peers was having a prestigious diploma. Her final choice came down to the University of Arizona (ASU) and San Diego State University (SDSU). She chose San Diego State because it was significantly less expensive than ASU.

In many ways Taylor Goldstein fit the profile of a student with a paralyzed privileged orientation. She took an intense IB courseload at her school, and it was important to her that she maintain straight As. I categorized Taylor as having a pragmatic orientation because her college choice process was completely driven by her proposed major in contemporary singing and songwriting. Only six schools in the country offer this program of study, and Taylor seriously considered four of the six schools. She had to go through a rigorous audition process on top of regular admissions. She was initially deferred at the University of Miami but attended up being accepted and was offered a $40,000 scholarship.

Sofia Rossi was another student I had difficulty assigning to one discrete navigation category. She was the daughter of Italian immigrants who approached Sofia's college applications with trepidation, as they had little familiarity with the higher education system in the United States. Sofia knew she wanted to go on to medical school and chose the schools with opportunities to be a strong future medical school applicant. To this end, she took a rigorous courseload, including five AP classes her junior year while studying for two additional tests on her own. Her mother was actively engaged in drawing up the list of schools she applied to. Sofia internalized what she needed to do to get into a good college and did it, resulting in an incredibly stressful junior year. I decided that pragmatism was Sofia's dominant orientation because the main criterion driving her college choice was how she would be positioned to attend medical

school in the future. Although she was driven to succeed like the paralyzed privileged students, her sense of self was not threatened when she was rejected from some of the more prestigious schools she applied to. Her final decision was between Tufts and the University of California-San Diego, and although Tufts is higher ranked, she chose the latter because it had a stronger biology program, and she was not sure she could justify the cost differential between the two schools. Sofia was the one student among the pragmatic privileged group whom I would assess at the earlier stages of external meaning making. She said among her friend group, "we all expect each other to go to *great* schools, not just good schools."

Alyssa Waters and Jessica Snow are the foci of Chapters Seven and Eight, respectively. Both students approached the college choice process with a clear sense for their desired outcomes. They navigated their college applications intentionally with relatively minimal stress.

In the next four chapters, I present four in-depth cases as exemplars of the typology developed here. The four cases were selected to represent the range of navigation orientations. They also illustrate how different strategies can result in similar outcomes vis-à-vis institutional prestige. Joshua Storm's and Alyssa Waters's institutions are ranked 22nd by *US News & World Report*, while Jessica Snow's and Michael Smith's are ranked 59th. All of these students could be said to have "done well" in their college choice process, as they were all attending schools ranked in the top 100. Joshua and Alyssa had the added cachet of their institutions being in the top 25, a distinction that can be important in some Silicon Valley subcultures.

CHAPTER 6

Joshua Storm

> You get caught up in this mentality of Palo Alto and you have to be this person that everybody's expecting you to be. If you're not, you just have such little value. It becomes disproportionate. You stop seeing yourselves in the eyes of who you are objectively. You start seeing it as how you compare to the other people that surround you. When you're in such a hypercompetitive environment like this, there's no way you can possibly be the best at everything. Even I was trying to be and it's this escalating spiraling inferiority complex that manifests in all of us. - Joshua Storm

Unlike many teenagers, Joshua Storm expressed himself in paragraphs – whole essays in fact. Not surprisingly, he was active in Junior Statesmen of America and the Model UN, as he was exceptionally articulate. With little prompting, he shared his thoughts about growing up in Silicon Valley and attending Henry H. Gunn High School ("Gunn"), the epicenter of Silicon Valley's 2014-2015 suicide cluster (See Appendix D for statistics about the four focal students' communities.) At times his narrative was difficult to track, as he was prone to flights of adolescent hyperbole and making contradictory statements. Joshua was clearly a work in progress as he struggled to make meaning of his college choice process.

Joshua's case is an example of how a paralyzed privileged student suffers in an environment where he fully espouses the rules of the elite college admissions game yet lacks the academic credentials to be competitive at the level necessary to be "successful." He grew up surrounded by a high level of wealth and achievement that was normalized as the bar for what his future should entail. He was fully ensconced within the Silicon Valley bubble, his high school, and even his own family – all of which set expectations for what he should be able to accomplish regardless of psychological cost. He attempted to follow the path laid out for him and

applied to some of the most competitive schools in the country. Rejections left him unmoored as the narrative he had embraced failed him, yet he lacked an alternative.

However, over the course of his senior year, Joshua began to appraise in a new light the formulas he had followed to live what he perceived to be a good life. His senior year was incredibly turbulent, and the boy I met in the first interview was not the same one I talked to at the end of the school year. He described the six months between interviews as the worst in his life. At the beginning of the year, Joshua's uncritical approach to meaning making could be best described as firmly external[25], as he accepted without critique many of the prevailing narratives about education and success that were prevalent in his community. Among the students in my sample, he seemed to have the most difficulty navigating senior year as he spiraled into clinical depression and attempted suicide at the beginning of his second semester. By the end of senior year, his meaning making had shifted toward a late external orientation, which meant he was beginning to see the weakness of accepting external formulas uncritically, though he had yet to form internally derived replacements. This shift was demonstrated by his questioning of the cultural values he had formerly embraced. He cited the period after his suicide attempt as a new chapter in his life. Ultimately he chose to attend the University of Southern California (USC) — a school perceived as relatively low status within his world.

The Storms were a blended family, and Joshua had close relationships with his mother, father, and stepfather, all of whom were medical doctors. His older biological sister, Madison, was a senior at the USC. Though there was a five-year difference in their ages, Joshua and Madison got along well. Joshua placed a high premium on family and much of his decision-making about his future was tied to his desire to remain close to his family.

[25] An external orientation refers to an individual who "relies strongly on external sources for knowledge, self-definition, and decisions about how to relate socially" (Baxter Magolda and King 2012:53). See Chapter 2, Table 2.

Madison was a junior at Gunn during a previous suicide cluster in 2009-2010. Joshua's mother, Laura, recalled it as a terrible time in the community:

> There were suicides when my daughter was going through school. I don't know if you heard about them. But there were four or five kids that jumped in front of a train and killed themselves. It was just *terrible. Terrible* time for the school and the community. And a lot of it was just the intensity around getting to college. And so I think the school has tried very hard to ease back on some of the expectations. But in a sense, the expectations are not really coming from the school. It's really coming from the families. (1st interview)

Here, Laura alluded to three of the primary factors in the high-pressure Palo Alto academic environment — family, school, and community. When considering the puzzle of why some privileged students in this upper-class community are so unhappy, and so stressed out about getting into college, I came to consider these three elements as the "unholy trinity" as they worked synergistically to create such overwhelming pressure that suicide seemed like a viable escape.

Laura described Joshua as social, but immature for his age, something she attributed in part to his being a boy and thus slower to develop than girls. He was one of the younger students in his grade, having started kindergarten when he had just turned five. According to Laura, it is common in the area for parents to hold boys back a year so they would perform better in sports and academics once they started school. This practice, known as "redshirting," has been found to be most common among white, high socioeconomic status boys who are close to the cutoff date for enrollment (Bassok and Reardon 2013). Though Joshua fit the profile of a student who redshirts, the Storm family opted not to pursue such a path.

Though in some ways Joshua might have lagged behind his peers, in others, he was notably precocious. He had the confidence, maybe even the overconfidence, to go after the things he wanted. For example, when he was fourteen, a high school freshman, he decided he wanted to participate in a Japanese language immersion program. After researching various

programs, he found one that was willing to accept a high school student even though it had never done so before, and he spent a month in Japan living with a host family.

In our second interview, recounting Joshua's shock at the failure of his predictive models to align with his application results, Laura portrayed Joshua as very black and white in his thinking, which is characteristic of Baxter Magolda's (2001) Following Formulas phase of the self-authorship journey. Ironically, in his own interview, Joshua told me that middle school students should develop a "grey area of understanding," that the world should be a balance between play and the pursuit of a name brand college. This disjuncture between the ability to critique a narrative versus incorporating it into one's own meaning making is what Pizzolato (2004) cited as the difference between *reasoning* and *action*. Lacking this ability can set the stage for an inflexible rigidity in worldview that can crack under pressure. Joshua's journey, which I discuss in more detail below, is a cautionary tale in how external meaning-making can be more than just a developmental stage: it can make the difference between life and death.

THE STRUGGLE TO STAY AFLOAT IN A TOXIC STEW

The two public high schools in the Palo Alto Unified School District —Palo Alto High School ("Paly") and Gunn — are both well-regarded, though Gunn is considered to be more academic and Paly more athletic. In 2018, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked Gunn 216th and Paly 270th (out of 20,548) in its national survey of best public high schools (U.S. News & World Report 2018). This puts them in the top two percent of public high schools in the country. Thus, Joshua's high school experiences represent a truly elite public high school life in the United States.

At Gunn, the interplay among the community, school, and peer cultures created a toxic stew that students struggled to stay afloat in to the best of their ability. Joshua described himself and his peers as the products of conditioning and grooming from childhood:

Joshua: I would say I'm equally a victim of this. A very, very beneficial victim of this. I'm not complaining whatsoever. Your kid, you know, you want the best for little Billy Chang. You send him to an SAT tutor. You know, he has a B plus in math. Well, you know what? You just got a tutor from Stanford. Both of these are actually true stories. I was Billy Chang. I'm Joshua Storm, I had an SAT tutor. I had a B in math and we just got a tutor and I had an A in math. Like, you *are* a yuppie. You make a great income. You throw that at your kids so that they're going to have every resource they can. Like my mom pointed out, you've either made it or you're busting it so that your kid makes it. Those are the two. And so if they don't have those resources, they're the ones that their parents buy them the book and then every day they just shout, "You have to work on you SAT for two hours." It's really one of the two. But they're still grooming their kids in that way. I know that so many people in eighth grade take the SAT. Take the SAT in *eighth grade.* People have better SAT scores than me now. In *eighth grade*. The person who sits next to me in Chinese, I was asking [student], I was like, "Are you going to take the SAT?" She's like, "I already took it. I don't have to retake it." "What'd you get?" "A 21." I'm like, "I got that score last year. How did you get that in eighth grade?" Because that was ridiculous. I studied and I studied and I took practice test after practice test. I clawed my grade from an eighteen hundred to a 2100 over half a year. But that was my version of conditioning and grooming. And I know kids who start this in middle school. Standardized testing, massively important. Kids go home with a B and like, busting out. And I'm actually not joking when I say they bust out with belts and actual, like, they actually beat their....I know a lot of my friends are beat by their parents when they don't get the grades that they are supposed to get.

I think the biggest symptom of this is burnout. Most of my friends are actually who, we all wanted to go to Stanford freshman year. All five hundred of us students want to go to Stanford our freshman year. I know that [student name] wanted to go to Stanford, and then it was Berkeley, and then it was Santa Barbara, now it's community college. [Student name] wanted to go to NYU, then Berkeley, then Davis, now community college. [Student name] wanted to go to Stanford, then Hawaii, then community college. Everybody kind of keeps giving up. You reach Stanford your senior year.

Johanna: Ha. Freudian slip. [laughing]

Joshua: Yeah. I was about to say. That was quite a Freudian slip there. Senior year is Stanford year. Let's be honest. It's a year away, so. [laughing] So a lot of kids just don't have the steam left in them. And I know a lot of people, whether it's through their counselors, their peers, or their parents, I know so many of my friends have a 3.5. They think they can't get into college. They literally think that they can't get into college and their only choice is community college. That is the mentality here. I literally had to shout at my friend, you don't understand that there are four thousand colleges in the US. I think you just ruled out a hundred of them, tops. That is so ridiculous. (1st interview)

Gunn students like Joshua are raised in an environment where a B is considered a low enough grade to warrant hiring a tutor – or in the worst cases, according to Joshua, getting a beating. There was a critical mass of parents who could afford to hire these kinds of services such that it was normative. Joshua speculated, or at least believed, that the parents without these financial resources, in some cases, rely on threats and violence. *And it worked.* It produced students who in middle school scored 2100 out of 2400 on the old SAT.[26] Yet the cost, according to Joshua, is the risk of burnout. Joshua witnessed a gradual downgrading of his friends' college ambitions from top tier schools to open enrollment institutions. Moreover, the decline of their GPAs fueled the kind of black and white mentality that made them focus on the two extremes of the postsecondary landscape. Joshua called it "the mentality here," which is myopic in its preoccupation with the top hundred schools. This mentality is shared by counselors, peers, and parents. These beliefs about the importance of achieving an elite college education recirculate in the echo chamber commonly called the Silicon Valley bubble.

In the Preface, I reproduced Joshua's cautionary tale of "Jon," a student whose high school experiences ground him down, crushing most of his earlier-held ambitions. When I first met him, Joshua was friends with many students like Jon and was well-acquainted with their

[26] This is comparable to approximately 1470 on the new SAT according to The College Board (2016) This is the 98-99th percentile (The College Board 2018).

stress. This does not mean he was immune to stress himself, yet he considered himself to be the voice of reason in his group. He described himself as "on the line":

> It just depends on how long it takes for someone to break. If you can make it the four years. I'm kind of on the line here. I am really stressed out with this process. But I've held strong. My junior year I'm the only one of my friends who held up their 4.0. And you try to get the four all four years. My junior year is the only one with the 4.0. I was the only one applying to the Ivy Leagues. I – and this isn't even to toot my own horn here. I could give a crap what a researcher thinks about, me versus my friends. From a research standpoint obviously, but as far as how I stack up against [student's name], I don't have anything to prove here. I literally had to beg my friends, no, I know you have a 3.4, but please apply to the UCs. You're still going to get into somewhere great. Even if that's Santa Cruz. Even if it's Merced, you're still going to be able to go way far because you got a college education. I think it's going to be harder for you at Foothills. It's going to be harder for you to want to motivate yourself when you're with a crowd of people who are at community college. Not that same Gunn ambition you're used to. It's going to be a bit of a different paradigm. And I've been maybe successful with half of my friends. The other half are still giving up. Probably once a week I have to psych them up for college apps because they're really not for it. (1st interview)

Here, Joshua referred to the target goal of achieving a 4.0 throughout high school, indicating that he was only able to do it during his junior year but was more successful than his peers. Apparently, in their minds, their GPAs put Ivy League institutions out of reach. The way Joshua talked about his friends made it sound like once the Ivy League was ruled out, they gave up on other competitive institutions. In this community, where it was Ivy League (or Stanford) or bust — "bust" denoted the local community college that functioned under a different paradigm from what Gunn students were accustomed to. This was the narrative that Joshua believed at the beginning of his senior year.

Senior year was a difficult journey for Joshua. He spent much of the fall in the throes of depression when he spent upwards of sixteen hours a day in bed. During this time, he dug himself into an academic pit that proved to be his breaking point[27]:

[27] Joshua and I were watching a video diary that he kept during part of his senior year. The video has since been removed from YouTube.

Joshua: All four of the teachers that I had asked for extensions, I didn't have any or nothing. They all rejected my request for extensions and all gave me zeros for my finals and my final essays, final papers. My GPA dropped from a 4.8 to a 3.4. All my grades dropped about two letters. That actually comes into a play in a bit. This week I was arguing [with] the administration about it. That's my dog. As you can see it is second semester, throwing lots of parties. Still lots of depression just sitting in bed. Sitting. On January 22 I kind of gave up my focus on administration over trying to preserve my grades. I had to submit these grades to colleges. Taking it from a 4.8 to a 3.4 was kind of dramatic.

On January 22nd I attempted suicide and this is me being sent to the hospital where I was kept for about four days while I was recovering. You'll see it was the only day I missed.[28] This one 22 to 25 where I wasn't allowed to have a phone with me. Then just trying to continue, this is my water polo team. We won the […] Championships which was really awesome for us. What we start to see towards January 26th my life gets significantly better. I meet this girl who ends up introducing me to a lot of her friends. I end up talking to them, introducing me to a lot of their friends. I started to explode into this new chapter of my life which you'll start to see here.

This is me. I wrote a letter to my best friend who took his life. He took his life the same day I attempted suicide as well.[29] We have about five attempted suicides per week at Gunn High School. We're about a class of 400. I wrote him a letter and as Chinese tradition if you ... Are you Chinese?

Johanna: I'm Korean.

Joshua: Okay you write a letter. You burn it and that's how you speak. I just want to let him know how much I miss him and how much he made an impact me. (2nd interview)

I was shocked and horrified when Joshua told me he attempted suicide. I had finished my first round of interviews thinking that he was one of the most confident and put-together students in the sample. Confidence can mask bravado, and in Joshua's case, it was the veneer of well-being that obscured the early stages of a severe illness. To my surprise, Laura downplayed Joshua's suicide attempt when I interviewed her:

[28] He missed filming video entries.
[29] There may be some confusion with the dates. Joshua's best friend died on January 24, 2015.

> I don't know that he actually attempted it or would have done anything but who knows. What happened was he had been going through depression. He finished out the first semester and didn't take one final and didn't turn in a paper. Now he had all Christmas vacation to have done it and he didn't. I think he just thought that they'd give him good grades anyway and they didn't.
>
> The suicide gesture I would say is he met with the vice principal and the vice principal had said, "I can't change your grades. I can't let you take that test late. The grades have already been submitted. Had you talked to your teacher, like at the time at the final." It was wrong of him really to think that he could have had … The vice principal even called me and told me. I said, "Do what is the right thing to do." I think that he did the right thing, but Joshua is angry and I think decided himself that he just had so royally put … whatever the expression is tombstone or a grave. He had just… yeah it was not now going to get into … and I think he didn't get into those.
>
> I think had he been able to pull it together and been a little more mature about how he was handling all of it, he probably would have had a different scenario, but he did truly get … I think that did determine a lot for him. but [it's] still not worth taking your life over. He drove over to the train station, but immediately he was texting his friends and they said call the hotline. He called the hotline, then of course we called the hotline like immediately the police showed up and he was put in a 72-hour hold. He was in the hospital for that. (2nd interview)

According to Laura's account, the severity of Joshua's academic decline was not as serious as what he described. Her unwillingness to intervene on his behalf with the administration was consistent with her belief that it is okay to let children fail, as failure can be an opportunity for growth. Though I did not reproduce it here, Joshua painted his teachers in an unflattering light, indicating they were unsympathetic to his depression. Laura's account suggested Joshua felt entitled to break rules.[30]

Academic pressure exacerbated by mental illness drove him to the maladaptive coping strategy of disengaging from the problem (Wakefield 2013). However, the role of the context on fostering this pressure cannot be discounted. Joshua himself attributed his suicidal thinking to the academic environment, which he talked about as follows:

[30] Laura came across as uncaring here, but immediately after the quoted passage, she told me that during Madison's senior year, it came out that Madison had been sexually molested for a decade, and the family had to deal with aftermath of that revelation. Perhaps Joshua's senior year crisis seemed less severe comparatively.

> When insecurity manifests, you become so vulnerable and receptive to your inner critic. The anxiety that is so well propagated by your peers who are undermining any sort of confidence you could be having through this process by these humblebrags, these one ups, these people pushing me in the hallways because I only got a 2100 on my SAT, stuff like that. My friend getting pushed around in Physics class for only getting a 32 on the ACT which I don't know how well you guys know these scores, but those are 95th and 99th percentile scores respectively in this country. It's an interesting academic bullying environment. It's cool when it's September and I'm succeeding in everything and la, la, la. Once you reach December where you can't keep such an unsustainable pace of pulling 17 all nighters in one semester averaging three hours of sleep a night, losing 25 pounds over the course of a month. I weighed about 128 during the first semester, I weigh 172 pounds right now. You're literally talking about a 44 pound difference. I'm going to pray that my math is right if that's a soundbite, which I believe it is. It really takes a lot out of you being at this high school. (2nd interview)

Joshua's language here must be interpreted with caution, as by his own admission he was conscious that he could be providing a "soundbite" for my research. It is unclear whether his use of the word "push" here is metaphorical or a physical form of bullying. Joshua's litany of stressors – 17 all nighters, averaging three hours of sleep a night, losing weight — may be factual, but they also may be an exaggeration for the sake of the interview.[31] Yet, despite what Joshua portrayed as anxiety, poor physical health, and bullying, Joshua was committed to living in Silicon Valley after college, even going so far as to want his kids to attend the Palo Alto public schools. This is how insidious the narrative about Palo Alto is: it compels people to embrace it even as it sucks the life out of them.

A METHOD AND A MADNESS

When people in the area ask me about my research, they are usually curious about the takeaways, the advice I would pass along to parents raising children in the Valley. I am always quick to say that the price of entry— according to Zillow, the median home list price in Palo Alto was $2,988,000 in February 2019 (Zillow.com 2019) — is not worth the high-pressure cost

[31] For example, earlier in the interview Joshua mentioned spending upwards of 16 hours a day in bed, which contradicts his sleep estimates in this passage. The discrepancy could be due to changes in his sleep patterns over the course of the semester.

of living there. Thus, I found myself perplexed when Joshua was adamant about his desire to return to the area after college.

Though Joshua did not say so explicitly, he had a love-hate relationship with Palo Alto, particularly in regard to Gunn. He said that the pressure and stress were terrible, but they also pushed him to excel more than he would have, had he been in more relaxed environment: "I've seen first-hand that as painful as this process was, it's the reason I got into USC. Yes, I put in the hours, but I'm a symptom of, I guess my productivity was a symptom of this very poisoned culture. It's a method. It's a method and it's madness." Prior to this summary of his high school experience, he said that he wanted to raise a family in Palo Alto, presumably despite the "poisoned culture."

Laura acknowledged that Joshua's sheltered environment may have played a role in the pressure he felt to go to a good school to maintain a standard of living similar to his parents. She speculated that it might be an issue specific to Silicon Valley:

> One other thought and I don't know if this plays into it or not. This would be specific to this area and obviously not across the United States. We live in an area where the parents have done well and even financially have done well. I wonder if there is a part of fear in Joshua that he doesn't know any other world than this. If he can't maintain this level of what he feels is what you need to live. My husband and I came from not even middle, more lower-middle socioeconomic families. We knew that you could just get by and you're fine. You're happy like it was fine. That's a guess. I don't know if there at some level. Some of the things he says sometimes makes me wonder if he's worried about that, that he has to go to the best school in order to do well or else somehow it's going to be a terrible life or something. (2nd interview)

Laura was a first-generation college student who did not grow up in the kind of wealthy enclave she raised her children in. Thus, for her, the American Dream played out the way it was supposed to: she did better than her parents in terms of educational attainment and occupational prestige (her father was career Navy and her mother was a stay-at-home mother). Joshua reaped the benefits of his parents' accomplishments, but faced the daunting task of living out the

American Dream himself, when his parents were physicians with credentials from Berkeley, Stanford, Yale, and University of California-Santa Barbara. What Laura implied was that given his parents' wealth, he was never in danger of living a "terrible life" even if he did not go to the "best school." Joshua's fear of downward mobility speaks to how entrenched the narrative is that each generation must surpass the one that proceeded them in terms of accomplishments and material wealth regardless of whether this is possible or even necessary. In fact, given Joshua's family's extreme affluence, he was likely to be protected from any significant downward relative mobility[32] despite how he might *feel* about his success relative to his parents (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2012).

REGIONAL EXCEPTIONALISM

The specter of downward mobility casts a pall over the children of Palo Alto's upper-class inhabitants. There is the perception that migration to the region has coincided with a shift in its demographics, which Joshua shared:

Johanna: Is your high school unusual compared to other people's?

Joshua: Incredibly unusual. This high school is, this area… I'm not going to say we're some sort of special snowflake. Silicon Valley is the snowflake itself. Ironically without snow, but. It is this – as I call it – this intellectual vacuum where anybody around the world, "Oh, you want a tech startup? You go here. You got a software engineering degree? You go here. And congratulations, anybody who just got out of an engineering school is going to head here. Anybody who wants to be a doctor heads here. Anyone who wants to be a lawyer heads here. And you just get this concentration of yuppies who then marry yuppies, have kids who grow up to be yuppies. And then what's crazy is the people who were originally here, they're like, 'screw this.' They move out and they're replaced by people from abroad who want to get into the game. They're people who are like, rich people from Taiwan who want their kids to grow up in America. They do that, too. So it gets worse every year. You actually look at an elementary school, Bing Elementary School fifty years ago. And it's entirely Caucasians. And now you view it today and it's just this completely cosmopolitan mix because so much of the international

[32] Relative mobility "measures how a child's ranking in the income distribution compares to her parents'" (McElwee 2014).

> community had been vacuum pulled into this area. And it's funny because also these people, they're smart. And they birth smart kids. And they condition and groom smart kids. (1st interview)

Here, Joshua characterized Silicon Valley as an "intellectual vacuum" in the midst of a population shift. The cosmopolitanism that Joshua referred to was a result of an atypical variant of social mobility that, while not unique to Silicon Valley, marked it as a "special snowflake." As longer-term residents opt to move out of Palo Alto, they are replaced by people like the Storms who have already achieved upper-class status, as well as people actively pursuing social mobility who are determined to give their children the resources of the Palo Alto Unified School District. Thus, there is a "press" of families crowding each other at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid. This creates pressure that students in Palo Alto acutely feel.

Although I think it was in part an artifact of the self-described less-intense families I interviewed, I consistently heard that the blame for pressure students experience was a family-specific phenomenon. There was a logic to this: students attend school in the same communities, so the variable is family life. Laura captured the sentiment that families are responsible for the high-pressure dynamic:

> But in a sense the expectations are not really coming from the school. It's really coming from the families. You know, the families are very…are usually very either successful or intelligent. A lot of professors' kids, you know, Stanford professors' kids go to the school. A lot of entrepreneurs, successful business people, are all living in this area. So there's a high expectation for your kids if you're in that kind of a family. I'm sure some of it is a very conscious and the kids are told that they…But I think a lot of it is just subconscious. (1st interview)

As Laura said here, it was common for families in this area to be "either successful or intelligent," and, I would add, or both. Laura mentioned certain kinds of families that set high expectations for their children — notably believing that hers was not one of those families. However, it was the unconscious element of expectation setting that makes it insidious. This kind of unconscious absorption and perpetuation of upper-class dispositions exemplifies Bourdieu's

(1977) concept of habitus as an engine that drives social reproduction as Swartz (1997:103) explained: “chances of success or failure are internalized then transformed into individual aspirations or expectations; these are in turn externalized in action that tends to reproduce the objective structure of life chances.”

Well-credentialed parents do not necessarily comprehend how the college choice process has changed since they were students, or they did not attend postsecondary education in the United States. The feeling that elite college admissions is a black box lends itself to an arm’s race in which students struggle to top each other’s achievements. Some parents’ reservations about engaging in this kind of escalation are drowned out by the community-wide recognition of the narratives that extol the importance of attending an elite college, regardless of the cost. Joshua described this as being caught in what he called a “social crossfire”:

> Even if their parents are completely apathetic, it causes ridiculous social crossfire from amidst all their peers or their parents who have come to expect a kind of academic performance that their other peers provide. When you look at the world, you always see a relative looking glass. It's hard to say that the smartest kid at some Alabama high school ... He might be completely below average here, and would not be treated like he is a smart person. He would be treated like he's below average. For the sake of Palo Alto, he would be. This hypothetical person. (2nd interview)

In an earlier section, Laura pointed to schools, family, and community as the three factors contributing to creating an unhealthy environment for Palo Alto teenagers, and the influence of peers should not be minimized. These were the children of the successful professionals who themselves were groomed to be successful. Parents who set high expectations for their children raised the bar for everyone else who got caught in the “social crossfire.” It was notable that Joshua shared this observation in his second interview, after he had begun to question the narratives he had been socialized to believe. He had the insight that achievement is contextual — a relative looking glass — and that an excellent student from Alabama might be below average in Palo Alto. Of course, here Joshua assumed that a smart student in Alabama would not be able

to compete with the Gunn students, which revealed his engrained notions of Gunn and Gunn students' superiority compared to the rest of the country.

Unfortunately, being trapped on the other side of the looking glass, as it were, Palo Alto adolescents were immersed in a stew of peers operating at the highest levels of achievement, resulting in a volatile and stressful environment.

ACADEMIC BULLYING AND STUDENT STRESS

One of the reasons high school was so stressful was that students faced the what Joshua called the "crossfire" every day. They were caught in a system that fostered both the will to excel and the fear of failure. Joshua told me that everyone kept tabs on each other, and I asked him what it was like to build friendships in this kind of environment:

> Well, in the most amusing way, we stress each other out, comparing each other, chastising each other. It's also what we bond over. Life is so stressful, and we are part of that perpetuating spiral, that, sure, you know what? You're in water polo. You talk about the game. Or you do debate. You talk about the tournament. Or in UN you talk about the conference coming up. (1st interview)

On the one hand, students shared common ground given their common activities and application milestones, such as standardized tests and essays. However, I heard bravado in Joshua's claim that students' shared stressors were a source of amusement. Adolescent negotiation between identity versus role confusion (Erikson 1968) is tested in this kind of atmosphere where students not only compare each other, they also compete with each other. Tension among students manifested according to local values:

> We haven't had a fight in ten years. We just bully each other about their SAT scores. More true than I'd actually like to admit. And then we just, I think we see ourselves stacking up…almost I think we view ourselves in an elitist way. (1st interview)

This kind of academic bullying is neither amusing nor, I believe, cost-free, though there is little empirical evidence of its long-term effects. Laura recounted the posturing around the SATs as a

form of passive-aggressive shaming. For example, when Joshua said he got a 2200 on the SAT, an acquaintance assumed that meant he was going to take it again. Joshua's use of the word "bullying" here is telling, as Laura told me that Joshua was a victim of bullying when he was in middle school to the point where he switched schools. He used the pronoun "we" when he talked about students comparing how they stacked up against each other to fit a self-image of being "elite." The "we" here was probably a form of deflection in lieu of the more egocentric "I." Joshua viewed himself as part of this elite and felt the pressure to have this validated through his college admissions.

Joshua created a statistical model to predict his likelihood of getting into the schools he was interested in. It was based on factors like historic acceptance rates, SAT scores, and admission rates for various demographics, such as legacies or race. I asked him how he evaluated his chances compared to other students and he framed it in terms of how he compared to his peers.

> I also kind of looked at people I knew who got accepted and rejected and think, "Am I [student's name]? He didn't get in. But [student's name] got in." And kind of also see how I stack up as a person, how I stack up as a statistic, how I stack up school or not school, to get that mental gauge of is this in my mind going to be difficult or not. (1st interview)

Note the shift in language from evaluating admissions chances to stacking up as a person. This showed the close link that students make between performance for colleges and their sense of self. I asked Joshua to elaborate on how he stacked up as a person.

> How I stack up as a person. I think that we can… your GPA and your SAT is mostly what is easy to report on a website. But they don't really say, like, "Oh, yeah. We accepted eighty percent of people who did ballet, debate, and croquet." So you kind of need to figure out, like, "Oh, I know that [student's name] does a million things after school. And he got in. And I know that [student's name] has better grades, but he doesn't do a million things." Kind of think of what my life is like as far as how much am I pushing myself, how much is he pushing himself. Everybody's very much so compared to each other. Everybody's very insecure about, like, who they are. And everybody, with

> that in mind, we're all very competitive to think that we're the one who's gonna get in. (1st interview)

This comparison of self to peers exemplified the firmly external approach to meaning making that Joshua exhibited at the beginning of the study. He could not articulate a self separate from the person he was going to present in his applications. He regarded his peers as his competition and evaluated himself accordingly. He claimed that everybody felt this way, that everyone suffered from similar insecurities. Peer comparison and insecurity is characteristic of the teenage years, but it had a particular tenor in Palo Alto where students learned to value themselves based on their academic achievement.

Though the association between psychological profile and self-authorship has not been studied, I speculate that Joshua's mixture of surface overconfidence and (according to Laura) low self-esteem tied directly into how strongly he was subject to external narratives in the interpersonal dimension. As a former victim of bullying, the way he thought about himself was possibly influenced by how he perceived himself through others' eyes. This may have been why it was important to him that he attend a prestigious school — a form of validation recognized in the currency of the community. Laura also thought that Joshua's self-image was tied to seeing himself as a serious candidate for the institutions the community holds in most esteem, Stanford being the most prominent. She admitted she encouraged him to aim high, which lent tacit support to the idea that he was smart:

> Joshua just kind of threw his hat the ring and I think just went for it, which is fine. I encouraged him to. I said, "What you just…why not? You just apply wherever you want to go." Partly I think he's insecure and so needed it for his own sense of self, which is hopefully getting better. (2nd interview)

Parents like Laura are in a difficult situation. She was one of many parents who tell their children they can do anything, when realistically, not all kids can go to their first choice of college. The one time she suggested that Joshua take a different path, perhaps even attending the local

community college, he became upset and accused her of insinuating that he could not get in anywhere else. This attempt to relieve some of Joshua's pressure backfired. Community college could have been a viable postsecondary path if presented outside the stigma that accompanies the merciless college application process particular to Silicon Valley.

Joshua ended up applying to a number of schools that could be considered reaches for all but the most outstanding students. He ranked his schools in order of preference, and I have reproduced this list in Table 7.

Table 7 Joshua Storm's College Applications and Outcomes in Order of Preference

Institution	Outcome
Dartmouth	Early Decision, rejected
Yale	Rejected
Stanford	Rejected
Princeton	Rejected
Harvard	Rejected
Duke	Rejected
University of Southern California	Accepted —> Final choice
UC Berkeley	Rejected
UCLA	Rejected
Carnegie Mellon	Waitlist
Tufts	Rejected
UC San Diego	Rejected
UC Davis	Accepted
UC Santa Barbara	Accepted
UC Irvine	Waitlist
Northeastern	Accepted
Occidental	Accepted
William & Mary	Waitlist
Lewis & Clark	Accepted

Joshua's top choices were heavily weighted towards tier I private institutions. Among the top schools that he liked — Joshua mentioned the saying "Ivy or bust" — Dartmouth stood out for an odd mix of reasons: when he visited, the weather was cold and there was snow on the ground; Hanover was a cute town; everybody seemed to know the tour guide. What ultimately tipped the balance in Dartmouth's favor was the acceptance rate for early decision applicants:

> I think that when I looked at Dartmouth, I was sitting on the bed. I was looking at Dartmouth stuff and I was looking at the admission rates. And I saw something that said thirty percent. I was like, sold. Because it was like this school, if I just commit, that's a thirty percent rate. But that's so, that's going to be a huge factor on if I can get in or not.

> That really sold me, and I knew that I could happily commit to the school if they were going to guarantee me the chance of getting in. (1st interview – parent[33])

Thus, a mixture of emotional response and rational decision-making affected Joshua's early application planning. Cost was not a factor, so Joshua could afford to make his choice based on emotional resonance. In the first family interviews, Joshua talked at length about Dartmouth and the benefits of going to a name brand school more generally, in terms of future job prospects. USC barely came up except that Joshua's sister went there and his grandfather went there for two years, which meant Joshua could factor legacy status into his application strategizing.

After he had been rejected from his top choices (all within the span of a few unpleasant days), Joshua whittled his choices down to USC and University of California-Davis, which he had ranked highest in order of preference for the schools he was admitted to (see Table 7). He had decided on USC two days before our second interview, and he already wore the merchandise when we met. Laura thought Davis would have been a great choice as well, since it was closer and populated by "good, smart, decent kids," but she fully supported Joshua's final decision.

There was a distinct shift between the two interviews in how both Laura and Joshua talked about USC. When he went through his final list (ranked according to a formula weighing factors like preference – he how felt about the school – and prestige), he used words like "favorite" and "lucky" to describe his decision. When I asked him why USC was his favorite, he told me:

> [recounting an experience when Joshua was a sophomore and was visiting his sister, who was a USC student] She showed me around the next day and I just fell in love. It was the best campus I have ever seen. I was like, "I want to go exactly here. This is the school for me." I didn't tour any other schools for a year and a half. Literally didn't see a single other school. We went on a trip after that to the Ivy Leagues. Some I hated. Some I loved. Nothing like USC, but I actually really loved them enough to where I would commit to the schools that weren't USC. It was clear that it was up there from the get-go. (2nd interview)

[33] Joshua eavesdropped on and commented during my interview with his mother.

Joshua made no such claims about USC during his first interview, as he was preoccupied with the prospect of attending Dartmouth. Presumably, Dartmouth was one of the Ivy League schools he loved, since he applied there under the Early Decision option, but I did not get the impression it narrowly edged out USC in his preferences; it was not at all clear to me that USC was "up there from the get-go." In the context of the question, Joshua may have meant favorite compared to his acceptances, and he may have meant lucky that he actually had choice. This is an example of how students change the story they tell about themselves to resolve the pressure to attend a top school and the reality of the low odds of actually doing so.

Laura had been more circumspect in the first interview about her hopes for Joshua – she had a more realistic sense of the competition than he did – but her tone about USC also had shifted:

> I think in the end it all worked out. He applied early decision at Dartmouth but truthfully, actually he didn't say "I want to go to USC more, but Dartmouth was more main school." He was throwing his hat in the ring early decision for that, but in the end, he's going where he wanted to go. (2nd interview)

Here, she implied that even though Dartmouth was his first choice based on Early Decision, he had *really* wanted to go to USC all along. I had not received that impression at all in our first interview. USC had seemed like a "why not?" school because of its familiarity. For example, Laura and her husband had not been enthusiastic about Brown because of their perception that Providence, Rhode Island was unsafe. While the area around USC has a similar reputation, they were more comfortable with USC because Madison had not had any trouble there.

Joshua happened to have been visiting Madison when he received his USC acceptance, so he was able to form an emotional connection immediately when all of her friends were excited for him. The decision was made easier because Joshua had already ranked his institutions in order of preference, and USC was the highest he was accepted to. Although Joshua's ranking list

was in part subjective, it was also a rational way of taking some emotional vagaries out of the mix. It allowed him to make a logical choice that was validated by the emotional resonance he experienced when he was visiting.

Joshua's desire to attend a highly ranked university was in part due to how it fit into his image of himself — indeed how he crafted an image for himself — as well as his fear that living in Palo Alto would be out of reach if he did not follow the path of going to a good school, getting a well-compensated job, and becoming successful enough to settle in the region. When we talked about how his college choice process turned out, he said:

> It sounds really stupid, but if I could do it all over again, if I had to put myself in this entire thing, I still would. It got me in USC. I would still feel like this crippling self-hatred and torture and pain and unwillingness to live. It means this much to us. It literally does. It means this much to us. I've cried when I got in…Now I know that for the rest of my life, I'm actually going to be okay. I'm going to be able to afford a house here. I'm going to be able to get a job. I'm going to be able to raise a family. I made it. That's what all this meant to us. This is surviving here in Palo Alto. In order to stay, you have to bust it harder than anybody else in the world because otherwise you can't afford to. You're going to have to leave. (2nd interview)

Joshua's whole family lived in Silicon Valley, and his sister planned to return when she graduated at the end of the school year. He was committed to living in the region long-term, and this fear of having to leave because of not being able to find a job or afford a house loomed large. This pull to live in the area resided alongside what he described as "crippling self-hatred, torture, and pain." As an outside observer, it was unsettling to hear a 17-year-old describe his life in these terms, especially when he honestly seemed to believe the ends justified the means. His conviction that getting into USC was a guarantee that he would be economically secure for the rest of his life was also troubling. It spoke to the idea of higher education as a magic bullet for maintaining class status. I suspect this was partly teenage hyperbole as well as his enthusiasm from having just returned from visiting USC, but it also tapped into broader cultural narratives about the reason for investing in higher education. Unfortunately, Joshua's confidence in the

purchasing power of his future degree may have been misguided. STEM fields are the highest paying majors, yet the median mid-career STEM annual salary is $76,000 (Carnevale, Cheah, and Hanson 2015), which is well below the income necessary to afford a home in Palo Alto.

PARENTAL ACHIEVEMENT AND EMBODIED EXPECTATIONS

Attuned to their children's pressure to fulfill the image of being part of the "elite," many parents in Silicon Valley attempt to remain vigilant about the kind of messages they send their kids, perhaps as a corrective against the community-level attitudes. However, there can be a tension between the messages that parents send implicitly versus explicitly, and of course children are sensitive to this discrepancy.

One of the most potent sources of implicit messaging is the bar that parents set just by virtue of whom they are. In this way, parents' biographies influence their children's identity development. A characteristic of maturation is the ability for children to differentiate themselves from their parents. Accepting or rejecting their parents as educational role models is one aspect of differentiation.

Students with parents who have attended elite institutions may consider their parents' alma maters when formulating their choice set. This is partly due to seeing parents as the most consistent and present role models. Parents' own level of involvement in creating the application lists also plays a role in pushing a child to their alma mater or similar institutions. There is also the more strategic and pragmatic fact that legacy status affords some amount of advantage in admissions.

Deciding whether or not to apply to apply to a parent's alma mater can be an important milestone in a student's process of differentiation from their parents. Parents are among the most ubiquitous and central sources of the external voice that these students encounter. Students

internalize and even project their parents' expectations, whether they are articulated or not. Laura worried about this as she reflected on Joshua's rocky path to his postsecondary destination:

> There's a part of me that would have loved to have seen him get into Yale or his … [step-father's name] and he has a different biologic dad. His dad went to Yale and it would've been fun to see some kind of … Then a part of me wonders, "Do I have that?" It's a very nonspoken bar, but my kids have always said they felt anxious because I went to good schools. Their dad went to good schools. Their stepmom went to good schools. Their stepdad went to good schools. We all went to some versions of Yale, Stanford, Berkeley. Even more than the unspoken, maybe subliminally there's messaging we give our kids that we don't want to admit we do, but we do. (2nd interview)

As Laura related, her children grew up with family role models who attended elite institutions. The Storm family went out of its way to cultivate a family ethos that emphasized getting the best education for each child regardless of status. Laura is a physician in the community, and she was conscious of the pressures that Palo Alto students face, and yet she acknowledged that there are unspoken messages students pick up from their parents' own pedigrees that could be considered value judgments. She suggested that these unspoken messages may be more powerful than verbal messaging, which children may experience as the difference between speech and actions. These kinds of tacit expectations are what I call *embodied expectations*. To use Laura's language, it is the anxiety that students feel by virtue of being raised by intimidatingly accomplished parents. The fear of letting their parents down may compel students to push themselves beyond what is reasonable or, indeed, their capabilities.

Yet despite Laura's best intentions, Joshua remembered times when his parents revealed their implicit biases in favor of elite education. Adults in this area get as caught up in the status game as their children, which is part of the problem.

> Joshua: The pressure of this whole keeping up with the Jones's or Changs or Goldbergs however you, what have you of this area of like, "Billy got into Princeton and Jeffery got into Harvard, so what is my kid going to get into?"

Johanna: Is that what counts for social credibility in this area?

Joshua: God, don't even make me start. Every time I'm with my parents, I remember sitting in the elevator last week and [my stepfather] said, "Oh yeah." He said to his wife, "You have to meet this woman, her name is blah, blah, blah." No, he said, "Her name is blah, blah, blah very smart, went to Yale, blah, blah, blah." I stopped him. "You realize what you just said right there." He said, "What, what, what?" I'm like, "You completely just tied their intellectual worth to the college they went to. You've been telling me for the last month that that doesn't matter, but this is like the tenth time I've heard you attribute where someone went to college with their intellectual success." The tenth time for him but the umpteenth time for everyone else. I always hear everybody attributing everything to it. People rule out colleges that they love just because it lacks prestige factor. The name is everything here. (2nd interview)

In this exchange, Joshua basically called out his stepfather for his perceived hypocrisy in telling his stepson that where he goes to college does not matter, while at the same time judging other people based on where they went to college. I did not meet Joshua's stepfather, but I am confident that Joshua's parents truly believed that he should not pick his school based on name, even while they slipped into the Valley culture of using education as an indicator of social value. As an adolescent engaged in forging a sense of identity while under the community microscope of his college choice process, Joshua had to negotiate what his final choice would signal in terms of his high school achievements as well as his adult potential.

SELF-AUTHORSHIP IN THE SPOTLIGHT

As individuals develop self-authorship, they may not progress at the same rate across dimensions (cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal), and the leading edge of development may shift as they move across contexts and have a range of experiences. In both of my interviews with Joshua, the interpersonal dimension stood out as having the strongest impact on his meaning making. This was in part due to the specific experience I was studying — applying to college, which by its very nature involves external evaluation in the form of presenting oneself to an admissions committee.

Joshua was strategic in how he engaged with the achievement narrative to show himself in the best light. Joshua's recognition that he could do this is evidence of his early External interpersonal meaning making. He performed this kind of identity work in the specific context of how he handled the inevitable question of where he was applying to college. In his social circles, going to college was never a question; people were interested in where students were applying and more specifically, where they were applying *early*. Joshua learned that this was an important distinction for signaling achievement:

> Joshua: I think last year I would usually start with — it's almost a social sense of its own — I'd start with, "Oh, Harvard, Princeton, Yale." People would laugh at you, a little bit because it's like, "Okay, cool, so is everyone. But what are you actually applying to?" And so I actually found myself — it's a little more respectable when I would do it a slightly different way. People say, "Oh are you applying to any college soon?" "Oh, I'm actually making an early decision." Or if they say, "How many colleges are you doing?" "I'm actually making an early decision. I could just easily say 24 and list 'em off. "Oh, that's cool." Which means they don't really care. Or they'll say, oh, what coll- early? Very exciting. Because an early decision really means that you have a good shot. And so people start to believe you a little more. And I say, "Oh, Dartmouth." And so people say, "Oh, okay." So they see you in that light. They see, like, great student going to a great place. If you shoot too high, people don't take it seriously. Nobody is guaranteed a shot at Harvard. If you say you're applying to Harvard people say, "Well you know, best of luck." But if you say you're applying to Tufts, people will be like, "Great. Smart kid."
>
> Johanna: When you say people, do you mean adults? [Joshua: Students too] Oh, students.
>
> Joshua: No adults too. Adults too. If I think about it, adults too. (1st interview)

The way that Joshua learned to navigate the "where are you applying" conversation exemplifies the escalation that occurs among Gunn students. Colleges have a number of ways of funneling students through the application cycle. The five main types are early decision, early action (restrictive or not), regular, rolling, and open. Early decision and early action deadlines area typically a few months earlier than the deadline for regular admissions (sometime in November),

and students may find out their application status before the deadline for regular admissions. Early decision is a binding agreement: students must attend if they are accepted. Early action is non-binding, and students do not have to render their final decision until the regular commitment date, typically May 1st. Some schools like Stanford and Harvard use restricted early action, meaning that students are only allowed to apply to the one institution early, but they still do not have to render a final decision until May. Under regular admissions, students do not find out their application status until the majority of the class receives notice, usually in March/April. Rolling admissions applications are reviewed as they come in, and open admissions admits everyone who applies as long as the school or program is not oversubscribed.

Applying to the most elite schools for regular admissions means little at Gunn because it is assumed that students will throw their hat in the ring since everyone in this context does. This is not normal college application behavior, and it shows how skewed the college application process is at Gunn. Applying to a school early is perceived as being a more accurate indicator of a student's accomplishments, both past and potential — "a great student going to a great place" because a student's early application is supposed to a be a school where the student has a good chance of getting in. Early admission programs tend to be used at the more selective schools, and there is a perceived advantage since admissions rates are higher among these pools compared to regular decision (Clinedinst and Patel 2018).

The kind of identity work that occurs when people ask each other where they are applying exemplifies how the interaction between self and other is a performance. Additionally, it is a performance with real consequences in terms of self-concept, as students learn to regard themselves only through the lens of how they stack up compared to others. This constant

comparison is endemic to adolescence, but it is exacerbated for Palo Alto teenagers who also craft their identities according to perceptions of what elite college admissions committees value.

As I mentioned earlier, in the academic year I knew Joshua, his meaning- making capacity shifted from early External to the cusp of late External. This shift was evident in the orientation from accepting external authorities without question to beginning to see the shortcomings in this approach (Baxter Magolda and King 2012). Prior to senior year, Joshua was committed to being the kind of person he thought admissions committees were looking for — what he described as picking the sparkles that would suit him best. His failure to get into any of his top choice schools was a developmentally effective experience that made him question the value in following the formulas he thought would bring him success.

In his first interview, Joshua talked about his interest in working on cars, and this proved to be an apt metaphor for how he made sense of the pressures he faced:

> You love to drive and you're in your auto shop – these are all examples of me personally – I'm in auto, I talk to my friends about cars. Cars in the market, car repairs. I'm petrified. Even though I actually build cars in auto shop, I don't touch my car. I'm just petrified I'll ruin something. It's fine. Hand me a hack saw and a really nice thing we're working on, it's like, "Let's go." But when it's mine, I'm just so petrified. (1st interview)

Joshua had no problem getting his hands dirty working on cars, even nice ones, within the constraints of auto shop. But when it came to his own car, he was petrified. This is analogous to the way he could tell his friends with absolute sincerity that they had postsecondary options, that they should not feel like failures with 3.5 GPAs and no hope of getting into Stanford. Yet, he could not apply this logic to his own life and thus checked all the boxes that he believed would garner him admission to a top school. He feared what it would mean for his future otherwise.

In our second interview, Joshua could articulate that there were flaws in the values of his community, yet he could not throw off their influence, which led to his holding contradictory views. This could be seen in how he talked about a future living in Silicon Valley:

Johanna: How do people define success?

Joshua: Success is where you go to college. Once you get out of college, where you work, how much money you help bring in the home, if you drive a Model S or don't drive a Model S. Yeah.

Johanna: It sounds like you can see that attitude for what it is.

Joshua: Certainly, it's a bunch of baloney.

Johanna: How do you avoid it at all? Is it just you can't be here?

Joshua: You really must know what you're getting into if you even step foot once in this area. There's no such thing as avoiding it. As terrible as it is to say, if you don't like it, you can leave. You have the most expensive house in the entire country. If you sell that house, you could live in a palace, anywhere else, the entire world. If you don't like it, you literally can and should leave. I don't understand why they are here if they don't like it. It's an inevitability of the status quo that is set in place here of these tech jobs, Stanford University and Berkeley. Just great colleges, Great industries that all need these really great people. (2nd interview)

Here, he was unambiguous in his assertion that the local signifiers of success were "baloney." He also indicated that buying into this narrative was a defining and inescapable facet of life in the Valley, such that people who did not like it had no choice but to leave. Yet despite this negative portrayal of the Silicon Valley status quo, Joshua looked forward to embracing it in the future.

> You couldn't work in McDonald's and stay in Silicon Valley. We all love it here for whatever fucked up reason. Pardon my language. We want to stay. In order to stay, you have to work this hard. We're committed to that. I want to stay here. My family lives here. I want to live with my family. I'm like really committed to that, you know? I'm a very family-oriented person. A lot of people here feel the same way. I don't know. That's what we all do. We all do it for one reason. I would say a very overarching reason is family. Believe me I almost sometimes wish I had [been] born in Albuquerque or something. It would have been a hell of lot easier when I was in high school.

> Now I'm spoiled and I wake up every morning to sunshine and trees and clean, eco-friendly weather. There's no going back. I had to put in the hours so that one day I'll be able to get my Model S and drive my kids to Palo Alto. (2nd interview)

Joshua's interpretation of the success narrative exemplified the kind of black and white thinking that characterized his late external meaning making capacity: Silicon Valley residents have to either buy into the region's values to be able to afford to live in the area, or they have to leave. Even if this value system is "baloney," he still bought into it. This tension is consistent with late external meaning making, in which students are aware of multiple perspectives but still rely on outside authorities to evaluate conflicting narratives (Baxter Magolda and King 2012).

Joshua was the product of the *concerted cultivation* that Lareau (2011) documented among the middle class (though in this case the Storm family could be considered upper class). His parents taught him to have confidence in himself while providing scaffolding, both financial and emotional, should he falter. Thus, by age 17, he had reached an equilibrium with his espoused values and the habitus in which he had been raised. But the very privilege that enabled Joshua's access to tutors and rich life experiences was also a factor in his undoing. A consequence of growing up believing he *could* do anything was also growing up believing that he *should* do what prevailing narratives told him to. Moreover, this confidence in his agency blinded him to the limitations that his privileged position afforded him, because he believed that he alone was responsible for his choices. In the first interview, when I asked Joshua how he persisted when many of his friends of his friends downgraded their ambitions, he told me:

> Because my parents literally said, "You can do anything." So I can do anything. I can do *anything*. That's so cool. And then I *choose* to walk the same path as the twenty people in shackles next to me. I am making this march not on my own, but instead of being pushed by my parents, I'm being, well… hard to explain it I guess. Well, instead of being pushed by my parents, I'm being led by my parents. Instead of them forcing me where to go, they're helping me get where I chose to go. And that's, I think, what has made me not break. Because at the end of the day I think I was the only one who *chose* this path. (1st interview)

This is the paradox that families face. Parents have the privilege to let their kids do anything to be happy, and this leads to students opting to take paths that result in their unhappiness. Like Joshua here, they feel like it's a choice without realizing that everything about their lives has led them to a narrow set of choices. Joshua does not blame his parents because he doesn't feel like he is being pushed by his parents, but he does not see all of the other invisible hands that have influenced him.

By our second interview, Joshua was more disillusioned with the way that following the formula to get into college had failed him. That said, the formula did not totally fail him — he was going to USC which *U.S. News & World Report* ranks in its top 25 schools — but he faced a number of rejections from more highly regarded schools. Yet compared to his optimism in the first interview, when he claimed that going to Gunn had been good for him, he was more circumspect about the shortcomings in the local narrative. When I asked him how kids in Palo Alto experienced high school compared to other places in the country, he said:

> Here in the South Bay we have a really distorted view on this entire process of adolescence in this transition of period of adulthood in college. [Johanna: How so?] I would say that it's both with a ... With this very, very blind weight of emphasis on it. I think that there are a lot of great paths that are alternatives to college. None that I bothered to pursue probably as a symptom of nurture as opposed to nature. (2nd interview)

Joshua sounded rueful when he admitted that he never considered alternative postsecondary pathways, but he had the insight that he was at least partly the product of his environment. Given the context, I think his use of "nurture" here extended beyond the boundaries of family to include how he was socialized.

Preparation for elite college admissions is ritualized for upper-class families who are aware of the steps, even if they lack confidence in their knowledge of the details. If self-authorship is a desirable outcome for young adults, Joshua is a cautionary tale of how the college

admissions process can stunt development. College-bound students spend their high school years crafting an identity that they think will be desirable to admissions committees. This leaves little space for developing a sense of personal identity based on internal criteria. An entire childhood can be spent in pursuit of a goal that is desirable for both status and financial security, even though realizing this goal may be impossible given the thousands of other students on the same path.

Rejection from a school of a student's choice can catalyze more complex meaning-making capacity than acceptance, as it forces students to reexamine the formulas that had failed them. He made some tentative strides in this direction by the end of his senior year. Despite his string of rejections, he regained some confidence in his intelligence and recognized the value of self-definition:

> You just reach a point where nobody else is going to validate you. Clearly nobody else has. I mean everyone's too busy trying to find their own source of kind of self-worth. Eventually, you got to stop feeling sorry for yourself and just be. (2nd interview)

He also divorced himself from the atmosphere at Gunn he found toxic and completed most of his second semester classes either at Foothill or online. By our second interview, he had gravitated to a group of self-described misfits also taking classes at Foothill. Once he experienced an educational culture outside of Gunn, he better understood just how strangling the local success narrative actually is. He finally internalized what he had been telling his friends about educational options outside of the most highly ranked. While I think he would have still said that Foothills represented a different paradigm than Gunn, I do not think it would have the same negative connotations as when he talked about the previous fall. He understood the value in doing something different from the Gunn norm. In fact, he planned to do a gap year and continue taking classes at Foothills before enrolling at USC.

Joshua Storm's senior year illustrates how the college choice process can help adolescents develop more complex meaning-making structures. It is a crucible of sorts — a test of the belief systems that guide students in pursuit of a top-tier postsecondary institution. Joshua's case illustrated the developmental opportunities that failure can trigger. Students who follow external formulas for getting into college — checking all the right boxes and becoming the person admissions committees want them to be — and are then rewarded for it, have little incentive to question the system. Students like Joshua, whose admissions results shatter their self-concept, have every reason to wonder why everything they had been told was wrong and to establish the building blocks for something more durable. From the theoretical perspective of self-authorship, choosing a college can place a demand[34] on a student that can enhance development, i.e., it can be a developmentally effective experience (King and Baxter Magolda 2019). Joshua's rejection from a number of top tier institutions, the emotional impact of which was exacerbated by mental health problems, proved to be one such developmentally effective experience, shown as he exhibited evidence of late external meaning making in his second interview. Unfortunately, it took a suicide attempt and recovery for him to recognize the shortcomings of trying to be a perfect Gunn student to impress college admissions committees.

[34] A *demand* is a task that "requires a more complex meaning-making structure than one the individual typically uses, and thus stretch[es] an individual's capacity to respond" (King and Baxter Magolda 2019:14).

CHAPTER 7

Alyssa Waters

> I interview for Harvard admissions. Last year I met this guy, and we were talking about sending our kids to high school. I'm like, "My kids go to the public high school." He lives in Woodside, which is this really other very wealthy town, and his kids go to public school also. Then when he saw me for the next pool night for interviews, he's like, "Oh, you're the one. I remember you. You're the one with the audacity to send your child to a public school." – Christine Waters, parent of Alyssa Waters

In this chapter, I discuss how although Alyssa Waters was encouraged to excel at a young age, she was also raised with the space to develop into her own person without being overly subject to externally defined measures of success. Joshua Storm and Alyssa both ended up attending universities that *US News & World Report* ranked 22nd among national universities in 2018 — University of Southern California and Georgetown University, respectively. However, the pressures they endured to arrive at these outcomes differed dramatically. Alyssa's college choice process was emblematic of *pragmatic privilege* in that she approached choosing a college like a problem to be solved. She had the capacity to realistically assess the field of competitive college admissions in order to find the school that best suited her interests and her credentials. Perhaps even more importantly, Alyssa's college process was less fraught than Joshua's and, as I will argue, also less fraught than her sister's, because her identity and self-worth were not inextricably linked to where she was accepted to school. Alyssa demonstrated meaning making consistent with early Crossroads, and her ability to hold external narratives as object contributed to the pragmatic approach she took to her decision making.

The Waters family lived in a large, one-story home in Hillsborough, a town in San Mateo Country approximately equidistant to San Francisco and Palo Alto. The median

household income for Hillsborough (in 2017 dollars) was $238,750, compared to $147,537 in Palo Alto (U.S. Census Bureau 2018b). Alyssa lived with her mother, Christine, and her father, Robert. Her older sister, Brittany, was a junior at Carnegie Mellon University. Christine worked in venture capital while Robert was a clinical trial manager at a biotech company. They met when they were getting their MBAs at Stanford. Christine was a first-generation college student who attended Harvard on an almost-full scholarship. She received both her undergraduate and master's degrees in engineering from Harvard.

Growing up, Alyssa was a nervous child. Within her family, her nickname was "Little Miss Worst-Case Scenario." She once asked her father whether he was sure he was going the right way when he was backing out of the driveway. According to Christine, up until the beginning of high school, Alyssa was controlled, constrained, and risk-averse. Alyssa had good time management skills. She started completing her Common Application at the end of her junior year, not realizing that the system resets on August 1, causing her to lose her work. She completed her essays in earnest in August before her senior year, placing her well ahead of schedule compared to many of her peers. On a day-to-day basis, Alyssa was disciplined enough about her schoolwork such that she was able to go to bed each night by nine-thirty. Alyssa internalized the importance of extracurricular activities when applying to colleges and believed them to be the second most important part of an application after the essays. She was an editor of her school newspaper and the vice-president of the Model United Nations (Model UN) club.

All in all, Alyssa gave off the impression of a well-balanced, high achieving student who maintained a healthy attitude towards the college choice process. She had time for an active social life, helped out around the house, and honed her skills as an accomplished baker. For

Alyssa, who was interested in foreign relations, arriving at a first-choice college destination was a simple process. Georgetown stole her heart; even Harvard paled in comparison.

A BIG FISH IN A SMALL POND

Alyssa was the only student in my sample who was accepted at and opted to attend her early action school. By the time we met for our second interview in March, she had already sent in her deposit signaling her intention to enroll at Georgetown University in the fall. Thus, her college choice process was one of the most straightforward and streamlined in the study.

Table 8 Alyssa Waters' College Applications and Outcomes

Institution	Outcome
Boston University	Withdrew application
Georgetown University	Accepted Early Action —> Final destination
UC Berkeley	Withdrew application
UC San Diego	Withdrew application
University of Chicago	Deferred for Early Action, withdrew application

Alyssa sought an urban, mid-sized university. Christine and both of her daughters concurred that the learning opportunities available at a larger institution were better compared to smaller, liberal arts schools. Moreover, the family had the financial resources to choose colleges without regard to cost:

> I think I am doing the best thing for my child, and it's not about the money. It's about what's going to give them a really great start in life, and I think having a very diverse set of friends, being a bigger environment...Like this is my kids when they were thinking about where to apply to college. They have no interest in the small, liberal arts college. There's this huge drumbeat among the parents and the counselors and stuff, "Go to a small liberal arts college. Go to Hamilton, even smaller than Amherst." It's all these little dinky schools. My kids are like, "My high school class has 450 kids a grade. Why would I go to a college that's 200 kids a grade?" It's like, "Why would I de-scope my world as I'm getting older and supposed to be more capable?" They felt that way, like I said, going from elementary to middle to high school. They didn't want to go to a smaller little environment. (1st interview)

When she was initially drawing up her list, Alyssa had limited awareness of institutional diversity, especially among the mid-tier schools. In her social milieu, students knew about "Harvard, Stanford, Yale, and there's like the UCs. That's what people know." Christine introduced Alyssa to schools like Boston College, Boston University, and McGill.

In our first interview, Alyssa mentioned Malcolm Gladwell's book, *David and Goliath*, which she learned about from her English teacher. Alyssa was captivated by one of the theses of the book:

> There's a chapter in that about, "Should you go to a really good school where you're gonna be a little fish or should you go to a slightly smaller school so you can be a big fish in a little pond?" It followed the story of this girl who got into Brown and then bombed chemistry and just didn't become a scientist even though that was her dream, and then he was like, "Well, it probably would've been better for her to go to a less competitive school and then she would've been the cream of the crop. She would've been more confident in what she was doing and she probably would've become a scientist."
>
> I discussed that and was like, if I got into Georgetown and Harvard, which one would I pick? I don't know. That's the question and then also just sort of working through, "What am I looking for in a school?" (1st interview)

Setting aside questions about the validity of Gladwell's argument, it nonetheless resonated with Alyssa and was a catalyst in her thinking about what she sought in a c

ollege. Her statement also implied that she was open to the idea of being a big fish in a little pond.[35] She may have even been afraid of the consequences of being a little fish, as she interpreted that case as a cautionary tale in aiming too high.

While on a college visit, Alyssa instantly connected with Georgetown when she learned that Madeline Albright taught a freshman seminar there. She described it as the moment where she thought, "This school is the school." Georgetown met Alyssa's institutional criteria and was an excellent fit given her interest in international relations. One of Christine's friends was going

[35] In 2017 Georgetown's undergraduate enrollment was 3,644 (Georgetown University n.d.), while Harvard's was 6,699 (Harvard University n.d.).

to be an ambassador, and his experiences spurred her aspiration to join the State Department. The one reservation she had was Georgetown's Jesuit heritage — she ruled out Boston College for a similar reason — but her fears were assuaged when she heard from Reddit users that Georgetown was secular. During our first interview, she talked only about Georgetown and the University of Chicago. Christine had urged Alyssa to look at Northwestern, but Alyssa disliked Chicago because Christine had had multiple bad travel experiences there. Then, Alyssa received a mailer from the University of Chicago and attended a local information session where she was impressed with the presentation and thought, why not? She regarded Berkeley as a "crapshoot" because "they have like seven or eight percent [acceptance rate] or something like that."

Perhaps the most notable aspect of Alyssa's list was the schools that were conspicuously absent — Harvard University, Christine's alma mater, and Stanford, both Christine and Robert's alma maters. In our first interview, Alyssa spoke as though she planned to apply to Harvard:

> My mom went to Harvard and we visited Cambridge. We'd gone down a couple times for reunions and stuff, and then also once for that Boston visit and I just really liked it. I really liked the housing system and it was a really good liberal arts school, like [a] really good school. I guess it was just like the one reach, so I was like, "You know, if I had to pick a reach, I'd pick Harvard out of all the Ivies," and like, "Why not?" I could in theory get in. I don't think it's super likely, but I could and, I don't know, and they're also ... They're, they're weird. They're like "Oh, we're early action except you can only apply to public schools, so we're not really." That's why they're early decision. I don't know. If I get in early to Georgetown, I might still apply or I might just be like, "I'm done. I am so done." Their application is actually really nice. It's only like 150 words, supplement. Because my mom ... My mom is a big fan [of] Harvard. She's like, "They're so nice ..." They're open to lower-income kids because they don't have the counselor to help them write the 600 words on some existential question, so that's why I think they have such a low, a small supplement. Where Stanford is like ... god, it's like 20 questions and three supplements or something like that. It's insane. (1st interview)

True to her cautious nature, Alyssa did not automatically think of herself as an unusually strong candidate for Harvard, choosing instead to regard the institution as a reach, despite her 4.18 GPA and 2310 SAT. Unlike students like Joshua who talked candidly about how their status as legacies might give them an advantage in the admissions process, Alyssa never spoke of herself

in those terms. Instead, she assessed her chances in light of historical data, making a conservative estimate of her chance of acceptance. Christine contrasted the way Alyssa approached her "reach" schools compared to Brittany:

> Christine: We actually looked at the Naviance[36]. It's facts. It's like, "I love you. You're my special snowflake." Then here are the facts. People like you, low chance of getting in, high chance of getting in. I really hope that Alyssa was in the clear green [for] Georgetown. That's one of the aspects of her that's the less, lower risk aptitude. Partly, it really, really fit. She was quite entranced with Harvard, but Harvard for her stats, there's a bunch of little red dots and a couple of green dots. Her calculus before applying, was "Let me bag a sure thing and then maybe I'll shoot higher."
>
> Johanna: Where some people do the opposite.
>
> Christine: Yeah. Brittany's strategy was the opposite. "Let me apply early to the place I have my heart set on and then I'll fall back to a safety school if I don't get in." The really hard thing for Brittany was she was deferred at Yale so it's a very nebulous answer. It's like, you almost qualify. You're on the bubble. Then, you're like, "Oh, well, I should do more like that because they almost liked me. Maybe the next place will like me." I think that that set her up badly. (2nd interview)

Within the same family, the two girls had opposite strategies for compiling their application lists, and both resulted in positive outcomes. Brittany's case illustrates the signal that deferral can send – namely that she was not quite good enough – without offering the closure of outright rejection. For Brittany, it reinforced the idea that she was on the right track and encouraged her to continue to see herself through the lens of external appraisal. Christine concluded that this set up Brittany "badly" because it encouraged the thinking that if one can just be "more," then one can crack the formula that will move one into the "acceptance" pile.

Alyssa and Brittany also took different approaches to Stanford, the school considered to be the brass ring among Palo Alto area students. Even though she had a strong GPA and test scores, Stanford was never on Alyssa's radar. This could be due in part to Alyssa's cautious

[36] Naviance is an online tool that high schools in the area provide to families in order to help them in the college search process.

nature: she noted that very few people get accepted into Stanford. Stanford also did not offer the kind of academic experience she was looking for. Alyssa did not feel pressured by her family or peers to include Stanford among her applications.

Brittany, on the other hand, was far more immersed in the narrative that she was supposed to go to a top school, even if she could not articulate it as such. As stated above, she felt the silent pressure to go to Harvard because her mother went there, and she eventually settled on Yale as her top choice. She also gravitated to Stanford for inexplicable reasons, as Christine recalled:

> Because she had been deferred [from Yale] then she went through this whole, "Maybe I should apply to these schools," so all of these applications. Of course, that all crushes your Christmas vacation. Then the last one she was thinking about applying to was Stanford. Stanford is on the Common App, but it has this huge supplement of completely different essays from all the other schools, big commitment to apply to Stanford.
> It was like a day and a half before New Year's, and she's like, "I should apply to Stanford." I'm like, "Why? For your whole life you have said you want to go east to college. You have always said you don't want to go to Stanford. It's so close. Why would you apply?"
>
> She's like, "It's a really good school." I'm like, "But do you want to go there?" "No." "Why would you apply?" She's like, "Well, you went there." "I'm not applying again. It's not my decision." I said, "Do you want to know for yourself that you can get in? Do you have something to prove to yourself? Do you need to know can you get in?"
> She's like, "I don't know." I'm like, "If you got into an east coast school, any arbitrary east coast school, and Stanford, where would you go?" "I'd go east." I go, "Then why apply?" (1st interview)

Given Stanford's overwhelming profile in Silicon Valley and the way the students in this study talked about it, it is safe to say that Stanford is the default choice for academically strong students in the area. Brittany had no reason to apply to Stanford, and yet she felt compelled to do so when her first choice did not work out. As Christine remembered it, Brittany used the word "should" when she spoke of Stanford based on the rationale (again) that her mother went there, but also conceivably because she felt the need to prove something to herself after her deferral. For Brittany, applying to Stanford was a way of reaffirming her identity as someone who was

Stanford-caliber. This contrasts with Alyssa's reserved approach to Stanford. She avoided the angst that throwing her hat into such a fraught ring would entail.

Alyssa's decision not to apply to either Harvard or Stanford despite her strong academic record illustrated her resistance to the narratives that she should apply to the most elite colleges within reach. Moreover, it was unexpected given her family's social milieu. In the next section, I describe Alyssa's social world and the taken-for-granted assumptions about the reproduction of privilege.

THE AMERICAN DREAM AMONG THE PRIVILEGED

The Waters family could easily have been the poster child for upper-class success. Hillsborough is one of the wealthiest towns in the country (del Giudice and Wei 2017), and the fact that Brittany grew up horseback riding almost every day signaled a level of affluence well beyond the average American. The Waters were one of several families in my sample who were financially and socially secure enough that they had the privilege to choose what narratives of success they embraced. There was the sense that since the parents had achieved the American Dream, the children perhaps had less to prove compared with families actively pursuing social mobility.

The Waters traveled in a milieu where social reproduction via educational attainment was an expectation and a marker of their privilege. More so than other families in the study, the trappings of social class came up in our interviews. Christine, in particular, seemed to encounter a range of class attitudes among her peers, many of which she spoke of with derision. Perhaps because she did not come from a wealthy background herself, she despised assumptions made about her based on her current socioeconomic status. For example, there was a moral valance

placed on the assumption of social reproduction within Christine's social sphere. The private school issue became a point of contention between Christine and one of her (former) friends:

> One of the worst things that anybody has ever said to me in my whole life, it's actually a friend from business school who, actually, I would say the friendship completely ruptured over this thing he said to me. We were at dinner together, three couples. This guy says to me, "Christine, you make so much money. Why wouldn't you do the best thing for your child and send them to a private school?" I'm like, "Hmm, okay. First, you're making an assumption about my financial situation. Second, why wouldn't I do the best thing for my child? You call me a bad mother and greedy." (1st interview)

As a parent, Christine actively resisted narratives about what people in her position were supposed to do for their children, opting instead for academic environments where her daughters would receive less coddling. She found this "friend's" query objectionable because: a) it presupposed her family's income and b) it implied that Christine would not do what was best for her child — that is, send her to private school — because she did not want to expend the financial resources due to greed. Christine's friend divulged his question in an intimate, though not private, environment, where there was the assumption of shared values; he did not anticipate that his words would be cause for so much offense.

Both Alyssa and Christine were frank about how off-putting they found local narratives about the importance of a narrow definition of academic and college admissions success. Alyssa recalled an incident from elementary school when a classmate was devastated about a grade on an exam:

> I remember in fifth grade there was a girl who was sobbing because she had totally bombed one test. I was like, "It's one test. You're in fifth grade. Why does this matter?" They're like, "You don't get it," and I was like, "Yeah. I'm just gonna like go sit over there, because I obviously don't get it." (1st interview)

Christine and Robert tried to shelter Alyssa from internalizing the stress of academic achievement at such a young age. This contrasts with Alyssa's best friend, whose mother, according to Christine, "Since he was a child, has always obsessed over everything." This

mother pressured her son about sports and activities to the point of straining their parent-child relationship. That said, her approach “worked,” as the boy was accepted early to Brown.

Even more than Alyssa, Christine encountered attitudes among her peers about the college choice process that she found unpalatable. As with her decision to send her daughters to public school, Christine had to resist assumptions made about her because of her class status and curated her relationships accordingly:

> We have friends who have sent their kids to Harvard and Stanford and we have friends whose kids are going [in] every other different kind of direction. I would say, we just don't hang out with the kind of people who are obsessive. I think I might have told you this in the first interview. There were some friends of mine who invited me to a dinner party and they were like, "Oh, you should meet this other couple. You'll really get along with them, the husband and wife. They are both senior partners at Goldman, so smart." Blah, blah, blah.
>
> That couple had a kid who had just applied to college. We're working in the kitchen and I'm talking with the mom and she's like "Oh Christine, don't worry about it. You just have to understand. You're really accomplished in business. Getting your kid into college is just like another business project. You just have to view it as it's a year of your life. You're going to get her into Harvard. It will all work out. You're going to make your kid cry but this is what you have to do and you know what you have to do." I walked away from that dinner party going "I hope I never see that person again" and then my friend called afterward and was like "Oh, did you make plans to have lunch with her? I think you guys must like each other." I was like ....
>
> There are those people and I just don't want anything to do with them. It's just a mindset. I'm on a board of a company in New York. Actually, one of the guys there lives in San Francisco and his son got into Harvard. Then another board member who lives in New York has teenagers, but not yet college applications. I said to the other director, "Oh yeah, my daughter had applied to Harvard and got on the waitlist." To which the other director, the New York guy said, "Well, we all know that the waitlist is a test of the parents’ connections." And I'm like, "No, I didn't know that. Because I wouldn't do that because it's my kid's application, not my application." There are those people. That one was a jaw dropper. "It's just a test of the parent's connections." I'm like, "No." (2nd interview)

The kinds of parents whom Christine wanted nothing to do with were overt in their belief that applying to college requires parental investment in terms of time, social capital, or finances (in the form of private high school and/or college counselors). Christine called this a “mindset,” and

it is a level of privilege beyond even the solidly upper class. These are not parents who regarded elite college admissions as a lottery: Harvard admission was something that that could be guaranteed with the allocation of parental resources. It was not viewed as a measurement of their offspring's achievement. This attitude, with Harvard as the metric of success, stood in contrast to the more local narrative that usually positioned Stanford as the gold standard. The association of Stanford with hard work as opposed to Harvard's blue blood reputation is more aligned with the meritocratic ethos revered in Silicon Valley. Christine understood both worlds and the kinds of expectations that permeate the environment:

> Then there are these families here that are these intensive pressure cooker families. Education is held in really high esteem here. You have a lot of immigrant families where the parents are first-generation college and so the kids are being held to that high standard by the parents, and you also have the families where it's first-generation immigrant, not college, looking to the kids to make it for the family, which I think, actually, creates incredibly hard-working, super smart kids, really, really dedicated, great...
>
> It's almost the opposite of the silver spoon expectations. It's like very much of a striver, motivated environment, but the kids feel a huge responsibility to the parents. That permeates the whole social group at school. It's really hard to get the kids to unwind. (1st interview)

The role of immigration in the way expectations play out in Silicon Valley cannot be underestimated. An analysis of United States startups valued over $1 billion dollars found that over half were founded by immigrants (44 of 87), and 32 of the 87 were headquartered in California (Anderson 2016). Obviously, few immigrants found billion-dollar companies, but the motivation that Christine cited is often attributed to the immigrant ethos of the region (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013). Parents put pressure on their children, but parents' own personal narratives create an additional layer of responsibility for the family welfare. Christine described this message as "creating" hard-working, smart kids, but these are also students vulnerable to the message *I must.*

Both Christine and Robert were first-generation college students. After being accepted at Harvard, Yale, Berkeley, and MIT, Christine attended Harvard, while Robert was a commuter student at the University of Minnesota. Christine and Robert were much better positioned than their parents had been to shepherd their daughters when it was time to apply to college. The question was always *where* they were going to college, not *if* they were going to go. College was part of the discourse among the Waters since the girls were young. When I asked Christine when she first started talking to Alyssa about college, she said:

> Since they were little. It was always the expectation of going to college. I would say, from the time they were early, I really encouraged them to go away to college, meaning go to a different culture, experience something very different. Yes, they'll joke with me. It's like going to CSM, a good college[37] in San Mateo, is not an option. (1st interview)

Not only were the Waters girls expected to go to college, they were encouraged to leave the area, which ruled out Stanford. This practically ensured that, unlike their father, the girls would have a residential college experience. Alyssa and her peers in the AP track at her school were mostly four-year college bound. However, unlike the Gunn students, Alyssa and Brittany experienced heterogeneous narratives about possible postsecondary paths. When I asked Alyssa how the expectation of her going to college was communicated, she said:

> Your parents went to college and that still is that sort of American dream idea that you're gonna do better than your parents even though who knows how well that one's turning out. We have a lot of counselors at our school, we've got the counseling staff. It's gotta be like eight people for, you know, fifteen hundred kids. And there's a college counselor and a scholarship advisor, like together, so they're really big on going to college is how it works, and obviously [students] can be like, "I don't want to go to college yet," or "I don't want to go to college at all. I want to do a trade school or something." That would be like ... No one bats an eye. That's a rational decision, but the default idea for, at least for my friend group, is that you're gonna go to college. I mean, you take AP classes. Those are college courses. Why would you take them if you're not gonna go to college? (1st interview)

[37] College of San Mateo, the local community college

Alyssa noted that in order to achieve the American Dream, doing better than one's parents is expected, though she implied that might not be possible to achieve. In her case, this would mean postgraduate education at a minimum, since both her parents held graduate degrees. While college was the default in Alyssa's friend group, she was aware that some students could make the rational decision to pursue trade school or forgo postsecondary education altogether. Her statement that "no one bats an eye" suggests that community college would not be stigmatized the way it was talked about at Gunn and even Menlo-Atherton.

THE PRESSURE OF ELITE PARENTAL PEDIGREES

In the Waters family, Christine and Robert's unspoken identities as high achievers were part of the family mythology. Even though she had good intentions, Christine exposed her daughters to Harvard and made it seem like an attractive option for their college choice. Christine maintained a close connection to Harvard, attending class reunions and interviewing potential students, and was a strong proponent of Harvard's residential housing system. She was concerned that her daughters may interpret her enthusiasm for her alma mater as pressure to attend the institution themselves. Alyssa and Brittany grew up with Harvard:

> Both of my girls have had this big fear that I have some huge expectation of them that they can't let me down. I've tried to be really, really explicit. I'm not trying to make you go to Harvard. I have loved Harvard. If you went there, I would hope you love it too, but it's your choice. Brittany always said, "I swear you have this hidden thing that you really, really want me to go to Harvard." (1st interview)

She later continued this theme:

> I'm successful. We're well-to-do. It's all self-made. Like I said, I grew up with a single mom on food stamps. I think our kids feel like Mom did it. Should I be able to do it myself? Does Mom want me to be able to do it? Does society look and say I should be able to do this too? (1st interview)

Though Christine tried not to explicitly pressure her daughters to apply to Harvard, it is impossible to know how much implicit messaging to this effect was conveyed in the household.

Christine herself embodied a conventional portrait of success with her academic pedigree and position as a female partner at a venture capital firm. The pressure to live up to their mother's achievements, particularly when the value of these achievements was echoed in the local narrative, was manifest in Brittany's fear that she was letting her mother down. Though Alyssa may not have felt this pressure as acutely as Brittany, she was aware of her mother's preference for her alma mater.

Embodied expectations pressure students on multiple levels. Within the family it manifests as the silent (or not-so-silent), ever-present model of adulthood that children are exposed to from a young age, and it undergirds all discussions of college going. No matter what they say, the parents themselves remain the benchmark for achievement. Even when parents claim they want their children to be happy rather than following in the parents' footsteps, the social pressure to be as good as one's parents can override good intentions. Christine alluded to the way her daughters felt "society" is judgmental about their ability to be as successful as Christine.

Students also face embodied expectations in the form of societal disapproval. Like the Waters daughters, Emily Garcia, a student from Gunn High School who decided to attend San Diego State University, was sensitive to how she may embody her family's failure. She asked her mother, "Is it really sad for you when you're talking to your friends, and I'm going to SDSU?" In Silicon Valley, one's academic pedigree is inescapable, if only because of the widespread use of LinkedIn. The decision to attend San Diego State or Georgetown becomes part of one's calling card and the face presented to the world. Moreover, the students of today go on to become the parents of tomorrow and will bring the achievements they embody into the next generation.

Peer contempt about one's college choice, even if silent, was a fear among students in the study, causing many of them to be reticent about both the places they were and were not accepted. The high school environment played a large role in fostering a culture of support (or disdain) for students' accomplishments. Alyssa's high school favored inclusiveness, which went a long way towards relieving the pressure to achieve that characterized schools like Gunn.

KEEPING UP WITH THE STUDENTS FROM GUNN

According to Alyssa and Christine, the Aragon High School experience was very different from that of Gunn and Menlo-Atherton. It lacked the ultra-competitive ethos of Gunn. It also lacked the race and socioeconomic segregation that characterized M-A. At Aragon, the narrative of attending an elite college lived side by side with the narrative of attending the local community college. A student like Alyssa thrived in this environment, where her privilege seemed to open up the space to explore her interests, rather than suffocate her with one singular future pathway.

Christine and Alyssa estimated that somewhere in the order of a third to a half of students pursued community college after high school, while another subset went on to top tier institutions. Christine broke down the destinations as follows:

Johanna: I'm trying to get a sense of how competitive Aragon is.

Christine: I think within their [Alyssa's friends] group, it's pretty competitive. They [Aragon] send a kid to Harvard every year. Only eight kids from San Mateo County go to Harvard usually in any given year. They [Aragon] almost always have one. There hasn't been a year that Aragon hasn't sent a kid that I can remember. Then, [Aragon will] send another six or 10 to Ivies, a whole passel of kids to the next tier of schools, like Georgetown. They send something like 20 kids to Berkeley every year. Maybe it's not in their class or 450, that all 450 are credibly vying for 20 slots at Cal because I don't think that's true.

I think there's probably at least a third of the school that's going on to community college or something like that. There's a pretty good portion of

> kids who are shooting for the top. One of the things I really like about the school is, the feeling I've always gotten from each of our kids and their friends, is it's not a zero sum like me against you. They are into helping each other. [The school is] into providing extracurricular activities for kids who can't afford to do stuff. They really try to make all the extracurricular super egalitarian economically. Even the cross section of kids who are academically really smart, it's a whole jumble which is really nice. And I think that's probably different at Gunn and Paly just because here you have the across-the-tracks kids and there it's more socioeconomically homogeneous. (2nd interview)

The picture of Aragon that Christine painted was one of diversity in postsecondary destination. Graduates had opportunities to attend schools like Harvard as well as the local community college. She used the word "egalitarian" to describe the extracurricular opportunities, as well as "jumble" to describe the mixing of kids of different socioeconomic and academic ability. She further elaborated:

> Aragon has a big Asian population but it's very diverse backgrounds and I think a lot of that is ... across the board at Aragon, you have maybe less of the White kids but for the Asian and Latino kids, you have a lot of kids who are first generation going to college. Whereas, my guess is at Paly and Gunn, almost all the parents are college educated. A lot of them are immigrant college educated so it plays a huge premium on school and getting in the best schools, stuff like that. (2nd interview)

Christine's estimates of Aragon were accurate, and as of the 2016-2017 school year, the number of Asian, Latino, and White students was fairly evenly divided (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.a).

Alyssa's experiences at Aragon substantiated her mother's observations. Her friend group comprised an even divide between students who applied to top institutions and students who were planning to attend San Mateo College. Her boyfriend planned to attend San Mateo College. One of her best friends was also going to San Mateo College while her other best friend was going to Brown University.

Alyssa described Aragon as competitive but not as competitive as other area schools. Students who were fixated on the most elite institutions seemed to be the exception, not the norm. I asked her about whether her peers used college counselors:

> Alyssa: I don't think so. There's a couple, but, like it's ... Like there are some kids whose parents who are like, really like, "Oh, you must get into Harvard," um, or kids who are like, "Oh, I must get into Harvard," and that sometimes triggers like an SAT prep or a college counselor, but people are pretty laid back. They're like not focused on the Ivy. They're focused on, like, "What school's better for me?" So we're pretty chill in that sense. Um, so I don't think it's like a ... It's not like a super competitive, like you, "It's not enough that I must win. It's that others must fail" sort of school. It's more like, you know, "Do what's good for you and everything else will fall into place" sort of school.
>
> Johanna: You said that "I must win" versus "other must fail"?
>
> Alyssa: Oh. It's, it's this quote. It's like, "It's not enough that I should succeed. It's that others must fail."
>
> Johanna: What is that from?
>
> Alyssa: The internet. It's just not like that super competitive, not just that you feel like you've done well for yourself but that you feel better than other people, which is just not our school. Like, we're really competitive, but we're not that, like that. There's ... I'm ... in Model UN you meet a lot of different kids from different schools, and like one school, Mira Costa, their Model UN club, or this class, they have, to get an A in the class, they have to win an award at conferences, which is just like, "That's not right. That's just not right." Some schools are like that and some schools aren't. It just sort of depends. (1st interview)

It would be naive to think that Alyssa was completely divorced from peers who felt pressured to aim for schools at the Harvard tier. But within her social circle, there was not a critical mass of such students, so this pressure did not infect the peer group as a whole. Moreover, Alyssa asserted that students were not competitive with each other. She noted that this mentality differed from the ethos at Mira Costa where students have to win awards at conferences to earn As, saying "that's not right."

Both Christine and Alyssa used Gunn as an example of a competitive school. There was the sense that insofar as Aragon was competitive, the students could always take comfort in the feeling that at least it was not as bad as Gunn. When I asked Alyssa whether her school was competitive, she said, “I’d say we’re pretty competitive, but not Gunn-level competitive or some other schools.” Within Aragon, Gunn inspired its own narrative about the college choice process. In comparison with her own classmates, Alyssa noticed that the underclassmen were taking a greater number of AP classes. One student in particular stood out in her mind:

> The junior class is pretty crazy, but the sophomore class is really crazy. I know a kid who's taking 6 APs. He's going to take some 7th class, but 6 APs, as a writer for the newspaper and doing his sport, and a bunch of clubs. We're like, "Dude, no." Everyone's trying to talk him out of it, like, it's not going to end well. He's like, "If I want to keep up with the Gunn kids, I need to do it." (2nd interview)

AP courses are supposed to be equivalent to college-level coursework, but almost no college student would take six academic classes. The fact that this student thought he needed this kind of rigor on his transcript to keep up with the Gunn students spoke volumes about Gunn’s reputation within the region.

I was curious to learn more about this sophomore who was taking six AP courses, so I asked Alyssa about his racial identity:

> Johanna: I'm curious about the kid who is taking six APs. What race is he?
>
> Alyssa: He's Asian. He's saying, "I would take five, but my dad wants me to take AP comp-sci." We're like, "You can't just tack on AP comp-sci like it's nothing. It's a class. It's a pretty intensive class."
>
> Johanna: Where does he get this idea that he has to keep up with the Gunn kids?
>
> Alyssa: He's very adamant upon going to Stanford. That is ... He's like, "I'm going to go to Stanford". We're like, "Good for you, [student’s name]. Great." (2nd interview)

I asked this question because Christine had suggested that the concentration of highly educated immigrants in Palo Alto contributed to the pressure the students feel. Though we did not end up

exploring racial implications in the interview, it is notable that Stanford came up in the context of why the student felt he needed to compete with the Gunn kids. His rationale indicated that he had absorbed the narrative that Gunn students go to Stanford and they therefore set the benchmark for what it takes to be competitive in the applicant pool. From the perspective of self-authorship, this student thought that taking an astronomical number of AP courses was the formula for success as embodied in admission to Stanford.

Given Gunn's reputation for academic rigor, it is not surprising that Gunn was equally associated with stress. In the second interview, Alyssa and I talked briefly about the Palo Alto suicides and how they were discussed among her friends: "We talk about it a little bit. On the way back from model UN conference, I was talking to some underclassmen about it. They were like, 'Why is this?' I'm like, 'Because the usual narrative, which is they're really stressed.'" Alyssa went on to elaborate that she learned the suicide we were referring to was explicitly due to mental illness, not stress, but the fact remains that her first instinct was to assume stress was the underlying cause of the student's death. Moreover, Gunn functioned as a foil for the Aragon student body, the cautionary tale about the pitfalls of being overtaken by pressure.

If elite college admissions can be considered a field of contention where students vie for admission to the most selective institutions, Alyssa had the qualifications and background to compete at the top of the game. Yet, she was not subject to the pressures that befell students like Joshua Storm. While this is due in part to the culture at high school, it was also a reflection of her self-authorship, which was relatively advanced for her age, which I describe in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS

The two girls in the Waters family had different, and often conflicting, personalities, and these differences could be seen in the ways that they approached their college choice processes. Thus, within the same family and growing up under the same circumstances, children can make meaning of major life choices in divergent ways. Alyssa's approach to choosing where to apply was much less stressful than Brittany's, and I speculate that this was due in part to Alyssa's more developed sense of self-authorship.

According to Christine, Alyssa and Brittany did not get along well until Brittany went away to college. Alyssa was more introspective, and Brittany was more inclined to charge forward heedlessly. This led to conflict when the girls were growing up. Christine recalled the transition:

> It's taken them, now they're quite close, they text each other, they Facebook message, they send each other little presents, but it's taken two or three years to heal that again. There was one point, Alyssa's very perceptive, there was one point where Brittany had done something to Alyssa. I used to take Alyssa out on walks, one on one, my strategy was with both the girls was we go on a walk, we can have a really intense conversation because they can't run away. We're there, but we're also not just looking at each other. You're doing something, you can kind of have that safe space to have a touchy conversation. So I was on a walk with Alyssa and I said something about Brittany, and she says to me, she goes, "Mommy, I would have thought you would have had more control over her." (1st interview)

Alyssa was around eleven years old when she and her mother had this exchange, and it illustrates that even at such a young age, Alyssa had insight into Brittany's strong personality. The girls' approach to high school also reflected their different characters. Again, Christine recounted the contrast in the orientation to change:

> It's [high school] very intimidating, the concept of it was intimidating, but once [Brittany] got there she mastered it really quickly. Then when she moved from middle school to high school. So again, Brittany full of drama. So Brittany's nickname was The Drama Queen, and Alyssa was Little Miss Worst Case Scenario. So, the Drama Queen was always full of Sturm und Drang, "So much work, so much work, oh my god, I have to stay up 'til 2:00 at night."

> Alyssa was just like, "Eyes to god, high school is going to be so hard." When she went to ninth grade she didn't want any extracurricular, she was like, "I'm just going to make sure that I can actually do school before I sign up with other things." Signed up for nothing freshman year, then she got straight As, 100 percent. So then, "Okay, do you think maybe you can add on a few things? It seems like you have room in your schedule and life, to actually achieve outside of just this little domain."
>
> She was like, "Yeah, you're right." That was when she started doing the bunch. She started with Model UN, and had a boyfriend, and expanded the portfolio of activities. Then had to juggle a little bit, not everything was always straight A, 100 percent perfect, but she can do it. (1st interview)

Brittany's extreme response to the academic challenges of high school is reminiscent of how the Gunn students and, to a lesser extent, the Menlo-Atherton students, talked about the competitive peer culture at their schools. I speculate that as the older child in the family, overblown narratives about what it takes to be successful in high school coupled with Brittany's already extreme personality, pushed her to adopt external formulas for meaning making. Brittany modeled a way to approach high school that Alyssa rejected, instead adopting an almost too-conservative attitude that allowed her to find her footing before she expanded her scope.

Brittany and Alyssa's different experiences of high school life ultimately affected how much pressure they felt as they began gearing up for college applications. Brittany gravitated towards a crowd who fully embraced the rules of game in terms of what one "must" do to get into an elite college. Christine described how Brittany became subject to external definitions of success, much to her detriment:

> As [Brittany] got older, she got less self-confident. She compared herself to her peers more often. There's a clique of kids there who freak out if they get a 98 and whose parents freak out if they get a 98. Brittany got less and less self-confident. Even now, this semester in college and her last semester, she ended up going to counseling because she was unhappy and she was feeling unproductive. (2nd interview)

Christine's use of the word "clique" here is telling, as it suggests isolation from a broader range of students and narratives that could have opened up more postsecondary pathways. This strict

adherence to the rules of the game hurt Brittany's self-esteem, as her identity became swept up in a set of goals that are difficult to achieve. Alyssa's engagement with peer achievement was almost completely opposite: "The whole, "Where is everyone else?" doesn't concern me. It's not like I need to be better than them. I just need to make sure that I'm doing okay." Unlike Brittany, Alyssa chose not to compare herself with her peers. Moreover, it is possible that she and Brittany would have described the ethos of Aragon differently because of the contrast in their peer groups. Alyssa mentioned the line, "It's not enough that I should succeed, it's that everyone else must fail" in both her interviews, which suggests that it was a deeply held belief about how she approached high school.

From what I could glean about Brittany, it sounds like she may have fit the profile of a paralyzed privileged college applicant. Her list stood in stark contrast with Alyssa and ultimately led to an initially disappointing outcome:

> Christine: If you had interviewed us about Brittany, it would have been a very different story. She applied to something like eighteen schools. She got into all UCs she applied to. She got into BU. She got waitlisted at Harvard and waitlisted at Carnegie Mellon and denied at all the other schools; Every Ivy, Chicago, Northwestern. She felt like a huge failure and she was so mad. She didn't want to go to BU. She felt like she was better than that and was really unhappy. She's very happy at Carnegie Mellon. This turned out to be great for her, but that process was a nightmare. She wrote and rewrote her essays and was very uncertain and had a hard time deciding which group of schools to apply to because she envisioned herself there but her SATs were like 730 and 750 or something like that. They were strong.
>
> But Alyssa had 800s. When you have [scores like that] you can be a little less stressed. When Alyssa got her SATs back and they were 800s it's like, "Okay. Now I guess I can apply to those reach schools." The mid 700s is like a total crapshoot getting into a reach school. This is a fairly high bar. So, if you have a good kid who is getting mostly As and is even getting 700s and doing extracurriculars, but is not nationally competitive at something, it's not clear that that kid is going to get accepted into an Ivy League school. They'll get accepted at the next tier but it's not clear that they'll be accepted into an Ivy League school. If you're really fixated on

going to an Ivy League school, their acceptance rate is six percent. But if you say a third of the applicants are really, really irrelevant, you still only have a 10 percent chance to a 12 percent chance of getting in. That's stressful.

Johanna: Did she have her heart set on the Ivy League?

Christine: Brittany really wanted to go to Yale. Then she had worked as an intern for a Stanford professor, a neurology professor who's really preeminent in his field. He wrote her a letter of recommendation. He told her, "Every person I've ever written a letter of recommendation gets into their first-choice school." She didn't. She felt like she had let him down. I talked to him a couple of months ago about something else and the first thing he asked me on the phone is, "Let me just ask you something, Christine. What went wrong with Brittany because she's so smart and I wrote this great letter of recommendation and she didn't get into a top school. What happened?" And it's like, "What the fuck? It's not like Carnegie Mellon is going to Slacker U. Could you just lay off? She's happy, so it's not your place to dis where my daughter went to school. Excuse me."

Johanna: Wow.

Christine: If that's your milieu if you're sitting there in Palo Alto going to school only counts if it's Harvard, Stanford, Yale, then you're fairly doomed to be disappointed. (2nd interview)

Brittany's college choice process was informed by the way she envisioned herself, and her identity was tied to kind of college she thought she could get into. Thus, instead of institutional fit, she applied to all the top east coast schools. Christine herself was pragmatic in her characterization of most students' chances of getting into an Ivy League school. Brittany being waitlisted at Yale was particularly devastating, as it led to her apply to the rest of the Ivy League:

Christine: [Brittany's] experience was she applied early to Yale, and got rolled over to the...Which was one of the worst things. In retrospect, it was probably one of the worst things that could happen because it was an early positive signal that she might be a good candidate for that Ivy League, which caused her to apply to every Ivy League and get rejected from every Ivy League. It was like this head fake. "Oh, you might be good enough. No, sorry." (1st interview)

As I recounted earlier in this chapter, Brittany's last-minute application to Stanford also came about as a result of her rejection from Yale. This was her response to the Yale's decision as an

attack on her very identity. Brittany was very much in the throes of being subject to external sources of meaning making, particularly in the intrapersonal dimension where she struggled to answer the question, “Who am I?”

By comparison, Alyssa’s college choice process was characterized by her pragmatism: She chose Georgetown based on its academic offerings and her likelihood of being accepted:

> Johanna: You said that among your friend group there's this expectation that you're gonna go to a good school, so what kind of schools are folks looking at?
>
> Alyssa: It depends on what's really achievable […] like I'm looking at Georgetown. I might apply to Harvard. There's girls who are looking at Cornell, but there's also kids that are looking at state schools in other states or ... which the UCs here are just great, so that's considered like ... Getting into Berkeley is like, "Oh my God, you got into Berkeley," so state schools actually seem like easy to get into, but it's just people have gotten really more realistic from junior year to senior year. Junior year is like, "Oh yeah. I, I love this school. It's so great. It's great," and then you're like ... You get [to senior year] and you're like, "Eh ... I don't know if I can make it, though." It's better to try for something like for different schools that are more achievable just because you can't always get into Stanford. Very few people get into Stanford.
>
> Johanna: That's true. How do you figure out what's achievable?
>
> Alyssa: I'm a very analytical person. Like, my first, like, response to "Can I do this? Problems?" Is like "Google! Let's google it!" You look at your GPA and your SATs you have to be like somewhere in the ballpark or have an extraordinary sort of circumstance to explain not being there, and then also just sort of what do you want, sort of, to be there, and then can you ... Like, it depends. You can have a low grade and write great essays, and ... so it's really kind of ... I don't know. Once you get below 20 percent acceptance rate [it is] kind of just a crapshoot. Like, if there's gonna be 40 percent of kids who apply are qualified and they can only pick 20 percent, half of them are gonna be dinged for some weird reason. You don't really know. They could've already taken like a trombone playing unicyclist and they can't take another one, so even if you are a trombone unicyclist and you, like, are really cool, maybe they already have one. Sorry. (1st interview)

Though it might seem like Alyssa’s reliance on statistics is another form of following formulas, there is a qualitative difference between assessing one’s likelihood of getting into a school based

on external data versus building an application list completely around external measures of a "good" school and the tying one's identity to going to such a school. It is a matter of foregrounding and backgrounding: Brittany foregrounded her identity into her college list, and the institutions themselves were less important, while Alyssa foregrounded the schools and decided how well she fit the profile of student who would be accepted there. Her assertion that applications at the most elite institutions are a crapshoot suggests that she would not have read rejection from such a school as a blow to her identity.

Alyssa's approach to her applications is characteristic of her pragmatic privilege. Her entire high school career was undergirded by the privilege of going to a good high school with multiple opportunities to explore her interests. She was able to choose schools to apply to without regard to financial cost. Her pragmatism can be seen in the way she assessed the field of elite college admissions and was able to strategize to make the rules of the game work for her. She did not need the validation that a potential admission to Harvard would provide because she had shifted the sense of the game, such that her goal was to be accepted at Georgetown.

Like Jessica Snow (next case study) and the other students I characterized as pragmatic privileged, this ability to reposition oneself in relation to the game is associated with more advanced levels of self-authorship. Though there were not enough data to assess either girls' self-authorship, Christine's recollections about Brittany suggest that she was both firmly External in her meaning making and likely an example of paralyzed privilege. In contrast, Alyssa's reflective approach to high school, where she did not feel tied to one narrative of success, revealed she was not completely subject to following external formulas. Choosing her college based on institutional fit —picking a school that suited her, rather than twisting herself to fit the school — suggests the emergence of early Crossroads meaning making.

Personal characteristics are a key component of the Interactionist Model of College Student Learning and Development (King and Baxter Magolda 2019), and the contrast between Brittany and Alyssa exemplifies how individuality lends an element of the unknown to college choice behaviors. Born and raised in the same family, Brittany and Alyssa brought two different orientations to the college choice process. I could speculate that perhaps their birth order or any number of other variables could account for their different outcomes.

Alyssa's college choice process speaks to the benefits of finding a passion and following it through to one's postsecondary pathway. She was one of several of students who were satisfied with their application outcomes because they ended up at the schools that were most suited to their interests. Students who were undecided or unclear about their future plans had a more difficult time narrowing down their institutional choices, but by virtue of their privilege still ended up at good institutions, albeit not necessarily ranked within the top 25. Even if Alyssa's future ultimately led her away from foreign relations, she would still have the satisfaction of knowing that she followed her own path to Georgetown.

CHAPTER 8

Jessica Snow

Rachel: Just because you have a 4.0 don't mean anything.
Jessica: Yeah, like if you took regular classes and you had a 4.0.
Rachel: If we had stuck with like — could you imagine being a regular student?
Jessica: Oh my gosh, it would be so fun.
Rachel: I'd be bored out of my mind.

Jessica Snow was a student at Menlo-Atherton High School (M-A), where she was immersed in a high-pressure environment much like that of Gunn. She enrolled at Southern Methodist University, which is 59th in *US News & World Report's* ranking of National Universities. Like Alyssa Waters, Jessica was an example of a *pragmatic privileged* student. Jessica's pragmatism was characterized by an active disavowal of both her parents' and her peers' expectations that she attend a top-ranked university. Despite considerable pressure to overextend herself in her academics and extracurricular activities, Jessica set personal goals that she was comfortable with and that were achievable.

Jessica most closely displayed characteristics consistent with a mid to late-Crossroads orientation to meaning making, which meant that she was actively engaged in constructing an internally defined meaning making structure. This is an unusually advanced level of development for a student her age. College students rarely demonstrate this level of self-authorship capacity (Baxter Magolda 2001). The complex meaning making that Jessica brought to bear on her experiences prior to senior year paved the way for her to complete her college applications with a minimal amount of stress compared to other students in the study. Jessica's case illustrates the positive role that self-authorship can play in helping students complete key milestones in their transitions to adulthood.

The Snows had three children, two girls and a boy. I talked to the elder daughter, Rachel, as well as the younger, Jessica, who was the focal student. By their definition of "regular students" - students who took non-AP courses - Jessica and Rachel were not regular. As the oldest in the family, Rachel was the pioneer, paving the way for both her parents and siblings to understand the challenges of attending the academically rigorous Menlo-Atherton High School. From the few details she revealed — she was, after all, not the subject of the interview — she did not have the easiest time. She was socially awkward and struggled to please her parents who set expectations for her that were difficult to achieve. In contrast, Jessica was an easy-going girl who seemed to have a lot of friends and an active social life. Moreover, by the time Jessica was in high school, the girls' parents had recalibrated some of their expectations to meet the reality of M-A's academic rigor.

Neither Jessica nor her mother mentioned a time when she wanted to attend Stanford, Berkeley, or other elite institutions that her peers aspired to. In short, at least in the story she told me about herself, Jessica did not face the disappointment of realizing during her junior or senior years that she was not Stanford material. She did not even approach high school with that goal in mind.

I first met Jessica in December, on the day the Elon "early action" decisions were scheduled to come out. At that time, Elon was her first choice. Jessica wanted to go to school in the South, or at least away from California, and her final list of schools reflected this geographical targeting. She also wanted a medium-sized school where she would be able to participate in Greek life and major in business.

Though we only touched on this obliquely, it was clear that she was interested in attending an institution with a connection to a religious tradition.[38] Jessica's final choice was Southern Methodist University, which, though nonsectarian, was founded by The United Methodist Church.

Table 9 Jessica Snow's College Applications and Outcomes

Institution	Early Y/N	Outcome
Clemson University	No	Waitlist
College of Charleston	No	Accepted
Elon University	Yes	Accepted
High Point University	Yes	Accepted
Rhodes College	Yes	Accepted
Southern Methodist University	Yes	Deferred —> Final destination
Texas Christian University	Yes	Accepted as spring admit
Trinity University	Yes	Accepted
University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa	Yes	Accepted
University of Pennsylvania	No	Rejected
Wake Forest	No	Rejected

When Jessica shared her college application list, I was struck by how little overlap there was between her and the other participants in the study. The only school that another participant applied to was the University of Pennsylvania, and Jessica only applied there on a whim. This put her directly at odds with her peers. According to Mariabella Lentini, the mother of Sofia,

[38] Rachel attended Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, which is a faith-based university.

who shared classes with Jessica, the part of the school they experienced was best described as competitive:

> It's very competitive. Everybody is going to college. Everybody wants to go, in their mind, in their 17 year old mind, [to a] top college. The same 20 names at the beginning that get tossed around. It's like there are 3,000 colleges in the United States! (1st interview)

Note the hyperbole in Mariabella's words. She talked about "everybody" wanting to go to a top college. Jessica, who was on the same track as Sofia, if perhaps not as academically motivated, demonstrably dipped outside of the top "20 names" that Mariabella claimed that everybody sought. Thus, Jessica's choices ran counter to her cultural milieu. I was left wondering what pushed her down a path that differed from "everybody" else.

Jessica attended and then worked at a summer camp in South Carolina for a number of years, which provided the initial impetus to target southern schools. Attending camp outside of California expanded her geographic horizons, and it also exposed her to other kids from around the country. From talking to students from other states, Jessica learned about academic environments that were not as hypercompetitive as her own. She saw that there were other ways to approach high school with less intensity than intensity of Silicon Valley.

Jessica had access to multiple sources of external formulas, including her own high school life, from which to make sense of the kind of student she wanted to be. On a day to day basis, she was immersed in the heavy load of demanding courses, extracurricular activities, and socializing that she thought was important for living a balanced life. She was not immune to environmental pressures and admitted that junior year was stressful. Yet in the back of her mind, she had already decided that she did not need to be the kid who goes to Harvard.

When creating their college application lists, students like Jessica are encouraged to think in terms of the characteristics they want in a college, as if examining product specifications. This

is logical, as it allows clear criteria for paring down the over 3000 postsecondary institutions that exist in the United States. In addition to size, geography, and major, students look at co-curricular opportunities like Greek life or intramural sports. These are all *features*, much like specifications on a product.

There are also quantifiable measures that students can use to gauge metrics across colleges. These include, most prominently, national rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report's*, and published data like graduation rates, average SAT scores, and the like. Many high schools also use the Naviance college planning system as an additional source of data for families to use when drawing up application lists. Although Jessica did not mention using it, other students did. It estimates how likely a student is to be admitted to a school based on historical trend data, including how students from the same high school fared in previous admissions cycles.[39]

Features-based or statistical estimation-based search criteria is a rational way to draw up a college application list. It is notable that Jessica, like the majority of students in this study, did not mention cost as one of the factors she considered when deciding where to apply. Once cost is taken off the table, it opens the door for criteria like the "vibe on campus" as a deciding factor in choosing a college. This shifts the decision from a strictly rational choice — maximizing the potential benefit — to one that is more emotions-driven, such as maximizing happiness. This is the black box where "fit" between the school and the student is assessed on both sides.
Of course, logic and emotion are not mutually exclusive, and most decisions meld the two ways of arriving at decisions, even if one drives the other. For many families, institutional ranking

[39] For example, students can create graphs comparing their high school's admissions decisions for prior graduating classes to SAT score for a given college, e.g., past Stanford admissions decisions for seniors from Menlo-Atherton high school with SAT scores in a specified range.

feels like a safe way to choose a school, because of the widespread belief in what rankings signal, which goes well beyond the quality of undergraduate education. Within the Snow family, Rachel and Jessica were just as attuned to rankings as anyone else, and they grappled with aligning their identities with their final institution choices. Rachel wavered between Occidental and Pepperdine:

> I think what was hard is Occidental's ranked a little higher than Pepperdine, so I had to let go of this stigma that I'd been holding, that I always picked the higher ranking. Even at M-A, always pick the harder class, always do the extra credit, always go the highest possible, and so I had to, when it came down to it, I had to be like, "Okay, I'm not going to pick my college based on the ranking," which I'm glad I did.

Rachel picked Pepperdine over Occidental even though she associated it with the “stigma” of choosing the lower ranked option despite it being the best school for her. Her instinct to listen to external narratives like national rankings was a result of being socialized in a community and culture where rankings are constructed as presumably objective measures of worth. Rachel’s conscious choice to push against the belief system she had internalized is a kind of downgrading of her expectations of herself that rankled her sensibilities: social expectations dictated that she attend the highest ranked school possible.

When it came time for Jessica to make her own decisions about where to apply, she had Rachel as an example, though the girls were not close. Jessica impressed me with the decisiveness with which she approached her college application list. Even with the assistance of a college counselor, her list included schools I had never heard of, let alone seen on the lists of other students I interviewed. She did not apply to any of the University of California campuses, which was a rarity among students in the sample. The other students who chose not to apply to the University of California were looking for specific experiences that the system could not provide. For example, Nicholas Hill, a student at Palo Alto High School, did not apply to any

UCs because he was only looking at schools that offered strong programs in international relations.[40]

When I asked Jessica whether she felt left out of the chatter surrounding the UC applications and decisions, she was firm in her reasons for why she did not:

> I've never been one to really care about that. You know, oh everyone else is applying here, I have to do that. Especially with college, I've always been like, "I want to go far away" and people are like, "What? I don't want to leave." I'm like, "Oh, I could get out of California." (2nd interview)

Jessica described her approach to choosing colleges as "realistic," and she had a grasp of the kind of environment where she would be likely to do well:

> I think a lot of people reached a lot higher. I guess I did apply to an Ivy, but a lot of people thought they were going to get into Harvard and all these schools. I guess I've always just been realistic. Also, I don't think I wanted to go to an Ivy. That's just not a good atmosphere for me, I don't think. But there are definitely people who set their mind on it. (2nd interview)

Although Jessica never said so explicitly, her 3.6 GPA and 1950 on the SAT would not be considered competitive for admission to the most elite schools. She knew this about herself and was not one of the students who "set their mind on it." This was in contrast to her peers, who she thought lacked perspective. Jessica's approach to the SAT illustrated her pragmatic approach to doing enough, and not going overboard, to meet her college goals. It was the culture among Jessica's M-A friends to take the SAT multiple times, and in this respect she conformed to the norm. However, she did not take it to same extremes as some of her peers:

> I knew I was going to take it at least twice at least. I didn't take it as many times as my friends and I kind of felt like maybe I should have, but I felt like I had the scores I wanted for the schools I wanted to go to and I did it turns out. But yeah, I mean looking back maybe, but I don't know. That semester I was just stretched so thin I could not try and do that too. (2nd interview)

[40] In 2018 *Foreign Policy* ranked American University, the school Nicholas ended up attending, higher than any University of California campus for the study of international relations. https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/20/top-fifty-schools-international-relations-foreign-policy/

Jessica had enough confidence in her future plans that she did not stress herself by trying to raise her SAT score beyond what was needed to meet the requirements of the schools she was interested in. In her high school context where students aimed to go to a top-20 postsecondary institution, a 1950 would be considered low, but she did not bow to external pressures to pursue an academic achievement that would valuable for little beyond bragging rights.

Her realistic approach paid off: she was accepted at eight of the eleven schools she applied to. The schools where she was outright rejected — Wake Forest and the University of Pennsylvania — were reach schools, and her reasons for applying to them were more the result of external influences rather than her own meaning making. She applied to the University of Pennsylvania because she was a distant relative of Benjamin Franklin, and she felt external pressure from her parents to apply to Wake Forest. She would have faced a dilemma similar to Rachel had she been accepted at Wake Forest — a school more highly ranked than the others on her list.

> I didn't ever want to go to Clemson or Wake Forest. The reason I applied to Wake Forest was because it was similar to Elon and my parents were kind of like, "You should apply" because I should go to the best school I can so that if I don't get in there then I don't have to go there. I don't know. All the schools I applied to, it pretty much turned out exactly as I wanted it to because I didn't really want to get into either of those. I actually applied there for fun but if I had gotten into there I would have had to go to Wake Forest and I wouldn't want to. I just didn't like it. It would have been good to go to Clemson I guess, but I don't really care. (2nd interview)

Jessica approached her college applications armed with a clear sense of the institutional characteristics she desired and lacking, for the most part, externally derived pressures about where she should apply. She was not completely immune to environmental cues — she admitted she would have gone to Wake Forest had she been admitted — but this did not become an issue because she knew herself well enough to set reasonable expectations. Her similarly indifferent

attitude about being waitlisted at Clemson is another example of how much control Jessica maintained over the application process.

Although Jessica faced peer and community pressures to follow narrowly prescribed academic and postsecondary pathways, the main challenge to Jessica's internally derived sense of self came from the expectations set by her family. In the next section, I describe the kinds of messages about college going and success that Jessica absorbed while she was growing up.

COMMUNICATING PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

Rachel Snow had a theory about how parents' backgrounds and personal achievements set a bar for their children that may very well be unachievable.

> Rachel: My theory is, like Jessica was saying, the parents all went to Stanford but the thing is they didn't grow up in this area. They all grew up in areas where they were the top of the class.
>
> Jessica: Oh yeah, I've heard this theory.
>
> Rachel: They were at the top of the class and then they went to Stanford. Their class was not that competitive.
>
> Jessica: They want their kids to be at the top.
>
> Rachel: They think their kid needs to be at the top of the class because they were. But everyone's parents think their kids need to be the top of the class because they were. *They can't all be the top of the class.*
>
> Jessica: I feel like everyone wants to, expects to be the best. I feel like you told me that.
>
> Rachel: I tell everyone. (1st interview)

Rachel's theory alludes to the way that context matters when it comes to parents tempering their expectations. The "theory" is the narrative that Rachel and, presumably, other students like her have crafted to make sense of where parental expectations come from. The narrative is grounded in the parents' biographies and touches on a point that came up several times in my interviews: the landscape of college admissions today is much-altered from what it looked like when the

parents in this study were undertaking their own college searches. Moreover, context matters. In any environment with a critical mass of highly educated people, such as college towns or, in this case, Silicon Valley, there is a concentration of adults who were excellent students, often the best in their "not that competitive" high schools. There is variation in how much parents realize their biographies affect their aspirations and expectations for their children. They also have varying levels of consciousness as how to their implicit predispositions spill into explicit mandates couched as "encouragement."

By the time I met Jessica, she had grappled with the question of how much she would let her grades determine her self-worth and come out the other side. This was unquestionably a journey of shifting her expectations from external to internal measures of success. One of the most powerful sources of external expectations came from her parents. Her mother had some pithy advice freshman year:

> I guess I like to take some stress off because everybody goes with this expectation that if you get a B… I remember Mom saying freshman year, every B closes the door. That stressed me out so much. I remember seeing her [Rachel] go through it and it was like, it's going to be okay. It'll be fine. I'll go to college. I do think a lot about what I'm going to do after college, when I am 30. I want to be a stay-at-home mom. I want to have a career and then I want to be a stay-at-home mom. I was thinking, is where I go to college really going to ruin, make or break my life? I feel like a lot of people are ... Also, I felt like I was going to high school worried about my next step. I realized if I'm not happy now, in college, I'm just going to be worried about what job I'm going to get. I am worried about it, but the same time I want to enjoy high school and have memories to remember. (1st interview)

More than one person in my interviews mentioned the social pressure to always think ahead to the next hurdle, always pushing forward with the goal of being successful, however that is defined. In this passage, Jessica put the issues of grades into perspective about what she wanted her future to look like. She concluded that stressing too much about grades was not how she wanted to experience high school.

James Snow was even more aggressive than his wife when it came to motivating his children through fear of future failure. Rachel and Jessica could still remember incidents of their father's "encouragement" years after the fact:

Jessica: I don't know if they understand exactly what it takes, what it doesn't take. I don't know. I think they were listening to what their friends thought and got frustrated, that's clearly obvious.

Rachel: That scared them. I do remember dad, one day, sophomore year again, was like, "You have a baby, you look at them and you are like you would give anything. They could be anything, they could be the president then you watch them grow up and you see all these doors shut."

Jessica: He gave me that talk. That's horrible.

Rachel: I was like, I hate my life.

Jessica: I think my dad just worries too much about us. I'm like, I will be fine. I'll figure it out no matter what happens. (1st interview)

Jessica speculated that her parents absorbed their friends' thinking about academics and how high school performance will affect their children's future. In other words, the adults in Jessica's life were just as vulnerable to external formulas as their children. Jessica had to cast off both her fear of her parents' approbation and her fear of the picture of failure they set out. In recounting this incident years later, Jessica had that confidence that she "would figure it out no matter what," but I suspect that at the time, her father's warning was much more devastating. Jessica's experiences in her junior year led to her dramatic developmental gains, so if "that talk" predated junior year, she would not necessarily have had the meaning making capacity to critically analyze her father's guilt-inducing pep-talk. Yet Jessica painted the talk in a positive light — a sign that her father worried about her too much — rather than seeing it as a kind of emotional blackmail.

The Snow parents relaxed their expectations over the years, which meant that Jessica had an easier time than her sister academically. Given the academic rigor of Menlo-Atherton, the

Snows came to understand that a B did not necessarily close a door and was actually something of an accomplishment given the caliber of the students. Both Jessica and Rachel believed that their parents were even more lenient with their brother, who was the third child to go through M-A.

This was not necessarily a lesson that came naturally to the parents. Jessica was the only student I interviewed who mentioned working with her parents to bring them around to her way of thinking, rather than vice versa. She described it as giving them feedback:

> I used to think it would be more like backhanded comments, which were the worst. I would put in the time studying, it would be like, "You're not going to pass." As hinted in there all the time. I don't think he [James] meant to but it was what they were thinking about. I feel like that was just add to a lot of stress because it's like, I worry about myself and I'm fine, I'll figure it out, I know what I have to do. Them just poking in there all the time was not helpful. I feel like I told them that at one point. I feel like they are trying to work on it. I was definitely more of the constructive criticism kind of kid. I gave them feedback. I don't feel like I did too bad. I feel like our dad is not a sugarcoating kind of person. Neither of them would be like, "Hi honey, how can we help you, you seem really stressed." They would just be like, you're probably going to fail. This is bad. How are you going to fix this?" (1st interview)

In the self-authorship model, personal characteristics are one of the three elements (along with experiences and effects of experiences) that affect how students make meaning (King and Baxter Magolda 2019). Jessica described herself as a "constructive criticism kind of kid," from which I infer she was not shy about telling her parents what she thought (they no doubt considered it talking back). Nevertheless, this streak of fierce independence also gave her the confidence to figure out what she needed to do. She was not immune to stress and endured quite a bit during her junior year, but insofar as she could manage her stress — in this case by telling her parents to back off — she took measures to do so. Apparently it was effective, as Tammy and James worked on leaving her alone more. This openness to change tempered with the way Jessica perceived her parents' personalities, i.e., that James was not a "sugarcoating kind of person," gave her some measure of appreciation for them.

Teenagers make sense of the world using comparisons and contextual influences (Erikson 1968) and in this case, the Snow kids viewed their parents favorably in comparison to others. Jessica describes some kinds of parents as "controlling," as they exert an outsize influence on how their children experience school.

> I think my parents are better. After Rachel, they are better than most. A lot of parents are really controlling of their kids. If someone is, "I am going to get a B" and they are freaking out. It's not freaking out for [themselves], they are freaking out because their mom's going to kill them. My friend, yesterday, was like, "I'm going to get a B in this class. My mom is going to kill me." Also, I got over being scared of my parents last year. I think that helped, to take off some of the pressure. I was like, if I'm going to get a B, they will get over it. I was more concerned [about] my feelings towards it. Because I was like, it's my life, I guess. I feel like a lot of people are still living under their parents and whatever their parents say, they are scared of that. (1st interview)

The narrative of parents who punish their kids for getting Bs has some basis in truth — after all, that was the starting line for the Snow family. However, many students, and even some parents, seemed to know at least second hand of a student whose parents would "kill" them if they got a B. Jessica suggested that parents use fear to control their children to achieve academic success. Jessica was also explicit about the interplay between fear and pressure encapsulated in the shorthand — *my parents are going to kill me*[41]. This contrasted with her assessment of her own parents being "better than most." At the same time, both she and Rachel could recount memorable conversations where their parents made thinly veiled threats about the possibility they could ruin their futures if they did get As. Because Jessica could compare her parents with more demanding ones, she could reframe her own family dynamic in a positive light. Students believing and appreciating that their parents were not as strict as others creates a complicity in presenting an image of not conforming to the stereotype of the high-pressure Silicon Valley family. By situating themselves outside the narrative that parental pressure is one

[41] While "killing" in this context is teenage hyperbole, it would be remiss not to mention that the threat of violence is real for some students in the region. Michelle Kim told me that if her daughter, Hannah's grades slipped, Michelle would not "spank her or throw a chair at her," adding, "I really have to say, though, I know that there are Chinese families if their kid gets a B they would throw a chair at them. And it's not uncommon."

of the main causes of stress among students, families believe they are not part of the systemic problem that exists at the community level. Put another way, it gives them the moral high ground to argue that too-high expectations plague other families, not theirs.

Jessica differentiated herself from peers who were afraid that their parents would "kill them," and her own process of having gotten over her fear of her parents. She had let go of earning grades for her parents' sake and shifted her attention to how she herself would feel if she got a B. While it is likely that external opinion still factored into her feelings, it was a level of meaning-making complexity removed from explicit focus on parental approbation as the main motivator for good grades. It is no accident that Jessica also one of the students who found the college choice the least stressful. She had already passed a major milestone in her life, by letting go of tying her identity to external values about achievement.

THE FACE OF PERFECTION

Jessica was neither immune nor oblivious to the pressures of growing up in Menlo Park and attending Menlo-Atherton High School. She had a clear sense of the external expectations that were laid out for her: perfection.

> It's like an expectation that everything is perfect. I feel like people expect you to have an over 4.0 and also be the president of a community service club and be the varsity captain of a sport and just do all of that, fit it all in your day and volunteer and just do everything. I don't think there is physically time for that, but it still feels like everybody expects you to do that. People aren't very forgiving. If you mess up, you're just not supposed to do that. I feel like people judge a lot, I guess. I feel like a lot of self-worth is put into your grades. That's something I tried to work on, is not focusing everything on that. I work hard in school, a lot, but finding my self-value in other places. A lot of people, if you ask them what defines you, they would probably say their GPA. (1st interview)

Jessica demonstrated that although she was aware of the dominant belief that grades are the determination of self-worth, she actively resisted it. She was not perfect and admitted to trying to work on it, but had also adopted a philosophy of independence — or what Rachel called

rebelliousness. Jessica herself used the term “self-motivated,” claiming that “even my parents taught me to do something, doesn’t mean I’m going to do it.”

From the theoretical perspective of self-authorship, Jessica’s meaning making could be described as Leaving the Crossroads, the level prior to becoming self-authoring. This meant that external expectations only had a limited impact on what she knew to be true about herself. Because she had a burgeoning internal orientation, she had confidence that her college choice decision would lead to her ultimate happiness. Jessica developed this pragmatism during her junior year, when she admitted that she took on too much and tried to meet too many competing demands. When I asked Jessica whether taking eight APs (total throughout high school) was average among her peers, she described the process of how her worldview shifted from listening to others to listening to herself:

Jessica: Yes, yeah I would say probably. I think I did a little, definitely too much last year. I feel like I was definitely on the more intense side because I was in honors class and I took seven classes and six is a full schedule. That was not a good combo but junior year, when you sign up for classes, everyone is telling you to take the hardest schedule you can, as much as you can fit in there. I just always was like, yeah you want to balance but nobody actually will push you to be balanced. You have to be the one saying I want a balanced life. I feel like all the parents also are like, “Oh my kids are healthy” and stuff but then you still go home, do your work. It's not like they're actually going to do anything to make sure that they're balanced.

Johanna: Did you feel like you weren't balanced junior year?

Jessica: Definitely not. Oh my gosh, no. It was a really good learning experience for me though. Just like everything junior year.

Johanna: How's that? [Jessica: Huh?] In what ways?

Jessica: I also feel like my friend group changed a lot and I just felt like there was a lot of things, like my lacrosse team was a very interesting experience. Trying to balance everything kind of like I feel like I needed that exposure to realize that I cannot do everything because since I was little, I've always tried to do everything because I don't like missing on things. But yeah, it

> was just like, way too much and I actually feel like I actually saw that. It was not fun, I would not want to relive it, but I'm glad I realized that.
>
> Also I feel like I figured out that I have to take control. I can't just listen to what they're telling me to do, my parents and my coach and my friends and all that. I had to kind of decide for myself what decisions I wanted to make and what I was going to give time to. Ultimately I could not please everyone at all. My lacrosse coach was always unhappy, my parents and like, it was just like, I felt so torn so then I kind of realized ... I feel like that made me mature. I figured out more of who I am and who I want to be because of that. Looking back, I'm glad it happened. It was not fun. (2nd interview)

The culmination of Jessica's junior year experiences, including failing to live up to her lacrosse coach's expectations, helped her develop the ability to hold competing demands as object rather than being subject to them, resulting in her having a much less stressful senior year. During junior year, she realized that "balance" in her environment was mere lip service and that individuals have to responsible for bringing balance to their lives, because the default is to overextend. From the perspective of self-authorship theory, Jessica's junior year would be considered a developmentally effective experience because it fundamentally altered the ways she thought about herself and her interactions with others (King et al. 2009).

Jessica even invented a process that she called her four-step plan: "I made this one up. For any situation or thing, number one is to analyze the situation, number two decide what you want the outcome to be, number three, make a plan, four, execute it. I just don't believe in the whole stress thing." Late Crossroads is characterized by individuals cultivating an internal voice to mediate external influences (Baxter Magolda and King 2012). The four-step plan that Jessica created to take control of her life exemplifies the kind of complexity in meaning making that would be expected at this level — albeit it is highly unusual to see someone of Jessica's age with this level of meaning making capacity.

The durability of the lessons Jessica learned from her junior year were tested when it came to choosing her senior year courses. Unlike junior year when she took on a course load that was expected, if not conducive to balance, in her senior year Jessica ignored the advice of most of the people around her to do what was best for her:

> Jessica: I did not take a math because ... Actually now looking back, that was definitely like a decision I made despite everyone telling me not to because I knew if I had math with the same teacher for three years, it would just be worse this year and I would not be able to do well in that class and I knew that would hurt me more than not taking the class. I'm glad I didn't take it, but everyone was telling me to and I was like, no. I know myself, I know math, and that's just not going to work.
>
> Johanna: You say everyone like your friends?
>
> Jessica: No my friends, definitely they were talking to me like, "Whoa, that's not a good call." I was like, "Calm down, I thought about it." But my parents and my guidance counselor, and I think the only person who told me it was okay was my other private counselor but the school counselor told me it was a bad idea too, and I was like, I need to do that because it was, yeah I would have been taking four APs again. (2nd interview)

The experiences of her junior year gave Jessica the courage to listen to herself rather than everyone telling her to take math — to have confidence that she did indeed "know herself." Jessica's memory that she had to tell her friends to calm down suggests that her decision was controversial, at least something her peers thought was worth getting upset about.

Jessica approached her college applications armed with a clear sense of the institutional characteristics she desired and, for the most part, lacking externally derived pressures about where she should apply. She was not completely immune to environmental cues — she admitted she would have gone to Wake Forest had she been admitted — but this did not become an issue because she knew herself well enough to set reasonable expectations. Her similarly indifferent attitude about being waitlisted at Clemson is another example of how much control Jessica maintained over the application process.

> I think I learned more junior year and I feel like I kind of knew who I was when I applied so I don't know if I would say I really learned that much applying. I feel like I went into it with the mindset that wasn't like, oh my gosh, what if I don't get in? Like I was, I'll get in somewhere and I'll end up somewhere happy. I feel like I guess from the whole high school process I learned that. Like, not everything is the end of the world which I feel like sometimes. (2nd interview)

Jessica was an unusual student in that she did not set herself up for failure by aspiring to an overly narrow definition of success the way many of her peers did. As she said, she did not fall into the trap into thinking that it would be the end of world if she didn't get into one paramount dream school. She managed the college application process in its entirety with a realistic worldview, both of herself and how she was likely to be viewed by the schools she planned to apply to.

Jessica's college choice process went smoothly and was scaffolded by the strong sense of identity that she had developed as a result of her high school experiences. It was notable how little she had to say about the process itself. This was because by the time it came for Jessica to apply to college, she had already done the identity work of aligning her ambitions with her chances of being accepted at the institutions she applied to. This alignment required the ability to hold as object external narratives about what she should do, regardless of what was best for her, rather than being subject to them. This developmental capacity for internal meaning making is unusual for students of Jessica's age, and even many adults. Jessica achieved this internal foundation through the interaction between her personal characteristics and external cues filtered through her junior year experiences.

CHAPTER 9

Michael Smith

> A lot of them [friends] got into places where they really wanted to go. Like, a friend got into Cal Poly. He dreamed of going to Cal Poly. Pretty much most of our friends got into schools that they were really happy about. So I think the whole application thing just kind of worked out for them in the end. But in the meantime, it honestly wasn't that big a deal in my friends group because… I don't know. They have the same mindset as me. It's like, they're going to go somewhere great and might as well just not worry about it. – Michael Smith

Michael Smith was a tall, verbally reticent student who decided to attend the University of Washington (U-W), which is ranked 59th by *US News & World Report*. His college choice process was characterized by *passive privilege*, which meant that although he believed that it was important to go to a prestigious postsecondary institution, he did not approach high school with such a singular goal in mind. He challenged himself, but he did not contort himself into trying to be the type of person he thought elite colleges were looking for. His strategy worked out well for him: Without having to expend much academic effort throughout high school, he was accepted at a competitive institution (tied for 59th in *U.S. News & World Report's* ranking) — the acceptance rate was 49.1 percent in 2018 (Holtz 2018).

Michael's meaning making fell within the spectrum of solely External Meaning Making, which meant he demonstrated no signs of the internal voice with respect to how he thought about the world, himself, or his relationships with others (Baxter Magolda and King 2012). He accepted social norms without question, specifically the notion that he should pursue postsecondary education immediately after high school, even though his parents would have been comfortable with him doing a gap year. His application process was the source of little

stress, in part because of his self-described "laidback" attitude but also because he targeted schools with good engineering programs.

Michael grew up in Burlingame, California, a town on the northern end of the peninsula with a median household income of $118,410 (U.S. Census Bureau 2018a). He described Burlingame as "safe" and as socioeconomically upper middle-class, sandwiched between "filthy rich Hillsborough" and San Bruno and Millbrae, which he described as middle- to lower-class. He lived in a cozy home with his mother, father, and brother (a high school freshman.) Michael's mother, Kimberly, and her husband, Paul, both grew up in the United Kingdom and attended Cambridge University, though they did their graduate work in the United States. Their relative unfamiliarity with the U.S. higher education system was a source of stress for Kimberly. Kimberly supervised content marketing at a major national bank, and Paul oversaw business development for a technology company. They immigrated to the United States when Paul studied for his MBA at Stanford. Kimberly was a first-generation college student. She was not sure whether Paul's father went to college, but she knew that Paul's mother did not.

According to Kimberly, Michael was an introverted child who did not discover his confidence until the latter half of high school. He had difficulty participating in classes until something clicked for him. He found his footing as an active practitioner of Taekwondo and as a member of the varsity track team. He fell in love with architectural engineering during his junior year, which fueled his desire to major in engineering in college. English was his least favorite subject, and he had to work to maintain a B in his English classes, but generally speaking, he could, in his own words, "get by by just kind of coasting."

For Michael, "coasting," which he characterized as being able to manage his classes by studying enough and doing the work, ended up reducing the stress associated with the college

choice process. And though he did not have a dream school, his college choice process resulted in a satisfactory final outcome.

AN EASY FINAL CHOICE

Michael developed his college list by focusing on schools with strong engineering programs. He created an initial list and then showed it to his parents, both of whom tweaked it a little.[42]

Table 10 Michael Smith's College Applications and Outcomes

Institution	Outcome
California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly)	Rejected
Cornell University	Rejected
New York University	Accepted
Santa Clara University	Rejected
Stanford University (Early action)	Rejected
UC Berkeley	Rejected
UC Davis	Rejected
UC Irvine	Waitlisted
UC Los Angeles	Rejected
UC San Diego	Rejected
UC Santa Barbara	Rejected
University of Michigan	Rejected
University of Pennsylvania	Rejected
University of Southern California*	Rejected
University of Washington	Accepted → Final choice
Washington University in St. Louis*	Rejected

[42] There were some discrepancies in my data regarding the schools he ultimately ended up applying to. In our second interview he told me his final schools he sent applications to, but then when I talked to Kimberly, she mentioned some additional schools that were not among those Michael shared. In Table 10, I have listed the schools that at least one of them indicated.

Note. *Not on Michael's list

Michael's list was a mix of mid- to upper-tier universities in terms of competitiveness. None of schools were obvious "safeties" given his 31 ACT and 3.65 unweighted GPA. For example, for the Fall 2015 incoming engineering class at Cal Poly, the average ACT score was 30 and the average GPA was 4.08 (Cal Poly Institutional Research 2015). Cal Poly would have been a reach for Michael. Stanford was even more of a reach, where over half of the Fall 2015 class had over a 4.0 GPA and almost 75 percent had ACT scores with in the 30-36 range. Nevertheless, Michael applied to Stanford early, and we had a somewhat odd exchange that was characteristic of what he described as his "laidback" attitude.

> Johanna: Did you apply anywhere early?
>
> Michael: I applied to Stanford early.
>
> Johanna: And how did that go?
>
> Michael: It went well.
>
> Johanna: Okay. So deferral or?
>
> Michael: Nah, just rejected. (1st interview)

This exchange was odd because as it turned out, Michael had not been rejected from Stanford: He had neglected to press the final button to submit his early application. According to Kimberly:

> He'd told us he'd been rejected because he thought that if he told us he was rejected then if he ended up getting in it would be a happy surprise. And if he didn't then he wouldn't be embarrassed by telling us, "I really messed up." (2nd interview)

Michael's embarrassment and subsequent lie to his parents (and to me) spoke to his immaturity or the possibility that he was naïve to the stakes in the admissions game. His remark that his application went well, even in the light of him claiming to have been rejected, suggests that

rejection would not have been earth-shattering had his early application actually been deferred or rejected. Kimberly indicated this was his approach. Michael took to the entire college choice process as she said, "He's not a high drama kid like, 'Oh my god, my world will end. I didn't get in.'"

In developing his list of institutions for regular admission, cost — Cal Poly was one of his top choices because of its affordability — and prestige factored into his decisions, "because I want to be hired at a higher class [of job]. So if I get into a better school, I feel as though I'll get a better job." He was also interested in opportunities like study abroad as well as the institutions' physical facilities. He used tools like Naviance a little bit but admitted,

> I didn't put too much focus on it, really. Because, I don't know. I just kind of applied to the schools I wanted to apply to. But I definitely looked at those and just kind of like, I guess, calculated where I would fall in each of those sort of things. (2nd interview)

He said he completed the FAFSA and believed he might have to take out loans to finance his education, though Kimberly told me this was not the case. She was unsure why Michael would have thought otherwise.

Michael's final choice was between U-W and New York University (NYU), which were the only two schools he was accepted into. He was waitlisted at UC Irvine, and Kimberly thought he had a decent chance of getting in, but Michael was not interested in waiting. After visiting both campuses, Michael decided on U-W. I asked him how difficult the choice had been, and he said, "I mean I didn't feel as stressed, honestly. It felt like… once I visited both places it was kind of like, it wasn't that hard of a choice. So I didn't feel super stressed about it, really." U-W's engineering school is ranked higher than NYU's, and ultimately Michael liked the campus better. The ability to choose a school based on emotional resonance — how one feels about the school — is a privilege in and of itself. The Smith family had the financial resources such that

cost was not a major consideration in his decision — though Kimberly noted that U-W was less expensive than NYU.

The Smith family was content with Michael's final choice to attend U-W as it was a good school for engineering and because it seemed like Michael would be happy there. Even though Kimberly encouraged Michael to consider some "moonshot" choices, generally they did not go into the process with inflated expectations. In the next section, I discuss the way that realistic expectations shaped Michael's relatively smooth high school experience.

NOT IVY LEAGUE OR BUST

Like the other students in this study, Michael attributed the pressure of college admissions to the large number of residents in Silicon Valley with impressive academic credentials. When I asked him why students want to go to top schools, he said:

Johanna: Some of the schools around her the students are obsessed with getting into Ivy League schools or Stanford. How would you say Burlingame [high school] thinks about it?

Michael: I wouldn't say they're obsessed whatsoever. I'd say they're really okay with wherever they get into. It's not Ivy League or bust here. But it's definitely, like, half the student body really wants to go somewhere that's up there with the top colleges in the U.S.

Johanna : Half is a lot. [Michael: Yeah] Why do you think that is?

Michael: I don't know? Probably because we live in an area where a whole bunch of the parents and the students went to places that are really good. So they want their students to do the same because they're living a successful life.

Johanna: Do you know a lot of students who applied to the same schools as their parents?

Michael: Yeah. Actually a lot of the Stanford kids, the ones who really applied did, who had parents go to Stanford, and then applied there just because with parental alumniship – if that's a word. But, yeah. I feel like a whole bunch of kids are applying to schools their parents went to around here because their parents went to really good schools. (1st interview)

Michael implied that a large percentage of the parents went to good schools themselves and that their children sought to follow in the parents' footsteps. His unspoken assumption was that families want to at minimum maintain their social status, and that going to a college as good as if not better than one's parents is the way to do that. This can be seen most explicitly in the case of Stanford, where families attempt to leverage their alumni status. Michael himself was the child of an alumnus, as Paul did his MBA there, but Michael did not number himself among Stanford alumni elect.

Kimberly reiterated Michael's assertion that going to college is part of the culture in the area. She recalled that college was part of the conversation as early as elementary school:

> This may have been [younger son] actually. Or maybe it was Michael in third grade. He had a third grade teacher who encouraged them to think about college and what they wanted to do. So it may have been then, actually. I thought it was a little early myself, but, you know. It's just kind of the environment we live in. (1st interview)

Michael's predisposition to pursue postsecondary education was fostered as early as third grade. Moreover, the teacher was conveying expectations, however subtly, about what these students' futures would entail. This kind of subtle encouragement would follow Michael into high school, ensuring that college was his inevitable postsecondary pathway.

THE IMPACT OF PEER NETWORKS ON ACHIEVEMENT

Burlingame High School (BHS) is a large suburban school that both Kimberly and Michael described as diverse. In 2016, just over half of the student body was White and slightly less than 20 percent were either Asian or Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.b). Based on the advanced course offerings, Michael judged his high school to be "pretty good," with the caveat that Burlingame probably did not offer the range of classes on par with the local private schools. Teachers encouraged students to do the best they could, without exerting undue pressure. Due to the recent hiring of a new principal, BHS seemed to be in the

process of a transition, as she undertook a (poorly received) effort to reduce the importance of athletics in the school culture and added new (better received) activities like robotics and Model UN.

At school, Michael was unusual compared to other students in the study in that socially he was not surrounded by peers who were as academically strong as him, which may have contributed to his lack of motivation to truly excel. He also lacked a cohort of peers who were all figuring out the college application process together. Kimberly contrasted Michael's relative isolation with her other son's support network:

> He's always been kind of one of the smartest in his group, if not *the* smartest. And so, yeah. So he hasn't really had other kids around who have shown him the ropes. So here's the difference. So my youngest son who is academically probably about the same, but is different. He thinks differently and sees the world differently. But he did robotics this year. And he came home and said, "Okay, I want to go to CSM[43] and do chemistry over the summer, take chemistry so I can do AP biology next year. And then I also want to do algebra two over the summer as well. And I want to do programming camp. And I didn't even know that they could go and take those classes at CSM over the summer. I didn't know high school students could do it. Michael never knew about that. But it's because he's hanging out with all the super geeky kids in robotics who've all done that and then have come back and said, "Well, if you really want to do this, or you want to apply to this college, this is what you have to do." So he's found out from them and he's figuring it out. Whereas Michael was never in the super advanced classes, because he didn't do advanced math in middle school. He always got As in math. And I think he probably could have done advanced math. But we never put it for him for it when he moved from elementary school to middle school, because I'd been ill and just kind of missed the boat, basically. But I think if he'd been friendly and been with that group of kids, then it might have… yeah, it might have been different. (2nd interview)

The experiences of the two boys speaks to the impact of having a critical mass of peers who push each other to take harder classes and who are attuned to the goal of getting into a good college. Kimberly acknowledged that she was just speculating as to whether Michael's high school experience would have been different had he associated with a different peer group, because, "he's one of those kids who does just enough." Though from Kimberly's perspective Michael

[43] College of San Mateo

was the smartest student in his group, Michael mentioned one friend who strived for academic excellence beyond what Michael himself was willing to do:

> Michael: I think there's only one friend who actually tries really, really, hard to succeed. And he sometimes gets stressed out a lot. But most of the time he's pretty much as relaxed as we are.
>
> Johanna: And you said that he tries to succeed. What does 'succeed' mean?
>
> Michael: I guess by that I mean he tries really, really, hard. He's straight A everything. He puts a whole bunch of pressure on himself to try and do legitimately everything to the best of his ability, whilst the rest of us just try and do it, try as best we can. But he wants to go past that. (1st interview)

Michael equated success with trying hard, but "trying hard" comprised two distinct theories of action: the students who did the best they could and the outlier who strived for all As. These two orientations are indicative of the diversity in academic goals within Michael's friend group, but it also substantiated Kimberly's contention that Michael lacked a peer group who would push him beyond his comfort level.

Michael was circumspect about the range of achievement at his high school and where he fit in the hierarchy. Kimberly described him as "realistic." He told me about how he was sitting with "a smarter group of people" in the library on the day the Stanford regular decision results were announced. When I asked him how he knew they were smarter he said, "I had them in my classes and they're pretty much all straight A students. So I definitely thought they were the smarter people." Michael did not begrudge what he perceived to be the students' intelligence, but he also excluded himself from their clique. This distancing set him up to aim for a tier of college lower than those he associated with the smart people.

Because Michael did not consider himself to be a high achiever, his college choice goals were more modest than those of his parents for him. Yet, this did not become a source of family contention. In the next section, I explore the way Michael managed his parents' expectations.

RECALIBRATING THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

Since Kimberly and Paul completed undergraduate education outside of the United States, the allure of their alma mater was not as compelling as it was for students whose parents attended elite colleges in the United States. In fact, *U.S. News & World Report* ranks the University of Cambridge seventh in its survey of global universities. Nonetheless, neither Kimberly nor Michael mentioned Cambridge as a possibility.

Perhaps it was not in Michael's nature given his personal characteristics, but he did not look at his parents' credentials and aspire to take a similar path. In the United States' context, it was as if Kimberly and Paul's academic records did not count as markers of success. I am not sure Michael was even aware of how prestigious Cambridge is; it certainly never came up. Michael never felt pressured to follow in his parents' footsteps.

This was by design. Kimberly claimed,

> We never really put that pressure on him. It's that, "Oh my god, you've got to get into this school. This is the school we went to. If you don't get into this school it will be the end of the world and we'll have a big cry fest about it." So I don't think he ever felt that sort of pressure. (2nd interview)

Michael himself substantiated this claim — to a point. Kimberly did mention specific college destinations (including U-W when she heard it had a good engineering program). Paul, on the other hand, made comments to the effect that Michael should go to Stanford:

Johanna: So when did your dad first kind of present the idea that he wanted you to go to a good school?

Michael: I mean, he's always really wanted me to go to a good school. But it's more around this year that he's really been kind of pushing it.

Johanna: So what kind of stuff did he say that you would know that he always wanted you to go to a good school?

Michael: I don't know. He's just kind of hinted always, like, "Oh, you know, Michael. You're going to Stanford." I guess stuff like that, really.

Johanna: Did he want you to go to Stanford?

Michael: Yeah, pretty much.

Johanna: They have a really good engineering program.

Michael: They do. But he's perfectly fine with me going to any really good school. (1st interview)

I have no doubt that Paul influenced Michael's decision to apply to Stanford early. Yet the lackadaisical approach Michael took to his Stanford application suggests that he had not internalized Stanford attendance as part of his identity, which was why he neither surprised nor upset when he was not accepted. This could be in part because, unlike Paul, Michael never saw himself as Stanford material. This passage suggests that despite what Paul *said*, Michael *interpreted* it merely as his parents' desire for him to go to any good school. Michael's list of schools reflected these expectations:

> My parents expect a lot on me. So I chose pretty higher up there schools like Carnegie-Mellon,[44] and Cornell, and, you know, pretty high up there engineering schools. But then I also need a couple of middle ground safeties. So I applied to a couple of the middle ground UCs. So then Santa Clara and a whole bunch of other, I guess, safer schools as well. But as long as they had at least good engineering programs. Because I didn't want to apply somewhere that had bad engineering just because it was safe. (1st interview)

Michael's language does not convey any particular desire to go to a "high up there" school on his own behalf. Kimberly described the creation of Michael's list as, "It's always this back and forth between what we want and what he wants. And I really want it to be what he wants because, after all, it's his life."

[44] Not included in final list of schools.

Kimberly and Michael agreed that most of the family pressure centered around grades. In discussing a recent suicide that occurred at Burlingame High School, Kimberly keenly conveyed that she was not the type of parent to pressure her children, despite the fact that she believed the suicide was due to mental illness:

> I've always been quite careful. I mean, I've kind of pushed Michael and I think he knows the expectations that he needs to do. The way I've framed it up is that I want him to be the best that he can be. So he needs to put in effort. And if they get a bad grade and I know they've put in effort, that's fine. But if they get a bad grade and they really goofed off and they haven't really tried, then that's when I kind of get pissed off about it. But I would *never* want them to get to the point where they felt like there was no way out and they were a failure. I just can't be that person. (2nd interview)

No parent wants to be "that person," so Kimberly was hardly remarkable in this respect. Yet, I heard time and time again that parents were responsible for pressuring their children — even if no one in this study would own up to doing so. At several points, Kimberly mentioned that she would be comfortable with Michael taking a nontraditional educational path, in her first interview saying,

> We often have this conversation too, that if he gets in and he doesn't like the school, or he doesn't like the subject it's fine. He can just transfer. It's not the end of the world. I think there's a lot of emphasis, I mean, there's so many parents who try and steer their kids into this direction or that direction. And at the end of the day, I mean, it took me a while to figure out what I'd like to do. And I've been very successful at what I do. But my career really didn't take off until I got to Wells Fargo, and then I've just kind of been. So you have a long time to work. And he can always go to graduate school. And if he decides he's taken the wrong turn… the one thing I don't want him ever to do is to get to college and be super depressed and feel like that we'll think he's a failure or anything else, because I don't think there's anything, you know. You just recalibrate your road to success, basically. (1st interview)

The phrase "recalibrate your road to success" here stands out as both a value in the Smith family and as description of the way the families in this study reframed the students' final college choices. Ultimately, none of the parents were at least outwardly disappointed with their student's college destination because of the way many families retroactively reframed their expectations to fit the admissions results.

Michael himself supported his mother's claim that grades were the main source of contention between them:

> Johanna: What about your parents? Do you feel like they've pressured you to do well?
>
> Michael: Sometimes, because that's, you know, parents. But pretty much they've pressured me to do well. But in the end, it's really up to me, and they realize that, so. They just let what happens, happens. But if my grades start dropping, then they really get on my case.
>
> Johanna: What is their line for when they start getting on your case?
>
> Michael: I guess when they don't think that I'm doing the best I can. Because I've always gotten Bs in English because I'm just not that proficient in English. So whenever I get a B in English they're like, "Oh, that's fine." But when it drops to a C then they start getting on it. The same with math. It's like, I always get As. So when I get to a B, they start worrying. (1st interview)

Michael seemed to expect some amount of pressure as inevitable. He was unusually circumspect in his admission that, "In the end, it's really up to me." Michael and his parents generally seemed to share a healthy respect for balancing each other's wants and needs.

When it came to Michael's college applications though, his laidback attitude exasperated his parents. Having not gone through it themselves, they were unfamiliar with the college application process in the United States and were understandably nervous about such an important undertaking for their elder son. Kimberly was anxious about meeting deadlines, and the family decided to hire a college counselor to keep them on track. Michael's position, as Kimberly recalled it, was practically apathetic:

> I was kind of like, you know, like the adults on Charlie Brown cartoons, those Snoopy cartoons where you're going "Do this, do that." And all they can hear is "whu, whu, whu, whu." You know, I was saying, "Please do this." And then finally I was saying, "Okay, Michael. What can I do to get you focused on this? I will do anything at this point." And I knew… this friend of mine said, "Try bribing him." So I said, "Okay." And I said to her at the time it's like, "He doesn't want anything. He's of rather simple tastes." So I thought at this point will try anything. So I said, "I will give you anything." And he was, "Well, I don't really need anything." I was like, oh my god. Take me out and shoot me now. "Just do, please, just do a rough draft so we can help you with it or we can give you

> some guidance." And then my husband kept saying, "Oh, I'm really good at writing these essays. I can really help him." And I couldn't get him focused on it until literally the weekend before the deadline. (1st interview)

To put a finer point on it, Michael was not one of those students who started working on his essays the summer before his senior year. In fact, he said that he first started *planning* for his college applications during the summer, which included activities such as researching engineering programs. He comes across as good-natured here, but Kimberly's frustration is tangible. However, Michael's attitude was consistent with that of the other boys in the study (Joshua Storm being the notable exception). I heard from more than one parent that their sons were cause for concern given their cavalier approach to their college applications. When I asked about Michael's stress (or lack thereof), Kimberly continued:

> He was kind of mellow about it. I think he kind of felt like… he always says this to me. It's like, 'I've got this, mom.' But I didn't think that he did. I think that he can be a little complacent sometimes. And when he, then he realizes a little too late. So I just didn't want that to happen, because it's such an important thing. (1st interview)

Michael's complacency was in keeping with his character and the way he managed his relationship with his parents. Michael's mistake with his Stanford application suggests that Kimberly was right to worry that he was not as on top of things as he thought. His lack of awareness of that he would not have to take out loans to finance his education, as well as his ignorance of his status as a Stanford legacy through his father were indicative of his general obliviousness to the fact that he was even in the college admissions "game." In a sense, the rules of the game beyond the very basics — for example, that he had to fill out applications to get into college — went over his head. While he believed he needed to go to a good college to be successful, I did not get the sense that he pursued activities or strived for good grades to look on his applications. And yet despite his ignorance of the game, he still managed to be accepted to a good university, which speaks to the power of his passive privilege to bear positive outcomes.

PLAYING THE GAME

Competitive college admissions is a field of power with unspoken rules that many members of the upper-class accept as a manipulatable game, despite being, what Kimberly called, "a complete black box." Pragmatic privileged students assessed the rules of the game and adjusted the way they approached the process to be successful on their own terms. Passive privileged students like Michael tended to be more accepting of the rules of the game. In Michael's case, the contours of the game itself were somewhat lost on him, and his parents initially did not have the knowledge of the American school system to put into action the practices that the middle class takes for granted (e.g., Lareau 2011). Kimberly cited Michael's experiences in Spanish class as an example of how he was naïve about working the system or, in a Bourdeusian sense, playing the game:

> I think he probably could have got another couple of As in his first semester of junior year if he's actually gone and talked to the teachers where, you know, he'd dropped something because he'd been sick or, you know. He was right on the cusp. So with Spanish, he was literally about two tenths of a point off an A minus. And if he'd talked to his Spanish teacher, who really liked him a lot, I think the Spanish teacher, I mean, he was giving them points for class participation, he might have just bumped that up. And I think that parents who've been through this a couple of times or what have you and who have kids who they've kind of pushed to hustle a little bit more tend to probably do a little bit better. So I've really kind of pushed him. And I'm doing that with my youngest son too. Because I really actually think their relationship with their teachers really helps them a lot. And it's not… I wouldn't say it's, you know, it sounds like cheating, but it's not. It's really them taking responsibility for their grades and finding out what they can do as extra credit to help fix anything, if they've got a zero, or if they've missed something. And because he's more kind of on the more introverted spectrum he doesn't really, hasn't really done that. And for me going through school it was all about the exam grades, whereas for them it's all about what you do during the year as well. And the final exam counts for a big chunk of the grade. But it's not everything. So if you miss something or you're on the cusp, it's not like you get extra points for a B plus or a B minus. If you get a B plus and you're literally like that two tenths of a percent away from the A, it actually makes quite a big difference to your GPA. So it took me a while to kind of figure that out, and I think it took him a while to figure it out too. (1st interview)

Kimberly did not use the specific language, but here she was talking about Michael's (and her own) lack of savvy in advocating for himself to manipulate his grades. She was quick to assure

me it was not "cheating," per se, but "taking responsibility for their grades" is a way that entitlement manifests among the middle class, and it seemed to be something that Michael's peers who have "parents who've been through this a couple of times" were familiar with. It was clear that Kimberly was setting up her younger son to be shrewder in this regard.

Michael's passivity is striking compared to students who put a high premium on getting good grades even within his own school. While perhaps Michael's apathy was a function of him being one of the higher achievers in his peer group, the fact was he lacked the motivation to become one of the "smart kids." He shared his philosophy:

> Johanna: In general, what's the vibe in your school around achievement?
>
> Michael: I think the vibe is achievement is good. And we praise all the people who can achieve high things. And I guess my case, it's just kind of like I don't really care. I don't know. I'm kind of like… I understand that I'm able to achieve stuff. And that's really cool. But honestly I just feel very indifferent about it.
>
> Johanna: Would you say, looking back over high school, that you worked hard or you tried hard?
>
> Michael: I think I tried hard enough to get good grades to pass. I just kind of wanted to lay back and just relax. I feel like I could definitely have gone above and beyond. I just didn't have the energy to.
>
> Johanna: Um hm. What about competition? How competitive is your school academically?
>
> Michael: Somewhat competitive. Yeah, there are definitely people who go out of their way to be the best that they can be. And sometimes I'm like that too. But, yeah. There's definitely a line between people who really don't care that much and people who care a lot. I'd say I'm pretty near that line, but nearer to the people who care a lot. (2^{nd} interview)

Michael was not immersed in an environment where he felt peer pressure to "achieve high things." His mention of a line that delineated those who cared a lot versus those who did not suggests that at least two narratives existed at Burlingame High School, and he found his place closer to but not a part of the students who worried about their grades. Among the passive

privileged students, there were different bars for what constituted good enough, and it varied depending on their family and school contexts and personal characteristics. Michael was oriented towards the mid- to upper-end of the spectrum in his "somewhat competitive" high school, but he might have been considered a low achiever in a different high school. Nonetheless, even though Michael did not push himself to go above and beyond, his high school habitus was such that he still did well enough to be accepted at a competitive mid-tier university.

Michael rejected the path of pushing himself to his limit in favor of opting for happiness, which is not a word I heard associated with most students' high school experiences. He attributed his happiness to his eschewing what he called the "terrible lives" of the students who worked harder than him:

> Johanna: What did you learn about yourself through the process of picking a college?
>
> Michael: Hmm. I don't know, honestly. I guess I learned that I'm a really laidback guy, honesty. Even though I've been working my butt off, I just have not been working my butt off as much as a whole bunch of other people. And stressing out as much and like, wow, you guys have terrible lives. I'm sorry. And, yeah. I guess I just kind of learned to be happy where I am right now, honestly. (2nd interview)

From everything Michael had told me about his approach to academics, "working his butt off" meant doing well in the classes he cared about while maintaining grades acceptable to his parents in the classes he was indifferent to. Insofar as I could assess Michael's self-authorship, he would fall within the range of solely external meaning making, which is consistent with the other passive privileged students. Michael's most acute sense of pressure seemed to come from his parents wanting him to maintain a minimum GPA, but otherwise he was content to slide through high school without questioning the paths laid out before him.

Michael's meaning making was a mix of following formulas absolutely and making rudimentary choices (basically going with his gut) when confronted with multiple narratives. For example, he was going to college because "everyone says" so:

> Johanna: What made you think, "Oh, I'm going to go to college?" How did you come to that conclusion?
>
> Michael: I realized that… I don't know. I feel like there's kind of like a precedent where it's like, you have to go to college to be successful. And I wanted to be successful. So I decided, yeah, I should probably do that.
>
> Johanna: How did you come to realize that you need to go to college to be successful?
>
> Michael: I don't know. It's just kind of been what everyone says. (1st interview)

Michael's equating going to college with success was the result of unquestioned socialization. He was following a formula that going to college equals success and by his own admission, cannot articulate where that belief came from. There is no sense of an internally derived epistemology.

When it came to planning his future, Michael was more focused on following the engineering path that spoke to him. In fact, he had contempt for peers who gravitated to engineering for impersonal reasons, such as following in their parents' footsteps: "They probably say, 'Oh, hey. This class [architectural design] is pretty cool. It's what daddy does. You should totally take it.' And then they say yes, and then they either like it or hate it, I guess and then end up doing what they do." His commitment to engineering was also clear in the way he refused to play the application game to increase his chances of getting into a Stanford as Kimberly recalled:

> One of the things that he was told with the Stanford application was, both he and I said as well is like, try for math or econ. Don't try for engineering. Because engineering is so hard, and there's so many kids who want to come into Stanford because of Silicon Valley and blah, blah, blah. But he just stuck to his guns. He wanted to do engineering. He didn't want to go in on something else and have the possibility that he wouldn't get into

engineering. So he stuck to his guns and you know, I actually feel good for him because I think that that's clearly where his passion lies. And he's figured that out. (1st interview)

Michael's unwillingness to misrepresent himself to improve his chances at Stanford was probably due in part to his ambivalence about applying to Stanford at all. However, it also suggested that he had internalized the identity as an engineer such that he did not want to compromise it for the sake of making his application more competitive. While I would still assess Michael as solely external in the intrapersonal dimension, it was not absolute, as his meaning-meaning structure exhibited rudimentary critical thought in the way he thought about himself.

In the interpersonal dimension, he managed his relationship with his parents through a combination of appeasing them and doing what he wanted.

Johanna: A lot of parents and teenagers have a lot of fights and stuff. What do you think has been the secret to your good relationship?

Michael: I just try not to piss her [Kimberly] off, really. It's like, I know what she expects of me. And I just follow those expectations. I feel like people get into fights because they do what they want to rather than what their parents want. And I try and find a mix between the two. (1st interview)

Initially, he claimed that he followed his mother's expectations, merely to avoid pissing her off. He amended his statement to suggest that he exercises some amount of discretion in trying to find a balance between his own and his parents' wants. Moreover, in the interpersonal dimension, Michael did not spiral into depression when he was rejected from a number of schools because his identity was not implicated in the types or number of schools that accepted him. I asked him how he felt when he was accepted to U-W, and he said it felt good:

Michael: It was definitely nice because earlier I got rejected from three schools. And that was kind of a bummer. I didn't actually feel that depressed, I was just kind of like, "Alright. So the school who really wants me just hasn't accepted me yet." And when it finally came in it was like, "Alright, this is cool. I like this school." So, it was nice.

Johanna: How did you get to the mindset that it's really about the school that wants you and that, you know. Some people get just really angry and depressed.

Michael: I don't know. I just kind off decide to stay calm, I guess. I don't know. It was just kind of like a mental thing. I just didn't let it get to me. So I just kind of relaxed, kind of like I usually do. I mean, it just kind of came, honestly. Because I knew it would. It was just a matter of time, honestly. You just got to believe in yourself, you know? (2nd interview)

Michael's meaning making was consistent with the messages that students hear about managing their emotions vis-a-vis their acceptances and rejections — "the school who really wants me just hasn't accepted me yet" not to mention "you just got to believe in yourself." Yet even if he was following formulas, he was making choices about how to make meaning of his results. That said, believing in himself was most likely another type of formula, as it is reminiscent of the platitudes that many middle-class children internalize as they are growing up.

Though a general ethos of success pervades Silicon Valley, success can have different tenors depending on one's abilities and efforts. When he was younger, Michael saw himself as the CEO of a major company, but as he became, to use his words, "a little more realistic," he downgraded his ambitions to working in an engineering firm. To this end, he shifted his definition of what success meant to him to set a goal that was achievable given the amount of energy he was willing to exert. Michael's flexibility in his worldview went a long way towards relieving the pressure of his college choice process.

CHAPTER 10

Synthesis and Conclusion

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

The four cases I analyzed in Chapters Six through Nine represent the range of navigation and meaning making orientations I observed across the study sample. I sorted the cases by navigation orientation to show how in a context where prestige is an omnipresent factor in college choice, different strategies can result in similar outcomes, at least vis-à-vis institutional rankings. My findings show that the way students made meaning of external expectations undergirded their high school experiences and subsequent college choice processes. These external expectations intersected on three levels. There were the social and community contexts that students alluded to when they spoke about how they were expected to go to good colleges and be successful because that was the norm in Silicon Valley. Being surrounded by highly accomplished adults in what students called the Silicon Valley "bubble" fueled the perception that they must reproduce their class position by doing as well as their parents. For example, Joshua Storm felt like he had to attend an elite college to be successful enough to live in Silicon Valley near his family.

Students were most vocal about how expectations were communicated and enacted on the family level. All four students came from families where students felt the weight of both implicit and explicit expectations. In her seminal research on social class-based parenting strategies, Lareau (2011) observed what she called *concerted cultivation* to describe the middle-class parents' hands-on involvement in nurturing their children's talents and future opportunities. This

parenting pattern persisted into the college choice process and played a significant role in sorting by social class (i.e, middle class, working class, and poor) into who went to college and who did not (Lareau and Weininger 2008). As expected, all of the families in this study conformed to Lareau's concerted cultivation model of child-rearing. Lareau's theory sheds little light, though, on the role that parental expectations play in *how* and *to what end* middle-class parents foster abilities and subsequent opportunities. The present study begins to address that gap by drawing connections between concerted cultivation and parental expectations as they play out in the college choice process.

As children grow up, parents set implicit and explicit expectations for the way the children perform in different domains in life — academically, socially, and so on. Expectations come in the form of effort and outcome. *Effort* refers to the amount of work the student exerts on the goal, and *outcome* refers to the result of this effort. The balance between expectations of effort and outcome affect the way parents encourage their children to perform. It is the distinction between "do your best" and "we expect you to get at least a B in every course." The difference between a parental orientation towards outcomes versus effort has been found to affect the way that parents allocate resources aimed at promoting academic achievement (Lee and Zhou 2015).

As a socializing influence, the way that students see their parents' achievements, filtered through the lens of parental expectations, can result in students believing that they must follow similar paths. Given how the educational landscape has changed since these parents were in high school, the opportunities available to their children are more restricted. For example, the University of California system, which was supposed to be resource for residents of the state of

California, has become increasingly out of reach for even in-state students. Nicholas Hill observed this within his own family:

> Johanna: Just out of curiosity, do you know anybody who got into Cal?
>
> Nicholas: Going to Cal? I probably know someone who's got into Cal. No one's told me they got into Cal. I know people who got into UCSB, UCSD, and various other UCs. I know some who have gotten into some more prestigious schools too, like people who get into Columbia. I know people who've gotten into Harvard and Stanford and stuff. I don't really… I'm sure that I know someone who's gotten into Cal, but no one's said, "Oh, I got into Cal."
>
> Johanna: It sounds like it was harder to get into Cal than the Ivy Leagues.
>
> Nicholas: Apparently this year it was really hard to get into UCLA. Last year it was really hard to get into Cal. There were fewer than twenty people going to Cal from Paly in 2014. And my dad said that when he graduated in 1983 there were 40 people going to Cal from Paly. So I think, yeah. The landscape sort of changed and part of that is the whole financial thing. And part of it's just, like, these big name UCs are getting more exposure outside of California now than, say, 30 years ago. So as a result there are more people applying from outside of California, and they also have to consider those people too. So the pool's getting bigger and I don't know. I don't know if I should use a pool-based metaphor for describing what's happening to in-state students. But I think that that's sort of disappointing. I'm not even applying to UCs. But I know lot of people that should be perfectly qualified for getting in but they aren't, which is kind of ridiculous. I think all seniors and people who are around seniors, even teachers, like to indulge in being outraged that so and so didn't get in here because they're perfectly qualified to do so. (2nd interview)

The increasing bar to get into the UCs can create a feeling of pressure where students may not be able to achieve at the same level as their parents.

It is natural for parents to feel a connection to their alma maters and unrealistic for them not to share this pride with their children. Christine Waters' affinity for Harvard is a case in point. However, in the current admissions climate of ever-increasing competition for "spots" at the top institutions, parents may be doing their children a disservice by crafting a family narrative that requires following in the academic footsteps of prior generations.

Alyssa Waters and Joshua Storm were both the children of first-generation college students who had gone on to achieve to achieve significant career and financial success. Laura Storm, Christine Waters, and their husbands had achieved the American Dream of social mobility. They had nothing to prove to their own peers about their pedigrees. Thus, they had the kind of privilege rarely mentioned in the literature: the privilege of relieving the next generation of the pressure to achieve the American Dream. The Waters and Storm families had enough resources to provide a safety net for their children no matter how they fared in the college choice process. Objectively speaking, the stakes for Joshua, Alyssa, and their siblings were low in how their final college destination would affect their life chances. The Waters and Storm parents tried to communicate that they had few expectations that their children would follow in their footsteps, instead emphasizing happiness and the freedom to pursue their interests. In fact, wanting happiness for their children was a refrain among parents among the students — mentioned by the Pykes, Amy Hill, and Melissa Ambrose, among others — because the parents in this study had the luxury to want their children to find self-fulfillment rather than exclusively material success.

But the Waters and Storm parents set unspoken expectations by the very nature of their own success. In a social context where all the adults in a student's life seem to have stellar academic credentials and career trajectories, the accomplishments of one's parents are the most visible source of this narrative. Christine Waters explicitly told her daughters that she did not expect them to follow in her footsteps, yet Brittany Waters believed her mother secretly wanted her daughters to go to Harvard. Joshua Storm did not state outright that he felt pressured to replicate his parents' accomplishments, but he observed his parents had taken-for-granted biases towards elite education through their language. I call the tacit expectations that parents set based

on who they are and their class positions embodied expectations. See Figure 1.

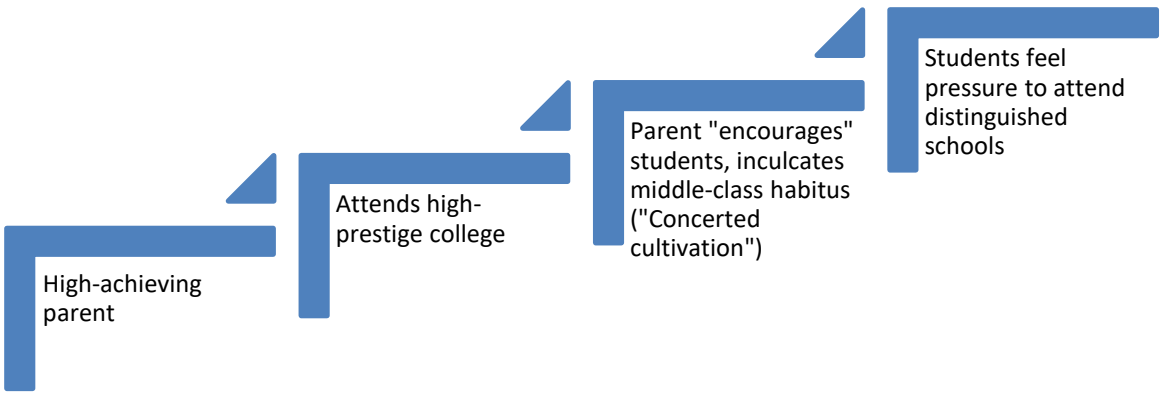

Figure 1. Embodied Expectations

Embodied expectations reflect the way parents' personal identities become reflected in their children's paths to developing their own identities. Concerted cultivation here refers to the way parents nurture values, as well as talents, in their children. Students with parents who have attended elite institutions and who themselves aspire to attend such institutions are likely going to consider their parents' alma maters when formulating their choice set. This is partly due to seeing parents as the most consistent and present role models. Joshua Storm's decision to apply to Stanford, and Alyssa Waters's initial interest in Harvard follows this pattern. Parents' own level of involvement in creating the application lists also plays a role in pushing a child to their alma mater or not. There is also the more strategic and pragmatic fact that legacy status affords some amount of advantage in admissions.

Embodied expectations in high-achieving families are hard to counter because doing so runs up against the tenets of the American Dream. When individuals have absorbed the American Dream whilst growing up in a context like Silicon Valley – that is, social mobility through merit and hard work – and are daily confronted with adults who have achieved this, it is

hard to believe one's parents when they tell their children they do not have to follow this narrative.

The Snow and Smith families also had expectations for their children, but they played out differently than they did in the Waters and Storm families. The Snow and Smith parents set explicit expectations for their children's grades, culminating in James Snow's memorable exhortation that "Every B closes the door." Jessica Snow's and Michael Smith's GPAs were lower than Joshua's and Alyssa's, so perhaps grades were less a concern for Laura Storm and Christine Waters. However, I speculate that the Snows and Smiths were more concerned than the Storms and Waters about their children going to prestigious schools because the Snows and Smiths themselves did not have the kinds of academic credentials that are valued in the Silicon Valley context. The Smiths both attended Cambridge University in the United Kingdom, which is a world-renowned institution, but it does not carry the same cachet in Silicon Valley as Stanford or an Ivy League School. Tammy Snow went to Arizona State University, and James Snow attended Bradley University, a small private college in Illinois. Tammy felt out of sync with her peers, saying, "Most of the parent population around here has multiple degrees. Lots of Stanford alum, Harvard alum, you name it, Dartmouth, Duke. Amherst. Bradley, yeah. We don't have that pedigree." Paul Smith stated outright that he hoped Michael would go to Stanford, though this desire did not transform into pressure, and the family was satisfied with Michael's decision to attend the University of Washington. Tammy was more reserved than her husband when with regard to pressuring their children to achieve specific grade benchmarks, and Kimberly feared being the kind of parent who drove their child to suicide.

The third context where students encountered expectations that shaped the way they approached their college choice process was their schools. At school, students interacted with

peers who have been shaped by their own familial pressures. All four students could point to peers who worked harder than them, which minimized their own feelings of pressure. Moreover, the cultures differed across the high schools, and this led to clear delineations in the amount of stress endemic to the environment. As a student at Henry H. Gunn High School, Joshua Storm fared the worst, as he was exposed to a constant drumbeat of needing to do and be more. The two other Gunn students in the study, Emily Garcia and Hannah Kim, confirmed Joshua's picture of Gunn as an unremitting pressure cooker. At Gunn, there was only one path towards a successful future, and it started with earning a spot at an elite postsecondary institution. According to reporting from *Palo Alto Online*, "Many students feel as if the norm in Palo Alto is a very specific image of excellence — high grade-point average (GPA), strong standardized test scores, leadership in multiple extracurriculars, then attendance at a prestigious Ivy League college and, eventually, a six-figure income" (Chen 2017) — an observation that mirrors my own findings. In contrast, Jessica Snow, Alyssa Waters, and Michael Smith attended schools where they were exposed to more heterogeneous narratives about what life after high school could be like, and students at Menlo-Atherton, Aragon, and Burlingame High Schools attended a range of postsecondary institutions, including community college.

Research has found that school affluence is associated with a number of adolescent risk behaviors, regardless of neighborhood and family income (Coley et al. 2018). Psychologist Suniya S. Luthar from Arizona State University has one of the most robust research programs examining maladjustment among upper middle-class youth. In her recent work, she has moved away from describing her samples in such terms as "privileged" and "affluent" in favor of youth from "high achieving schools" (Ebbert, Kumar, and Luthar 2019). While students remain the unit of analysis, her descriptor highlights the critical role that school culture plays in shaping

students' beliefs and behaviors. The results of this study substantiate that school context and the corresponding peer culture are indeed key factors in mediating the emotional impact of students' college choice process. However, I would include the caveat that the designation "high achieving school" does not account for within-school heterogeneity in achievement level. By the time the students in this study reached senior year, most of them were tracked into AP or Honors-level courses that sorted into high-achieving *subcultures* within their schools.

This overview of the way schools' environments shaped the way the students made meaning of their college choice process brings me back to my contention that context matters. King and Baxter Magolda (2018) identified interpersonal, institutional, and societal contexts as playing integral roles in students' development of self-authorship. My observations about the family, school, and community expectations students processed align with what King and Baxter Magolda call *contextual influences*. Contextual influences in turn moderate the way students made meaning of the college choice process.

EXPECTATIONS AND PRESSURE: MEANING MAKING ACROSS THE THREE DOMAINS

Although this was not a self-authorship assessment study, my interviews about the college choice process yielded sufficiently rich information from the students in this study that I was able to discern some meaning-making themes across the sample. For example, the pragmatic privileged students were more likely to operate from the Late External/Early Crossroads level of the self-authorship spectrum compared to their paralyzed and passive peers. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of both the paralyzed and passive students were their external ways of making meaning.

In the cognitive dimension, the narrative about the importance of attending a prestigious institution resonated across almost all of the students. Even the pragmatic privileged students acknowledged the social expectations to attend good schools by virtue of their family backgrounds and their advanced AP/IB coursework. The difference between the pragmatic versus the paralyzed and passive students was how their ability to hold the prestigious college narrative object, rather than being subject to the pressure it invoked. For example, Jessica Snow had clear boundaries about what she would and would not do to be successful in high school, resulting in an academic record that could be considered weak among her peer group at Menlo-Atherton High School. Yet, she applied to Wake Forest for the prestige even though she had no real interest in going there. When she was not accepted, it did not affect her self-concept, and she was perfectly satisfied with the schools where she was accepted. Michael Smith was also not troubled about his college rejections even though he believed in and was subject to the narrative about the importance of going to a top school. In his case, his passivity insulated him from disappointment, but his meaning making was still in the beginning phase of solely external meaning making. Joshua Storm did not question the prestigious college formula until he, too, was rejected from the majority of schools he applied to. Unlike Michael, the experience of these rejections served to promote his development. By the second interview, he had shifted from unquestioningly following the external college admissions formula to seeing the shortcomings in this approach. Joshua's experience demonstrates how a perceived failure can be an opportunity for growth in self-authorship.

The way students made meaning of their family and peer expectations particularly affected their self-authorship in the interpersonal dimension. Jessica Snow ceased to be afraid of her parents' worries about her grades because she decided it was her life and her personal

feelings about her grades were what mattered. She refused to engage with her peers when they compared grades or made passive-aggressive digs at each other's study habits. These actions were consistent with Jessica's early Crossroads meaning making structure in the interpersonal dimension. In contrast, one of Joshua's biggest sources of pressure was his peers, who stressed each other out in what he called an "amusing" way over such things as their SAT scores. He needed validation through being accepted at a highly regarded college. His need for acceptance by others indicated he fell within the range of Solely External in his interpersonal meaning making.

My interviews revealed the least amount of evidence with regard to students' intrapersonal meaning making. A consistent theme was how students crafted an image that they could present on their college applications that would be appealing to admissions committees. The consistency with how little students talked about their sense of self outside the context of applications leads me to speculate whether applying to college may stunt a student's development in the intrapersonal dimension. Students should be more than the weight of the expectations placed on them, yet the element of performing for others that characterizes high school seems to run counter to students developing a sense of self. In contrast to Kroll's (1992) *leading edge of development,* the intrapersonal dimension seems to be the lagging partner in the development of self-authorship. That said, I did observe an instance of change in the intrapersonal dimension, though not among the four foci students. Elizabeth Rivers was a perfectionist whose first choice college was Northwestern. When she was rejected, this shook her sense of self, as despite her best efforts at being the perfect college applicant, she came to believe she was not what Northwestern wanted. Like Joshua, another paralyzed privileged student, Elizabeth's failure to get into her desired college was a developmentally effective experience that

caused her to start questioning the external formulas that had governed her high school experience.

The limited amount of self-authorship data that I was able to glean from the interviews suggests that self-authorship could be a useful framework from which to examine the college choice process. However, more research in this area is needed, a subject I discuss below.

IMPLICATIONS

Mental Health and Well-being

Of the three types of students in this study, the paralyzed privileged students seemed to have the most stressful high school careers and subsequent college choice processes. Joshua Storm fell into depression and attempted suicide during the second semester of his senior year. As a junior, Elizabeth Rivers burned out on dancing and had to quit to find some semblance of happiness. In short, a paralyzed privileged orientation is not sustainable. Laura Storm, a physician, spoke of one of her patients who was an administrator at Stanford who told her,

> "There's probably every week I get a list of all the students that are in counseling in like struggling. They're having trouble." He said, "There's at least 60 on my desk at any one time that are …" He said, "These kids are just to your point working so hard to get into Stanford that when they finally get in, they're a mess. They're exhausted. They're emotionally depleted." (2nd interview)

Given the popularity of such documentaries as *The Race to Nowhere* and *The Edge of Success*, as well as Frank Bruni's bestselling book, *Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*, I expected to encounter more students whom I would classify as paralyzed privileged. One study found that the pressure to do well in school and go to college was the most common source of stress among teenagers (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University 2012). The families' anecdotes about extreme examples of students bent on attending elite colleges suggest that such overly driven students

exist in the communities I studied. In 2015, then student representative to the school board of Palo Alto Unified School District, Carolyn Walworth, wrote a piece for *Palo Alto Online*:

> As I sit in my room staring at the list of colleges I've resolved to try to get into, trying to determine my odds of getting into each, I can't help but feel desolate.…
>
> I consider myself a prime example of the PAUSD[45] system. Upon entering high school, I was genuinely interested in learning. I wanted to use my education to achieve my goals and help solve problems in the world. A month or two into my freshman year, I felt the pressure building. It crushes you on the inside to see what appears to be the majority of your classmates acing tests with flying colors, while you're just doing all right. A piece of you cringes when you hear that your friend has been preparing for the SAT with classes since last summer, and that they're already scoring a 2000. (Walworth 2015)

Though it is counterintuitive, research in psychology has found that children from upper-middle class, socially mobile communities may be more at risk of negative outcomes compared to children from more solidly middle class backgrounds (Ebbert et al. 2019; Luthar, Barkin, and Crossman 2013; Luthar and Kumar 2018; Lyman and Luthar 2014). Stress can be considered "an appraisal of harm/loss, threat, or challenge *to the self* [italics in original]" (Thoits 2013:361). Adolescents who are engaged in crafting a sense of self are particularly vulnerable to stressors associated with performing according to external expectations, especially as the college admissions process looms (Spencer et al. 2016). Luthar and Kumar (Luthar and Kumar 2018) argued that the most consistent challenge for students in high achieving contexts is the pressure to themselves achieve, and this pressure comes from "parents, schools, peers, and the values in the larger subculture in the USA" (p. 443).

In addition to the behavioral risks like substance use and academic misconduct, affluent students have been found to be vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes (e.g, depression, anxiety, stress, envy) (Coley et al. 2018; Ebbert et al. 2019; Luthar et al. 2013; Lyman and Luthar 2014; Spencer et al. 2016). In 2018, nineteen teenagers from around the Bay Area who

[45] Palo Alto Unified School District

were concerned about the Palo Alto suicide clusters created a survey about teen mental health issues. They compiled the qualitative responses into the publication, *Just a Thought: Uncensored Narratives on Teen Mental Health*. Some of the "thoughts" included:

- 43.7 percent of respondents had considered suicide.
- "Reaching out [for help on behalf of others] is a really, really hard thing to do, but it's better to lose a friendship than lose a friend."
- "My school is very competitive and makes it difficult not to have anxiety or depression at some point." (CHC Teen Wellness Committee 2018)

Though I did not ask them directly, none of the students in my study admitted to any illegal behaviors, but they knew secondhand of peers who used substances or engaged in practices like cutting. Only two students mentioned personal mental health problems beyond generalized stress. However, this was a sample of students who volunteered to talk about their lives, which probably weeded out students in the throes of depression or other mental health issues. Nonetheless, research suggests students attending high-pressure schools like the ones found in Silicon Valley could be at risk of serious maladjustment (Luthar and Kumar 2018).

For example, Mueller and Abrutyn (2016) conducted a qualitative study of adolescent suicide in a privileged community that bore striking similarities to the current study. From 2014-2015, they conducted interviews and focus groups in "Poplar Grove," the site of 19 youth suicides from 2000-2015. Poplar Grove was reminiscent of Palo Alto in that it was a source of envy among individuals from neighboring communities because of its high school sending its graduates to prestigious postsecondary institutions such that people moved to the town specifically for the schools. Mueller and Abrutyn use the term *cultural directive* to refer to this "intense pressure to be successful and to attain the same high socioeconomic status that their

parents achieved or were ascribed at birth" (p. 887). The parallels between my study and Mueller and Abrutyn's are sobering in that the latter was *a study on adolescent suicide*. Mueller and Abrutyn recommend that programs to help students cope with academic stress and perceived failure could be instrumental in reducing feelings of hopelessness and alienation that can be precipitating factors in suicide.

While only one student in this study shared experiences with suicide, the importance of monitoring higher-achieving students' mental health cannot be overstated. My findings suggest that most students will weather the college choice process safely, but if even one in 19 students faces a health crisis, every effort should made to help them.

Social Reproduction without Social Mobility

By virtue of their social class location and habitus, the students in this study possessed significant amounts of *college admissions privilege*, which meant that they had the benefit of knowing how to apply to college and/or pay for it (Pizzolato 2003). Even if students were unconscious of this benefit, it manifested in the oft-repeated statement that they grew up with college as an expectation.

The fact that all but two students enrolled at schools that accept fewer than 50 percent of its applicants[46] suggests that any fear of "failing" the college choice process and thus ruining one's life chances is misguided. This finding held constant regardless of the type of navigation orientation. The students' schools ranked well into the top 10 percent of institutions *U.S. News & World Report* evaluates, which includes only about a third of the postsecondary institutions in the United States (Moody 2019). In short, by objective measure, all the students in this study were successful in their college search process. This does not take into account subjective measures like the fit between the students and their final destinations.

[46] University of Wisconsin-Madison's acceptance rate is 52 percent; Lewis & Clark's acceptance rate is 75 percent.

There was variation in whether students' schools were more or less prestigious relative to their parents' academic pedigrees. Additionally, it is impossible to predict students' subsequent career trajectories based on their postsecondary institutions. Therefore, it is too early to know whether the students in this study will live out the American Dream of doing better than their parents. That said, given these families' positions near the top of the socioeconomic pyramid, students have little latitude in which to surpass their parents. For the students in this study, social reproduction without social mobility is a real and indeed likely future prospect.

Rather than strive fruitlessly for increased affluence and abstract measures of success — a tendency to which this population is particularly susceptible (Luthar et al. 2013; Mueller and Abrutyn 2016) — upper-middle class students have the luxury to pursue greater well-being as they make the transition to adulthood. Given the more advanced self-authorship I observed among the pragmatic privileged students compared to the passive and paralyzed students, I speculate that more complex meaning-making structures provide students with tools to navigate important life decisions.

Parental Responsibility

Parents and family life are immediately implicated in discussions of how to improve the college choice process for upper-class students. For example, parents can shape the discourse around college going in the family more readily than schools can change organizational structures. Students pick up on and remember what their parents say. Jessica Snow's ability to quote her parents years later or Joshua Storm's observation that his parents' speech betrayed their bias towards pedigreed education illustrates the power of language in conveying family values. These two cases also demonstrate the psychological tendency to privilege the negative over the positive (Baumeister et al. 2001), which is how one critical comment can offset

carefully constructed encouragement. Though it sounds trivial, parents should be considered in how they talk to their children about expectations, as well as to be mindful of the propensity to judge people based on their academic credentials.

It is important to note that having high expectations is not intrinsically harmful to students' well-being. Parental expectations as a form of involvement in education has consistently linked to student academic achievement (e.g., Benner, Boyle, and Sadler 2016; Tan 2017; Wilder 2014). However, parents have control over the nature of the values they convey. Families that emphasize the importance of values and *who people are* versus *what they accomplish* can be a corrective against school and community narratives that are focused on external success (Ebbert et al. 2019).

I found that more advanced levels of self-authorship were associated with a pragmatic orientation towards the college choice process, which was indicative of students having more internal control over their college choice decision. Moreover, self-authorship is advantageous to adolescents making the transition to adulthood. One way parents can foster self-authorship is by supporting students through difficult decisions prior to applying to college, such as quitting an activity and/or saying no. Elizabeth Rivers and Sarah Ambrose were both serious dancers who quit dancing because (in Elizabeth's case) it was too stressful and (in Sarah's case) she lost her passion for it. This was a difficult decision for both girls. Sarah's parents worried about whether quitting would look bad on their college applications. Elizabeth's parents told her that she should not worry about her applications but instead do what would make her happy. Her parents' support helped Elizabeth let go of her identity as a dancer. I have no doubt that had Elizabeth been the subject of a self-authorship assessment like the Wabash National Study Interview (see (Baxter Magolda and King 2012)), quitting dance would have been a developmentally effective

experience in the intrapersonal domain. In environments where students are constantly pressured to do more, forgoing this narrative can be an opportunity for questioning external formulas.

Institutional Responsibilities

High schools bear the brunt of public responsibility when tragedies like student suicides happen in a community because organizational structures are impersonal and perceived as easier to adapt than "community culture," which implicates individuals and their actions and beliefs. My strongest recommendation for schools is to limit the number of AP courses students are allowed to take — and to enforce it. At Aragon High School, students were supposedly limited to three AP classes per year, but students regularly received parental permission to overload their schedules. When I mentioned limiting APs during my interviews with students, the idea was universally panned. However, this is a case where adults know best and firm caps must be set despite student critique. The most common complaint I heard was that limiting APs reduces students' agency and ability to make decisions about themselves about their capabilities. Students also perceived APs as opportunities for advanced students to develop their interests. Saving money was also an issue, with the assumption that colleges will give students credit for passing AP tests.

There is no reason for high school students to be taking courseloads that surpass what would be expected of college students, and this is the case when students take three, four, or five AP classes on top of their regular courses. The combination of these extreme schedules on top of extracurricular responsibilities sets up students to overextend themselves and risk burnout. Overloading on APs also contributes to the feeling of high school as an arms race where students struggle to outdo each other in their academic accomplishments. To the argument that limiting APs restricts students' capacity to deepen their knowledge in a particular subject area, I would

direct students to the number of online learning opportunities that are available at minimal cost. If future tuition is a concern, many community colleges allow high school students to take courses, again at minimal cost. For example, Foothill College in Los Altos offers eligible high school students dual enrollment at no cost. These kinds of out-of-school learning opportunities can be dropped at any time without affecting a student's high school transcript.

Organizational factors can also exacerbate students' feeling of being a pressure cooker. Lack of sleep was commonly cited as a problem, and this was consistent with research that has found too little sleep in adolescent has a negative impact on a number of student outcomes (Kelley et al. 2015; Kyla et al. 2014). When I was collecting the data for this study, the two Palo Alto high schools were engaged in a discussion about limiting the courses offered during zero period, which started at 7:10 a.m. at Paly and 7:20 a.m. at Gunn.

Finally, high schools can foster an environment where the college choice process is deemphasized in the school discourse. According to Emily Garcia, Castilleja High School, an all-girls prep school in Palo Alto, forbade students from talking about college applications on campus. The college counselor at Menlo-Atherton High School the year I was doing my data collection also discouraged talking about college until people had made their final decisions in May. In Palo Alto "rejection walls" allow students to anonymously post their college rejection letters, publically acknowledging that rejection is a normal part of the college choice process. The year I did my data collection was the first year Gunn High School banned the tradition of students decorating their mortarboards with their college destination at graduation. This was an administrative effort to shift the focus to the celebration of commencement and away from their postsecondary destinations. Gunn students were unhappy with this decision, but in my interviews, students also revealed their discomfort with how public the college choice process

could be, with their peers grades, scores, successes, and failures becoming common knowledge. It is no accident that most of the school-level interventions I cite in this section were occurring in Palo Alto. Although little mentioned in the public discourse, the teachers and administrators were just as heartbroken about the 2014-2015 suicides as the rest of the community.

Postsecondary Institutions

Though it is often overlooked, postsecondary institutions are players in the game of college admissions. College-bound students spend their high school years pursuing the grades and activities they think universities want to see. Institutions like Stanford with their low admit rates exercise an outsize influence on how students navigate high school. When high-prestige schools set a seemingly Herculean bar for admissions, high-achieving schools will attempt to meet it. Insofar as college admissions is seen as an arms race, colleges themselves are responsible for stoking it. In a climate where parents are willing to spend thousands of dollars, both legally (private school, tutoring, SAT prep) and illegally (e.g., bribing coaches), for a chance at a "spot" at a desirable school, the higher education system is in critical danger of losing its veneer as a meritocracy (Golden 2006). The sense that college admissions is flawed has seeped into the public consciousness so much so that the idea of an admissions lottery has been floated (Hess 2019; New America 2019).

The March 2019 college admissions scandal continues to resonate across higher education, and in its aftershocks, questionable admissions practices at elite colleges continue to emerge. Harvard's preferences for legacies and donors were revealed in the *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.,* v. *President and Fellows of Harvard College* trial. The *Boston Globe* recently uncovered an incident where the Harvard fencing coach sold his home for well over its assessed value to a businessman whose son was subsequently accepted to Harvard and a spot on the

fencing team, prompting an official investigation (Miller 2019). The *Boston Globe* also found evidence that at Yale, families who endowed coaching positions (at the cost of $2 million apiece) had children who subsequently attended the school (Healy, Dungca, and Wen 2019). These revelations shed light on how the wealthy use backdoor channels to secure their children's admissions to top schools. Scholars of higher education find the preferences for athletes particularly insidious (Jaschik 2019) — what Karabel calls "the weightiest preference of all the various preferences" (Bartlett 2019).

In light of these reports, it is increasingly difficult to believe that higher education in America is a meritocracy. The momentum among high-privilege, high-achieving students is likely to remain focused on the elusive Stanford (or peer institution) acceptance. Parents, counselors, coaches, and other influential adults should remind students that admissions at the most elite schools is a lottery. Though pressure is causing some higher education institutions to reexamine their admissions preferences, changes in policies are unlikely to occur anytime soon. Students would benefit from being encouraged to cast a wide net and look at schools outside the top 20.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study paint a complicated picture of the ostensible "fragility" (Luthar et al. 2013) in the upper-middle class. The two students whose navigation orientations were indicative of paralyzed privilege showed signs of maladjustment consistent with the literature. The remaining 17 students whose data I analyzed experienced varying levels of stress but otherwise would not be considered "high risk" according to the information they shared. This discrepancy between what I would expect to find given the literature and what I actually observed could be the result of at least three factors. First, selection bias limits this study's

generalizability. I speculate that the students in this study felt like they had the time and energy to participate, which distinguished them from their more stressed-out peers. Second, students might not have felt comfortable disclosing illegal activities, even within a confidential interview, especially as they knew I would also be speaking with their parents. Third, the minimal research that exists on upper-middle class students focuses on pathologies, discounting the experiences of high-achieving, well-adjusted students. I found heterogeneity in both the way students navigated the college choice process and the psychosocial toll it takes on their well-being. More research is needed that examines this heterogeneity in upper-middle class students' high school and college choice experiences. The story of Silicon Valley teenagers suffering from acute stress, which has been promulgated in media, is only one story, albeit a sensational one. Yet, the majority of students in this study did not fit this image. Understanding the factors that differentiate high-stress from low-stress students of similar backgrounds is critical to creating interventions to reduce high school pressure.

An additional sampling limitation that raises questions for future research is the fact that I did not interview students who were admitted to the most desirable institutions — Stanford and the Ivy League. It is possible that these students, who "successfully" followed the college choice formula, would have displayed more of the vulnerabilities and pathologies that have been documented in the literature. Data about this population's self-authorship levels is also needed, especially if a link between this kind of "ultra-high" achievement and mental health negative outcomes is established. Helping students cultivate their internal voice as they plan for life after high school could help relieve some of the pressure to perform according to external expectations.

More research needs to be conducted on an ethnically diverse sample of high socioeconomic status students. All but three students in this sample were white, which decreases the generalizability of the results. Multiple parents speculated that Asian families in the area might be especially prone to setting rigid expectations for academic achievement. Qin et al. (2012) found that the way parents communicated academic expectations to their children was a source of conflict among high-achieving Chinese American teenagers. In 2015, the Palo Alto school district targeted Asian American families as a population in need of additional mental health support as one-third of its students came from Asian families (Kadvany 2015). Understanding specific vulnerabilities is critical for educators to serve this population. Likewise, only one student in this study identified as Hispanic despite participation from such schools as Menlo-Atherton High School, where 40 percent of the student population is Hispanic.

The findings of this study provide corroborative qualitative evidence for much of the research on affluent youth that has been conducted in psychology and human development. Research that brings a sociological lens to questions about expectations to succeed and the transition to adulthood is limited. The impact of school context on expectations and college choice is a particularly rich area of future inquiry for the sociology of education. Given the dearth of sociological research in this area, there is ample space to draw on a range of methodological traditions to address these questions.

Self-authorship has yet to be studied among pre-college aged students, and this research highlights the importance of gathering baseline data about students' self-authorship level before they encounter the learning opportunities available in postsecondary settings. I was surprised to observe students in this sample who seemed to have entered the Crossroads, as previous research would suggest that individuals would not reach this developmental capacity by adolescence

(Kegan 1994); cf. Pizzolato (Pizzolato 2003, 2004). Longitudinal self-authorship among high school students would help identify the types of experiences that can foster self-authorship in teenagers.

There is also evidence to suggest that the college choice process itself can be a developmentally effective experience. The students whose orientations were paralyzed or passive tended to be solely external in their self-authorship, and while I did not discern change in self-authorship level among the passive privileged students, Joshua and Elizabeth seemed to have developed more complexity in their meaning making between their first and second interviews. The perceived failure of their college admissions formulas to yield the results they wanted challenged their meaning making. Joshua managed his disappointment by framing USC as the school he wanted to go to all along. When I met with Elizabeth for her second interview, she was still in the process of reconciling her identity from someone who would attend Northwestern to someone who was actually attending Ohio State. Both Joshua's and Elizabeth's developmental shifts were limited — perhaps a microstep from Ea to Eb[47] — but shifts nonetheless. Joshua's and Elizabeth's journeys illustrate how college admissions "failure" can be an opportunity for growth. More academic research in this area could provide educators and parents with tools to help structure both the successes and failures of the college admissions process as learning opportunities.

The transition to college begins with the college choice process itself, and a successful transition sets up students for success as they undertake the next stages in their lives. Ultimately, most of the students in the study were satisfied with their final decisions and were ready to thrive at their chosen schools. I end with a thought from Frank Bruni (2015:6), whose bestselling book,

[47] Ea – Completely trusting external authorities; Eb – Experiencing tension with trusting external authorities (Baxter Magolda et al. 2012).

Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania, has made him something of a spokesperson for sane college admissions:

> For every person whose contentment comes from faithfully executing a predetermined script, there are at least 10 if not 100 who had to rearrange the pages and play a part they hadn't expected to, in a theater they hadn't envisioned.

High school students' scripts have yet to be written, and as they become authors of their own lives, adults would do well to remind them they are the stars of the show.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Recruitment Documents

SHORT FORM

Subject: High School Seniors and Parents needed for University of Michigan Study on applying to college

Hi,

My name is Johanna Massé and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan. I am currently working on my dissertation, which is an exploration of how high school students and their families prepare for college.

I am looking for high school students who will be applying to college in Fall 2014 to participate in this study. Participation involves three personal interviews, each 1 ½ to 2 hours long, spaced out over the school year. Students will be compensated $20 for each interview. At least one parent or guardian must also agree to be interviewed three times during the school year.

For more information about this study, please contact me at johamass@umich.edu.

LONG FORM

Subject: High School Seniors and Parents needed for University of Michigan Study on applying to college

Hi,

My name is Johanna Massé and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan. I am currently working on my dissertation, which is an exploration of how high school students and their families prepare for college.

I am looking for high school students who will be applying to college in Fall 2014 to participate in this study. Participation involves three personal interviews, each 1 ½ to 2 hours long, spaced out over the school year. I may also request permission to examine supplementary materials (e.g., application essays) as appropriate. Students will be compensated $20 for each interview. Interviews will be conducted in your home, at your convenience.

At least one parent or guardian must also agree to be interviewed three times during the school year.

The results of this study will be published, but all of your information will be confidential.

Study Background

The purpose of this study is to examine how families in Silicon Valley go about planning for and applying to college. The study is designed to benefit other students/parents who are in the earlier stages of the college choice process. You may also find it interesting to learn about how research is conducted in university settings.

About me

I am a Ph.D. candidate pursuing an independently designed program in Sociology and Higher Education at the University of Michigan. I received my M.S. in counseling from California State University-Long Beach, and my A.M. in English literature and Chinese history from Brown University. I recently relocated to the Silicon Valley area, after having completed my coursework in Ann Arbor, MI.

If you/your child is interested in participating in this study, please email me at johamass@umich.edu. I am also happy to answer any questions you may have. You may also contact one of the co-chairs of my dissertation committee, Prof. Elizabeth Armstrong at elarmstr@umich.edu, or Prof. Michael Bastedo at bastedo@umich.edu.

University of Michigan

High School Students Wanted for a Research Study

College decision-making among Families

University of Michigan researcher seeks families with **high school juniors or seniors** for interviews about preparing for college. Students and one parent/guardian will complete three interviews each over the 2014-2015 school year. Student participants will earn $20 for each interview.

Principal Investigator: Johanna Massé, Doctoral Candidate
Faculty Advisors: Dr. Elizabeth Armstrong and Dr. Michael Bastedo

For more information please contact:

Johanna C. Massé
University of Michigan
Department of Sociology & Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education
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FOR PROFESSIONALS

Subject: Request for interview about college choice

Hi,

My name is Johanna Massé and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan. I am currently working on my dissertation, which is an exploration of how high school students and their families prepare for college.

I am writing to you because of your experience working with students and parents who are involved in applying for college. I think that you have important insights about what is like for families to navigate this stressful event that they cannot articulate while they are in the thick of it. Thus, I would like to request a one-hour meeting to discuss your experiences as a [occupation] in [location].

Study Background

The purpose of this study is to examine how families in Silicon Valley go about planning for and applying to college. The study is designed to benefit students/parents who are in the earlier stages of the college choice process. It also has the potential to help professionals who are engaged in college counseling by shedding light on families' experiences and concerns about college admissions.

About me

I am a Ph.D. candidate pursuing an independently designed program in Sociology and Higher Education at the University of Michigan. I received my M.S. in counseling from California State University-Long Beach, and my A.M. in English literature and Chinese history from Brown University. I recently relocated to the Silicon Valley area, after having completed my coursework in Ann Arbor, MI.

Thank you for considering my request. If you are available to meet, please email me at johamass@umich.edu. I am also happy to answer any questions you may have. You may also contact one of the co-chairs of my dissertation committee, Prof. Elizabeth Armstrong at elarmstr@umich.edu, or Prof. Michael Bastedo at bastedo@umich.edu.

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Questions for Students – 1st interview

Introductory script:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this project. For your information, I am interested how you have planned for college. The information you provide in this interview will be used to help families navigate the college choice process.

Today's interview will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half, but you are free to terminate the interview at any time, because the interview is voluntary. Also, if you don't feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you may decide not to answer and I will go on to the next question.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview 1

Background

- Tell me about a little bit about yourself.
    - Family composition, dynamics
    - How does S spend time?
    - Friends and peer relationships
- What was it like growing up in XXXX?
    - How would you describe your childhood?

High School

- Tell me about your high school.
- How would you describe the academic environment at XXX school?
    - What factors contribute to this?
- Describe the attitude about going to college that you have noticed.
- What messages have you received from friends? Teachers? Parents?

Planning & strategizing

Early Stage Planning

- When did you first start thinking about college?
    - Role of parents
    - Friends
    - School officials
- At what point did you actively start planning for your college applications?
- How did you learn about how to put together an application?
    - Probe for information sources: people, media, school, etc.
- Have you gotten any help from your high school counselor?
    - Have you hired an independent counselor?
        - If yes, probe rationale and experiences.
- What schools are you planning to apply to?
    - Ask about whether S visited the schools and impressions

Questions for Parents – 1st interview

Introductory script:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this project. For your information, I am interested how you and your child have planned for college. The information you provide in this interview will be used to help families navigate the college choice process.

Today's interview will last approximately an hour to an hour and a half, but you are free to terminate the interview at any time, because the interview is voluntary. Also, if you don't feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you may decide not to answer and I will go on to the next question.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview 1

First I would like to hear a little bit about you and your background.

- Tell me about your family.
- What is your educational background?
- What is your work background?
- Ages of children and what they are doing
- Partner if relevant
- What brought you to live in [Palo Alto]?

Planning & strategizing

Early Stage Planning

- How would you describe your relationship with [your child] while s/he was growing up?
- When did you first start talking to [your child] about college?
- At what point did you start taking an active role in planning [your child's] portfolio?
- What kinds of things did you do?
- If relevant, what is the dynamic between you and your partner in terms of involvement?
- If relevant, what about lessons learned from other children's experiences?

Environment

1. How would you describe the academic environment at XXX school?

2. What factors contribute to this?

Choice set

- What schools will/did your kid apply to?
- Will your kid apply anywhere early? Where?
- How did you choose these schools?
    - Priorities?
    - Connection to career prep

Understanding the game

- What do you consider to be the purpose of higher education?
- Why is important that [your child] go to college?
- What do you want [your child] to get out of college?
- What do you see [your kid] doing when s/he grows up?
- What do you think college admissions are looking for in an applicant?

Questions for Parents - Interview 2

Introductory script:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this project.

Today's interview will last approximately an hour but you are free to terminate the interview at any time, because the interview is voluntary. Also, if you don't feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you may decide not to answer and I will go on to the next question.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Overview of fall

- Has anything important happened since we last spoke (e.g., family changes, work status, etc.)?
- Did you have any thoughts about the first interview?
- If applicable, clarifications/questions from first interviews

Choice set

- What schools did your kid apply to?
- How did you choose these schools?
    - Priorities?
    - Connection to career prep
- As far as you know, what is [student's] first choice?
    - How do you feel about that?
- Have you visited any campuses since we last spoke?
- How helpful was your counselor OR do you regret not using an independent counselor?

Financial planning

- How are you planning to finance your student's education?
- When did you start making financial plans to pay for higher education?
- How much will cost play a role in your kid's final decision?

Networks

- What changes, if any, have you noticed about your relationship with [student] over the year?
    - Relationships with partner/siblings?
- Who do you talk to for support?
    - How do these conversations go?

- Have you noticed any differences in boys' vs. girls' experiences [through talking to other parents]?

Well-being

- How challenging has [student] found senior year?
- How have you helped [student] handle stress?
- How do you set expectations for [student]?
- Tell me about the attitudes around achievement/competition you have observed:
    - At the high school
    - Among your child's friends
    - Among your friends
    - In the community
    - Do these attitudes threaten well-being?
- How has the recent student suicides affected the way you think about students' high school experiences?
- How is the school system addressing these issues?
    - How is the community addressing these issues?
    - How do you address them in your family?
- How would you describe the cultural attitudes about academic achievement in this area?
    - How do these attitudes affect kids?
- How can families strike a balance between valuing achievement while not pressuring kids?
- Do you think schools could or should do anything to change their academic environments?

Questions for Students - Interview 2

Introductory script:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this project.

Today's interview will last approximately an hour but you are free to terminate the interview at any time, because the interview is voluntary. Also, if you don't feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you may decide not to answer and I will go on to the next question.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Overview of fall

- Has anything important happened since we last spoke (e.g., family changes, work status, etc.)?
- Did you have any thoughts about the first interview?
- If applicable, clarifications/questions from first interviews

Choice set

- What was your final, final list?
- How helpful was your counselor OR do you regret not using an independent counselor?
- Have you visited any campuses since we last spoke?
- What's your top choice?
    - What factors have you weighed in making this decision?
- Does cost play a role in your choices?
- Have you talked to your parents about paying for college?

Now we're going to walk through the important elements of your application.

- GPA, ACT, SAT scores
- Total number of AP/IB classes. Breakdown of junior/senior year
- Essay
    - What prompt(s) did you choose for the common app?
    - When did you write your first draft?
    - What was your process for coming up with finished draft?
- Other elements that you think were important in your application
- What was your biggest challenge in putting together your application(s)?
- How do you feel now that you're done?

Networks

- What changes, if any, have you noticed about your relationship with your parents over the year?

    - How do you think they're handling the idea of you going off to college?
- Who do you talk to for support?
    - How do these conversations go?
- Do you have friends who are looking at the same schools as you?
    - How has that affected your relationship?

Well-being

- How challenging have you found senior year?
- How do you handle stress?
- How do your parents set expectations?
- Tell me about the attitudes around achievement/competition you have observed:
    - At the high school
    - Among your friends
    - Among your parents' friends
    - In the community
    - Do these attitudes threaten well-being?
- How has the recent student suicides affected the way you think about your high school experiences?
    - Has it come up among your friends?
- How is the school system addressing these issues?
    - How is the community addressing these issues?
- How would you describe the cultural attitudes about academic achievement in this area?
    - How do these attitudes affect kids?
- Do you think schools could or should do anything to change their academic environments?
- Which do you think exerts more pressure on kids: the school or family?
- How can families strike a balance between valuing achievement while not pressuring kids?

Looking forward

- How does the rest of the academic year look? Are you enjoying life as a second semester senior?
- How are you planning to spend this summer?
- How do you feel about starting college in the fall?

Questions for Key informants

Introductory script:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this project. The information you provide in this interview will be used to help families navigate the college choice process.

Today's interview will last approximately 60 – 90 minutes, but you are free to terminate the interview at any time, because the interview is voluntary. Also, if you don't feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you may decide not to answer and I will go on to the next question.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

First I would like to hear a little bit about you and your background.

- Educational history
- Employment history
- How long in college counseling/teaching
- How long in current position
- What brought you to the area?

Environment

- How would you describe the academic environment in [school] or [community]?
- How would you describe the culture of college-going?
- What factors contribute to this?
- Have you noticed any changes over your time in [xxx]?
- What do you consider to be the greatest strengths of [xxx] school?

Work with students

- What is the profile of a typical student you work with?
    - Variations by race, class, gender
- What colleges do your students want to attend?
    - How do they rank desirability of schools?
- How do you typically work with students?
    - Grade level
- What about the role of parents or other family members?
- What dynamics (if any) have you observed between students and their parents?

- What do you tell students/parents about the college application process?
- What are the most common concerns you have encountered?
- What kinds of support do families come to you needing?
- What resources do your recommend?
- What are the three most important pieces of advice you would offer a senior working on applications?

For independent counselors

- What is your relationship with the school district?
- How do you work with other counselors, teachers, admin?

Community attitudes

- What postsecondary pathways are valued in this community?
- How do families define success?
- How are these values conveyed in the school system?
- Have you observed any variations among different populations (e.g. class, race, etc.)?

Well-being

- How does/did your child experience high school?
- How have you helped [student] handle stress?
- How do you set expectations for [student]?
- Tell me about the attitudes around achievement/competition you have observed:
    - At the high school
    - Among your child's friends
    - Among your friends
    - In the community
    - Do these attitudes threaten well-being?
- How has the recent student suicides affected the way you think about students' high school experiences?
- How is the school system addressing these issues?
    - How is the community addressing these issues?
    - How do you address them in your family?
- How would you describe the cultural attitudes about academic achievement in this area?
    - How do these attitudes affect kids?
- How can families strike a balance between valuing achievement while not pressuring kids?
- Do you think schools could or should do anything to change their academic environments?

General

- How would you describe the state of higher education today?
- How does this [state of higher education] play out in Silicon Valley/community?
- What (if anything) should be done to change higher education?

Appendix C

Community Statistics

Table 11 Community Demographics

	Burlingame – Michael Smith	Hillsborough – Alyssa Waters	Menlo Park – Jessica Snow	Palo Alto – Joshua Storm
Population Estimates, 2018	30,467	11,444	34,549	66,666
Percent White	61.3	63.8	68.9	61.2
Percent Asian	24.6	29.3	13.3	31.3
Percent other or mixed race	14.1	6.9	17.8	7.5
Median home value, 2013-2017	$1,591,600	$2,000,000+	$1,764,600	$1,989,300
Percent with Bachelor's degree or higher (age 25+)	63.6	75.7	70.7	81.1
Median household income (2017 dollars)	$118,410	$238,750	$132,928	$147,537
Percent of persons in poverty	5.9	3.3	8.5	6.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts.

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