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Applicant Perceptions of Community College Admissions and Enrollment Terminology

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APPLICANT PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE ADMISSIONS AND ENROLLMENT TERMINOLOGY

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This study is quantitative and descriptive, meaning participants have been asked to respond to questions based upon how they feel in the present time, without any kind of intervention or stimuli (CIRT, 2017). Two-thousand, five hundred, sixty-nine applicants to two community colleges who graduated high school in 2017, were invited to respond to a Likert scale survey regarding their perceptions of the enrollment and admissions materials they received subsequent to completing the admissions application.

Using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis it was determined that social and academic capital can be predictors of how students perceived the helpfulness of college admissions and enrollment materials. Additionally, it was demonstrated that applicants perceived terminology associated with financial aid to be the most confusing. Recommendations to community colleges include reducing the level of terminology used in enrollment materials and connecting with support systems in a student's life to clarify enrollment processes and expectations.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Applying to college can be an exciting yet daunting time for students and families. With the prospect of attending college comes the responsibility of reading and understanding application material, such as online applications, complex financial aid information, tuition costs, and scholarship applications. For many first generation and underserved populations community colleges represent a viable, affordable college option that may have more flexible admissions processes than competitive admissions institutions. After their initial acceptance to a community college, students receive a packet of written information instructing them on how to move through the series of enrollment steps, including placement testing, applying for financial aid, and selecting their courses. Families pore over these packets of information, often sifting through information from several schools at once, attempting to understand what their next steps are. These letters include terms and jargon that are highly specific to higher education, and these documents are written at a college reading level (Chapman & Johnson, 1972). For example, a student may receive forms for completing a "FAFSA" (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) without first having been told why this financial information is important or even what the acronym means. Or, students may receive instructions to schedule a "placement test," and many students interpret such a test as an entrance exam. In short, the specificity of this language and vocabulary used by institutions of higher education is often counterintuitive to creating a clear pathway for students to secure their enrollment.

Research shows that many students applying to community college often do not understand community college enrollment and admission instructions during the application process (Castleman & Page, 2014). Applicants sometimes leave the enrollment process before

converting to a student, and this loss of conversions is a problem for admissions professionals. For example, Edmonds Community College reported a 2017 applicant to student conversion rate of 47% and noted a decrease in conversions that started in 2015 (Edmonds Community College, 2017). Mesa County Community College's enrollment management plan shows a goal of increasing conversions to 30%, indicating a current rate that may be in the 20s (Mesa Community College, 2014). Nationally, as many as 40% of community college applicants never complete the enrollment forms and thus are not matriculated into students (Ceja, 2013). Lastly, one institution involved in this dissertation research noted that in fall 2017 72% of their applicants did not matriculate, indicating a very high applicant attrition rate (S. Beeler, personal communication, December 2, 2017). This pattern of attrition indicates potential barrier to completing the enrollment process that need exploration.

When these students fail to complete the admissions process two problems are created. First, the school loses those students' potential tuition payments in addition to having spent a great deal of money on developing and printing unused application material. Second, and most important, the applicant may miss an opportunity to pursue their post-secondary education.

It may be surprising to those unfamiliar with community college enrollment practices that students abandon the enrollment process at such a high rate. In the community college system, admissions are "open," meaning that all applicants are accepted to the institution regardless of their academic background. After the acceptance process, students are tasked with specific enrollment steps, often called "front loading," that include placement testing, applying for financial aid, and registering for courses. Applicants are typically only considered "students" after they have selected their courses and have planned for payment. During the enrollment process, students who do not complete one or more of these steps, or complete a step

incorrectly, risk not being able to start classes during that semester. Determining why these applicants do not complete the process could provide valuable information for community colleges.

The open admissions model differs from the selective admissions model usually used at both public and private four-year institutions. In a selective admission model, a student is expected to score sufficiently high on the SAT or ACT tests in literacy and math prior to being admitted. Alternatively, in some cases colleges will accept high school grade point averages (GPAs), admissions letters, or letters of recommendation in place of the ACT and SAT scores. The selection process is intended to confirm that a student is prepared for college-level coursework. However, in the community college open admissions model, no such gauge of academic preparedness exists at the point of admission. Therefore, students of all academic abilities are granted instant admission, creating a wide student audience for admissions and enrollment materials.

In addition, because of potential insufficient academic preparedness, community college applicants are likely to need developmental coursework. Many students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and have a poor educational foundation (Ma & Baum, 2016). This lack of academic capital is evidenced by research showing 57% of community college students require at least one developmental course in either English or math (CCSSE, 2016). These students are often first-generation college students and are unsure how to navigate the college enrollment process, which may be compounded by challenges in reading ability (Moschetti & Hudley, 2014; Raby & Valeau, 2014; Roscingo & Wilbur 2016). This research sought to understand if applicants perceive the enrollment terminology to be confusing, and if there are variables that may be able to predict if an applicant may be confused.

Statement of the Problem

This study surveyed community college students to determine their perceptions of the academia specific terminology used in admissions and enrollment materials to determine how the use of highly specialized language impacts the enrollment process. The problem takes two forms. First, the mission of community colleges is to serve all members of the community, regardless of their academic preparedness, and these colleges cannot serve students who do not complete their enrollment. For many students, community college represents an affordable pathway to a better life—and in some circumstances, the only pathway. Seventy-five percent of community college students are in the bottom third in terms of SAT scores as well as socioeconomic status (Rosenbaum, Ahearn, Becker, & Rosenbaum, 2015). According to the Community College Research Center, 44% of low-income students and 38% of first-generation college students choose to attend community colleges (Rosenbaum, Ahearn, & Rosenbaum, 2016). The majority of community college applicants are underprepared and represent the typical population that community colleges explicitly seek to admit.

Second, community college enrollment rates nationally and in Pennsylvania are declining. Therefore, community colleges need to find better ways to help students complete the enrollment process and thus help increase college enrollment. From the fall of 2015 through the fall of 2017, student enrollment at community colleges declined steadily nationally, with fall 2017 showing a .7% decrease from the prior fall (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). This high attrition rate of applicants during the enrollment process, and decreased overall enrollment, means that community college lose a significant amount of money in printing costs, postage, and labor. Can the content of the recruitment packages be improved? Can the recruitment packages be revised to better communicate with entering students?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine how community college applicants perceive the written recruitment and admissions material they receive during the initial college enrollment process. Additionally, this study sought to understand how an applicant's social and academic capital may predict those perceptions. Do students understand the words, phrases, acronyms, and directives that commonly appear in written enrollment materials? This research study may help enrollment management professionals create more streamlined enrollment materials in order to increase applicant retention and recruitment, and in doing so increase the number of students who matriculate into community college.

Research Questions

This research study attempted to answer how students are perceiving enrollment terminology, whether certain types of terminology are more difficult to understand than others, and whether students identify it as affecting their ability to enroll in college. This research study sought to answer the following:

1. What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used in admissions and enrollment materials?
2. What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used to describe financial aid, and tuition cost?
3. Does a student's social capital predict their overall perceptions of the admissions process, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age?
4. Does a student's social capital predict whether they viewed the admissions process be difficult while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, high school GPA, parental education level, and reading level?

The study's independent variables include age, gender, ethnicity, high school GPA, whether the applicant requires developmental English, first-generation student status, and the institution for which they completed an admissions application.

Background of the Study

Community college applicants may be more susceptible to initial confusion when trying to understand the forms associated with college enrollment materials. For example, almost half of community college students identify as first-generation college students, which limits help from family members who may not be able to accurately complete enrollment materials (AACC, 2014). Evidence shows that, without a frame of reference, first-generation students are placed at an immediate disadvantage in understanding how to complete the college enrollment processes, procedures, and expectations. One first-generation student reflected on the initial admissions process saying,

> I guess I didn't really know much about college. I just knew it was to get you further into being successful, but other than that I was clueless. I didn't know what a credit hour was. I didn't know how to schedule for my classes. I didn't know about financial aid. I was stressed. I was overwhelmed. I cried. I didn't have anyone to lead me. (Sorcinelli, 2012, p. 21)

Another new student noted,

> I was brand new to the whole school thing. I used to hear college terminology and thought I never really had to think about it or worry about it. Well, now I am getting used to terms like academic advisor and academic probation. Probation from what I remembered wasn't academic. (Sorcinelli, 2012, p. 21)

The most notable of the obstacles to enrolling in a community college is comprehending the complicated procedures that are part of the admissions process. Students also have difficulty in understanding the culture, language, and expectations of higher education (Ishitani, 2003).

Johnson and Chapman (1979) explored the topic of comprehending academic terminology by analyzing college catalogs from 42 colleges using the Flesch Reading Ease Formula (1951), to determine college application reading levels. Using the Flesch formula, Johnson and Chapman (1979) determined that all the college catalogs reviewed were scored as "difficult" or "very difficult" to read. When 206 high school students were given an assessment asking them to correctly define college terminology, the average of correct answers was only 56% (Johnson & Chapman, 1979). Their study raised concerns regarding college catalogs and whether potential students had a full understanding of the choices they were making.

More recently, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNCCH) acknowledged the gap between what colleges think students can comprehend compared to actual comprehension rates. In 2014, UNCCH paid specific attention to creating a reader-friendly communication system for prospective students. More specifically, the university refined the financial aid letters and paperwork (Supiano, 2015). The institution created the position of Assistant Director of Communication in the Office of Scholarship and Financial Aid, whose task was to rewrite the confusing and technical financial aid jargon into "plain English" for students and parents. Supiano noted that much of the former application material was, "In addition to being full of jargon, that language has a lawyerly precision and an institutional tone… [it is] a clear message to certain groups of people that this is not for you" (2015, n.p.).

Admission and enrollment language may be even less comprehensible for students at community colleges, who often have poor reading and math skills. In 2015, 57% of community

college students required at least one developmental course in either English or math (CCSSE, 2016). College enrollment materials require students to read accurately, process directions, and understand financial obligations. If students have deficiencies in reading, can colleges expect students to possess the ability to comprehend their written instructions? An expectation gap may exist between the assumptions of enrollment professionals and the tangible abilities of students to correctly complete the admissions frontloading process.

Conceptual Framework: Bernstein & Language Code

Basil Bernstein is an educational sociologist who studied the influence of language on how individuals experience their education. Bernstein (1971) suggested that culture and experience build our access to, and understanding of, vocabulary and social meanings. Bernstein noticed when studying children from working-class backgrounds that they scored lower in language-based courses, such as English and social studies, compared to middle-class students. However, the students performed similarly in courses based in math or art. This observation led to the theory of Language Code, which Bernstein (1971) described as "forms of spoken language in the process of their learning initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationships with the environment and thus create for the individual particular forms of significance" (p. 76). Bernstein suggested that culture, class, and experience shape the way we use language and that certain experiences may open language opportunities to some, while resulting in "linguistic impoverishment" for others. It could be concluded that first generation, community college applicants would be positioned to experience linguistic impoverishment. Bernstein (1971) also stated there are two types of "code" that we use in communication: elaborate and restrictive. Within the restricted code, speakers draw on background knowledge and shared understanding.

This type of code creates a sense of inclusion, a feeling of belonging to a certain group. As Bernstein stated:

> Very broadly, then, children socialized within middle-class and associated strata can be expected to possess both an elaborated and a restricted code while children socialized within some sections of the working-class strata, particularly the lower working-class, can be expected to be limited to a restricted code. As a child progresses through a school it becomes critical for him to possess, or at least to be oriented toward, an elaborated code if he is to succeed. (Bernstein, 1964, p. 66)

People who participate in higher education—whether as administrators, alumni, or students—may have a similar understanding of the language of higher education. Comparatively, elaborated code is language that is descriptive and has more universal meaning. This dissertation takes the theoretical position that community college students carry linguistic impoverishment based upon their access to social and academic capital related to higher education. Additionally, the position of this dissertation is that the language used in academia is representative of the "restricted code," which requires the reader to have a solid context for the language being used (Sorcinelli, 2012; Striplin, 1999; Vargas, 2004; Williams, 2009).

Research Design

Little research has been done on the readability of college enrollment forms related to admissions, selecting courses, placement testing, financial aid, etc. Therefore, this descriptive research surveyed applicants in two Pennsylvania community colleges regarding their perception of the admissions and enrollment materials they received when initiating contact with the college. Descriptive research seeks to describe participants in a way that does not introduce external influences (Creswell, 2002). Participants in this study are applicants who had

applied to one of the colleges for the fall 2017 semester, and who had graduated high school in 2017. Initially, applicants who applied to the college but did not enroll were included in the sample; however, after examining the small volume of responses from this demographic they were removed.

The community college applicants were administered an electronic survey via email asking them to complete a Likert scale assessment measuring their perceptions of how the enrollment materials helped them to understand specific academic terms. Tests items included vocabulary related to admissions, enrollment, and financial aid. In the present study, academic terminology for the test is drawn from studies related to admission jargon and include language that spans the admissions process to formal class registration (Ardoin, 2013).

Additionally, respondents were asked to respond to Likert scale questions that captured information on how much assistance they received during the enrolment process, from whom, and how difficult they found the process in its entirety to be. This creation of questions was done to capture information on how much social capital the student had access to, which may be a predictor of how they perceived the enrollment terminology. Demographic information was also collected at the conclusion of the five-minute survey.

Multiple regression and descriptive statistics were used to assess the research questions. Research questions one and two were assessed using descriptive statistics, such as mean scores, to describe how applicants perceived the terminology. Descriptive statistics are used to describe the basic attributes of the data in a study, without inference (Creswell, 2002). Research questions three and four are addressed by using multiple regression analysis to determine if independent variables, such as college reading level, could predict dependent variables, such as perceiving the enrollment process to be difficult. Multiple regression analysis seeks to

understand how several characteristics of a population may predict their behavior, perceptions, or other dependent variables (Creswell, 2002). Predictive modeling may be useful to admissions staff who are making decisions on what materials are most appropriate for their audiences based on the applicant demographic information they have available.

Summary

Community college applicants are often economically disadvantaged, first-generation college students who read at a remedial level (Ishitanti, 2006; Moschetti & Hudley, 2014; Raby & Valeau, 2014; Sorcinelli, 2012; Stripplin, 1999; Thayer, 2000; Vargas, 2004)

The initial college enrollment process is heavily reliant on forms and letters that are written at a college reading level and crafted with terminology specific to higher education. Terms such as "matriculation," "FAFSA," or "credit hour" are unique to the realm of higher education and may pose a challenge to those unfamiliar with such jargon.

A survey was administered to community college freshman to determine how well they can identify college enrollment terminology. The words and phrases in the survey were drawn from admissions, financial aid, and academic content areas. Participants included applicants and students from two community colleges in Pennsylvania, and data were analyzed via descriptive statistics and regression models.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Applicants to community colleges are often academically underprepared, and their reading and math skills often require enrollment in developmental courses (Moschetti & Hudley, 2014). These students are unfamiliar with the college enrollment process, and most are first-generation college students. These academic deficiencies may cause students to disengage from the enrollment process, or to make mistakes due to their lack of familiarity with the language used in the enrollment instructions. Some applicants do not complete the application process during the break between high school graduation and starting classes in the fall. This disengagement from the process is often referred to as "summer melt"—meaning students who have expressed an interest in attending a college but then "melt away" over the summer. Summer melt is harmful to community colleges and students in two ways. First, it means that staff time, printing costs, and recruitment efforts are lost when applicants melt away. Second, failing to attend college may limit applicants' options for securing some post-secondary training.

To gain insight into how applicants navigate the enrollment process and college jargon, it is important to understand community college processes, the vocabulary used in the enrollment process, the academic preparedness of students, how family and support systems can influence the enrollment process, and educational theory around how students acquire academic language.

Community Colleges: Enrollment Trends and Practices

Community College Enrollment Rates

It would be easy to conclude that due to affordable tuition rates and an open admissions philosophy that enrollment rates at community colleges would remain robust. However, current trends in community college enrollment are mirroring the larger national trend of declining enrollment in post-secondary education. Nationally, in fall 2017, college enrollments have decreased among four-year for-profit institutions by -7.1%, two-year public institutions by -1.7%, four-year private nonprofit institutions -0.4%, and four-year public institutions -0.2%. Taken as a whole, public sector enrollment (2 year and 4 year combined) declined by 0.8 percent in fall 2017 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). When isolating first time students at public two-year institutions nationally in fall 2017 a 2.3% decrease from the prior year was observed (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). Additionally, when examining students aged 18-24 two-year public institutions saw a .2% decrease from the prior year, which was preceded by two years of declining enrollment among this age group. With tuition and fees representing 20% of financial support for two year colleges nationally, this enrollment decline stands as a direct threat to the stability of the two year college finance model (AACC, 2003). The remaining 80% of financial support in community colleges comes from a mixture of county and state funding, which is also under duress, because of budget problems in many state governments.

Pennsylvania's post-secondary institutions have not been immune from declining enrollment trends. Pennsylvania saw a .8% decrease in overall post-secondary enrollment in fall 2017, following a decline that started in 2013 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). When examining the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, which is comprised of 14

institutions, 14,000 enrollments have been lost since 2010 (Palochko, 2017). Lastly, The Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges network has experienced a decline in total enrollment of 3% across (PCCC, 2015). This decline in college enrollment is attributed to declining high school graduation rates, a strengthening economy, and students who are opting-out of post-secondary education all together.

For enrollment management professionals a declining college enrollment presents a challenge as to how institutions can effectively recruit and retain new students. Throughout the history of the community college system, it has been widely accepted that many students are attracted to community colleges without needing to be recruited. As a result, little attention has been placed on recruiting new students. However, declining enrollment has now forced enrollment management professionals to closely examine how to increase college enrollment and retention.

Community College Enrollment Practices

The majority of community colleges are open admission institutions that offer affordable, post-secondary educational opportunities to students of diverse abilities. In an open admissions institution, all applicants are accepted into the school without regard to standardized test scores or prior GPAs. With this 100% acceptance rate, community colleges can sometimes offer the only pathway to higher education for under-prepared or economically vulnerable students. However, the total acceptance of all applicants presents challenges in addition to opportunities (Mellow & Heelan, 2012). Students who attend community college are more likely than students attending traditional liberal arts institutions to be under-prepared, poor, and first-generation college students (Mellow & Heelan, 2012; Moschetti & Hudley, 2014; Raby & Valeau, 2014; Phelps, 2017). A lack of these attributes makes recruitment and retention of

community college students challenging. Students may have decided to attend an open admissions institution due to their inability to meet the requirements of other colleges. This inherently creates a more vulnerable applicant pool, which requires greater patience, clearer processes, and increased mentoring from enrollment professionals.

Community colleges employ student recruiters, admissions staff, and enrollment management professionals in the same way that four-year institutions do. These professionals serve various roles, including coordinating events, organizing campus tours, visiting high schools, attending college fairs, and targeting non-traditional populations (Jackson, 2016). Recruitment materials often includes view books, brochures, websites, fliers, and formal letters that are often sent to a prospective student who makes an inquiry to the college. Little is known about the effectiveness or influence of printed recruitment material upon a student's decision to attend community college (McDonough, 1997). Even though estimating return on investment into recruitment materials remains difficult to track college community colleges invest tens of thousands of dollars into printed collateral. These expenditures are often funded by tuition revenue as opposed to fundraised or foundation-based monies, making the national enrollment declined detrimental to recruitment budgets. This cyclical effect of low enrollment rates on enrollment management budgets is a point of frustration.

Students who apply to community college receive a written acceptance packet in the mail, and often by email as well. The admissions packet contains an acceptance letter welcoming the applicant to the college and a list of the next steps for enrollment. Most community colleges conduct placement testing, help in applying for financial aid, and arrange meetings with an academic advisor to schedule classes. The college information packets often include checklists, deadlines, and information on who to contact with questions. A typical

timeline to complete these processes at a community college, for a student starting in the fall semester, is noted in Table 1.

Table 1

Community College Admissions Lifecycle

Enrollment action	Community College time frame
Complete admissions application	January-July
Placement assessment for English and mathematics	February-July
Financial aid (FAFSA)	October-July (PHEAA by May 1st)
Academic advisement	February-August
Register for courses	March-August
Render payment arrangements	March-August

These enrollment steps may differ slightly from the processes used by four-year colleges. For example, community colleges often have later registration deadlines compared to deadlines for most colleges. The fact that community colleges do not require SAT or ACT scores sometimes causes confusion, since most four-year colleges do require college entrance exam scores.

Also, of note to community college admissions professionals is that community college applicant to student conversion rates are notably lower than at four year institutions, partly due to open admissions policies that attract a large volume of applicants. This conversation rate data is difficult to track, but individual community colleges report conversion rates typically ranging

from 35-50%. For example, Edmonds Community College reported a 2017 applicant to student conversion rate of 47%, continuing a decrease in conversions that started in 2015 (Edmonds Community College, 2017). Mesa County Community College's enrollment management plan shows a goal of increasing conversions to 30%, indicating a current rate that may be in the 20s (Mesa Community College, 2014). One analysis of national data estimates that almost 40% of community college applicants never complete the enrollment forms and thus are never admitted (Ceja, 2013). This attrition from the enrollment pipeline may happen for a number of reasons and it is not well researched why community college students specifically remove themselves from the enrollment process.

Community College Applicants and Academic Preparedness

Academic capital is defined as "social processes that build family knowledge of educational and career options and support navigation through educational systems and professional organizations" (St. John et al., 2011, p. 1). Ultimately, St. John et al. (2011) suggested that academic capital can assist underrepresented students to both overcome the barriers that can prevent them from accessing higher education and develop new legacies of educational success not previously experienced in their families or communities. Students who attend community colleges are often academically unprepared from the perspective of high school GPA and reading levels, and experience a lack of familial academic capital. This lack of academic preparedness, coupled with a lack of resources to manage the academic deficiencies, can prove challenging to students.

Community colleges have been pivotal in expanding access to higher education by enrolling all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or academic standing (Bragg, Kim, & Barnett, 2006). The cornerstone of the community college enrollment model is their philosophy

of open admissions, which makes these institutions attractive to students who lack academic capital. This practice, unique to community colleges, allows all applicants to enter the college without worry about GPAs, SAT/ACT scores, interviews, or letters of recommendation. Scant accessible data exist about the reading level at which community college enrollment materials—such as applications, financial aid materials, and course catalogs—are written.

However, application materials may not be designed for the remedial student who may have a poor reading ability. It must be noted that over half of community college students require remedial reading coursework. Research has revealed that as many as 68% of community college students require remedial work in English and mathematics, (Jaggars & Stacey, 2014). This academic under preparedness coupled with an open enrollment admissions system generates an applicant pool that needs extra assistance.

Poor students and students of color are heavily concentrated at community colleges and are more likely to need developmental education than Caucasian and higher income students. At public two-year colleges, 78% of Black students, 75% of Hispanic students, and 64% of White students enroll in developmental courses. Of students in the lowest socioeconomic group, 76% take remedial courses, compared with 59 percent in the highest income group (Chen, 2016). Comparatively, at public four-year colleges, 66% of Black students, 53% of Hispanic students, and 36% of White students enroll in developmental education. Of students in the lowest socioeconomic group, 52% take remedial courses, compared with 33% in the higher group (Chen, 2016). Seeing students with academic obstacles concentrated at community colleges is unsurprising and it creates a student profile that admissions staff need to account for.

In addition to placement into developmental coursework, high school grade point average has long been noted as a predictor of future academic success. Recent studies have found some

evidence that high school grade point average predicts college performance even more accurately than do standardized exam scores, even though many institutions use test scores as an admissions metric (Hiss & Franks, 2014; Hodara & Lewis, 2016). One study of college freshman noted specific indicators of college readiness found that a grade point average of 3.0 or higher is related to college persistence and completion (Hein, Smerdon, &Samboldt, 2013). This tendency for academically prepared students to persist through college could be revealing when considering that this high achieving demographic of student is not always widely represented in community college populations. High school GPA has also been correlated with reading levels, and many community college institutions are forgoing placement testing and instead are making course placement decisions based on high school GPA. This "multiple measure" strategy is designed to reduce the resources needed to test students, and to avoid undermatching students to coursework due them having a poor test day. In some multiple measure models a low high school GPA may automatically place a student in developmental reading based on data showing that low performing high schools students often need extra academic support (Smith, 2016).

It is worth noting that not all students who apply to community colleges have academic struggles. Some students find themselves "under matching" themselves to community colleges. Under matching describes the phenomenon of academically successful students, who may have been accepted to selective institutions, choosing community colleges due to financial restraints. Even though the student may be academically prepared for college they are still more likely to be low income, first generation students, than their peers at four-year institutions. Data from the Expanding College Opportunities Project at Stanford University show that as many as 80 percent of high-achieving, low income students do not apply to any colleges that match their academic qualifications (Hoxby &Turner, 2013). Part of this undermatching may be financial

and part may be due to admission to a selective institution is a process that begins many years before a student enrolls in college, which is a process that first generation families may be unfamiliar with. It can require prospective students to complete preparatory courses, sit for multiple admissions tests, and write multiple personal essays (Handel, 2014). Therefore, while underprepared students represent most of community college students it is important to note that many students do enter the institution with academic capital.

Community College Applicants and Social Capital

In addition to deficiencies in reading ability, community college students may have limitations in terms of the social capital needed to negotiate the college enrollment process. Social capital may be defined as 'the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 119). Essentially, it is the access you have to resources and knowledge based upon the relationships you have. These relationships may be influenced by your family structure, where you live, your socioeconomic status, your ethnicity, and a myriad of other factors. Students who have less social capital have less "currency" than other students when starting college. First generation students represent a large group of students that may lack social capital. Nationally, statistics vary on how many first-generation students are enrolled in post-secondary education. Some studies conservatively estimate that first-generation students comprise 36% of U.S. community college enrollments (AACC, 2014; CCSSE, 2012; NCES, 2015), while other studies estimate that 50% are first-generation students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Studies have shown that a myriad of items contribute to the retention of *all* college students—such as academic preparedness, working in addition to attending school, financial barriers, family influence, and

utilizing academic supports—and that these factors may be more impactful on first-generation students (Hsiao, 1992; Ishitani, 2004; Moschetti & Hudley, 2014; Sorcinelli, 2012; Thayer, 2000; Vargas 2004).

Research shows that students rely heavily on the expertise of those around them, especially their parents, when applying to college (Walczak, 2008; Moschetti & Hudley, 2014). College-educated parents tend to communicate their educational values to their children and are very "familiar with the [college] experience and are better equipped to explain how the college system works, and how their son or daughter can prepare for it" (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, p. 26). A parent's expertise, along with the expectation that their children will attend college, better prepares these students to navigate the enrollment processes. These students are also more likely to have exposure to academic activities, including SAT prep courses or college enrollment workshops that will help prepare them to tackle the enrollment process (Sorcinelli, 2012).

It is known that a lack of family involvement in their children's education because of limited financial resources, lack of time, and little understanding of college enrollment terminology (Phelps, 2017). However, sons and daughters who are academically prepared, often credit their parents as one of their greatest influences and assets when enrolling in college. Yet, for first-generation students one of their greatest resources, their parents, are often under-prepared to assist and guide them. In addition, problems are compounded by first-generation students who have lower self-efficacy, poor career direction, and a lack of academic confidence when enrolling in college (Gibbons & Border, 2010). Students potentially arrive at community college without a clear sense of purpose and this lack of direction puts a tremendous amount of pressure on admissions and enrollment management professionals to remediate these deficits.

Considering that students who are less likely to have the initial knowledge required to find their way to college necessarily rely more heavily on their schools for such information (Sickles, 2004; Orfield, 1984) means that academia needs to fill these knowledge gaps. This is not to suggest that parents with less college knowledge are not supportive. Many first-generation students report their parents as attempting to be helpful, despite being uninformed about the application process and transition to college life (Hamilton 2016; Hurst 2009; Wilkins 2014).

Not all students enter a community college academically underprepared. But many first-generation students, even if they have been academically successful in high school, are unlikely to apply to colleges that are highly selective. One study found that "students with less educated or lower-income parents were especially likely to attend lower ranked colleges, even if their academic ability and achievements were high" (Hearn, 1991, p. 164). In short, low-income and first-generation students are still at greater risk for failing in college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). It could lead us to believe that the poor outcomes students have *during* college are attributable to the experiences they have *before* they enroll (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

In addition to the potential effects of being a first generation college student many community college students come from underrepresented ethnic and racial backgrounds. White and Asian first-time full-time students are much more likely to be enrolled at public four-year institutions than at community colleges, while Hispanic and African American students are disproportionately represented in the public two-year and for-profit sectors (Ma, 2016). In 2015 31% of all first-time, full-time undergraduates in the nation were enrolled in community colleges, including 36% of African Americans and 43% of Hispanics (Ma, 2016). White students make up 48% of community college attendance, and 58% of four-year institution attendance. Students from historically underrepresented racial groups are less likely than white

students to have access to college preparation tools, and more likely to belong to immigrant communities. This discrepancy in social capital may impact how students of color navigate the enrollment process, including the jargon and terminology. Theories of social capital, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, attend to the varied ways that school bureaucracies and unwritten norms reward those fluent in the cultural practices of the White middle class (Kirshner et al., 2011).

Lastly, social capital is also tied to race and ethnicity and the privileges some racial and ethnic groups experience in educational settings. In studying first-generation students who also may be members of ethnic minority groups, White (2005) noted, "many minority students are not familiar with the linguistic styles or "academic discourse" required by the university" (p. 371). As a discourse community, it is a place that "has its own language, its own forms and devices for that language, and its own specific laws for the ideological refraction of a common reality" (Medvedev & Bakhtin, 1978, p. 87). Thus, to be accepted as a student in a college s/he must know and understand the discursive characteristics expected therein (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, 1984). Standard English, either written or verbally, is how we convey academic expectations and procedures and process a student's initial enrollment, it is reasonable to conclude that perhaps literacy barriers to academic language and discourse may adversely affect students who use linguistic styles that are unique. While a country may have a specific language and social norms, smaller subgroups within the country may have a slightly different language and social norms as well. For example, regional dialects emerge among people who may speak the same language; however, there are subtle, but notable, differences in how people translate the words and thus leave an outsider confused or misinformed (Schaefer, 2010). These cultural subtleties exist within the framework of higher education as well and can influence how students experience academia.

Theoretical Position

Social capital refers to the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, language, posture, clothing, mannerisms, material belongings, credentials, etc. that one acquires through being part of a particular social class (Bourdieu, 1986). Students whose parents attended college have access to greater social capital via the information about college than their students can pass on to them.

Concepts of how language interacts with academic success and social capital appear in the work of Basil Bernstein. Bernstein was an educational sociologist who studied the influence of language on how students succeeded in their education, and how they navigated the educational setting. Bernstein (1971) suggested that culture and experience promote our access to, and understanding of, vocabulary and social meanings. This theory become applicable to community college applicants whose lack of cultural capital may have limited their exposure to the terminology used in college admissions.

When studying school-aged children from working-class backgrounds, Bernstein noticed that they scored lower in language-based courses compared to middle-class students. This achievement gap between working-class and middle-class students led to his theory of Language Code, which Bernstein (1971) described as "forms of spoken language in the process of their learning initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationships with the environment and thus create for the individual particular forms of significance" (p. 76). He suggested that culture, class, and experience shape the way we use language and that certain experiences may open language opportunities to some while resulting in "linguistic impoverishment" for others. For example, a middle-class student may have a parent who talks about their own college experience, using the language of academia, which provides latent

support to the student when they apply for college. Comparatively, the working-class student may not have access to this casual conversation as part of their family or social circles, creating a deficit compared to her middle-class counterpart. Do students who are applying to community colleges suffer from this linguistic impoverishment? Does linguistic impoverishment contribute to difficulties in reading and comprehending college application material that is written in a language literally foreign to them?

In addition to linguistic impoverishment, Bernstein (1971), argued that there are two types of "code" we use in communication: *elaborate* and *restrictive.* Within the restricted code, speakers draw on background knowledge and shared understanding. The language used is cultivated through exposure to specific social groups, family dynamics, or community culture. It is typically comprised of short, to the point, sentences designed to convey information as opposed to deeper understanding (Bernstein, 1971). An easy example of this theory in the language culture of the United States is using various words to describe soft drinks, such as pop, soda, Coke, etc. The region where you live might dictate the *restricted code* you need to know to successfully order a beverage. This type of code creates a sense of inclusion, and a feeling of belonging to a certain group. All of us have some form of restricted code that we use for "insider conversations;" including higher education professionals.

For example, a prospective student may hear the word "credit," pertaining to credit hours, and misunderstanding thinking something is happening related to their credit score. Or, a prospective student may see the phrase "placement test" and think that a "test" means that they can fail, though that is not truly the case. This code requires explanation, context, and a greater deal of communication to make the intent of the speaker known (Bernstein, 1971). The limited set of definitions that the college applicant may have for the terms, or just the fact that terms are

unfamiliar, points to them not accessing our restricted code. Individuals who participate in higher education—whether as administrators, alumni, or students—may have a similar understanding of the restricted code of higher education.

Bernstein also described elaborate code, which he found to be most prevalent in middle class students. This understanding of language, in addition to a knowledge of restricted code, gave advantages to middle class students in their language arts classes. This language is associated with critical thinking and having a grasp of elaborate code is a tool that can be used to decipher restricted code that is unfamiliar to you. This more general, universal way of communicating allows us to transcend restricted code to build understanding across various socioeconomic, class, and cultural lines. Bernstein also noted that both types of code can exist concurrently, sometimes making restricted code difficult to identify.

This research study on perceptions of admissions and enrollment terminology takes the position, as Bernstein (1971) does, that the language and terminology used during the initial enrollment and admissions process creates barriers by excluding students who are both reading at a developmental level and lack the social capital to have been exposed to the language used in higher education.

Admissions and Enrollment Terminology

Diane Ravitch noted in her 2007 book *EdSpeak: A Glossary of Education Terms, Phrases, and Jargon*,

> Every profession has its own language. Law, medicine, science, business, economics, psychology, sociology—each of these fields has evolved a specialized vocabulary that its members use to communicate with one another. Perhaps this language is necessary to to discuss sophisticated ideas that are beyond the understanding of the average citizen;

perhaps not. The result, if not the intent, is to mystify the public. (p. 1)

Ravitch (2007) also noted that jargon has crept into education slowly, over the past 100 years or so, through the broadening of the scope of education. One area where colleges have focused increased attention in regard to how they interact with the public is in recruitment and admissions materials, which serve as tools to "court" students. If the language in college admissions material confuses students, then changes need to be made to ensure that admissions documents are clear and easy to understand.

A cornerstone study examining admissions processes by Chapman and Johnson developed a *College Terminology Quiz* (1979), which quantitatively measured how well students comprehended the terminology found in college catalogs. The researchers suspected a disconnect existed between the high reading levels of college recruitment and enrollment literature that is sent to potential college students.

Chapman and Johnson (1979) also note that much of the prior discussion around enrollment materials focuses on the *content* of the writing as opposed to the *accessibility* or the *reading level* of the content. Using college catalogs from 42 different institutions, the authors assessed the reading level of the documents and students' ability to correctly interpret common words from the communication. The Flesch Reading Ease formula is a tool used to determine the reading level of written communications. The formula uses an algorithm that counts syllables per word and per sentence, along with numbers of words per sentence, to establish the reading difficulty of a passage. What Chapman and Johnson (1979) found, using the Flesch Reading Ease Formula, was that the college catalogs and other materials related to admissions, financial aid, and academic policy all scored as "very difficult," meaning that they are best suited to upper-level college students. This finding was consistent when examining different types of

institutions, including two-year, liberal arts, and research institutions. Unfortunately, two-year colleges were found to have higher reading difficulty in their college catalogs compared to liberal arts colleges.

Table 2

College Terminology Quiz: Flesch Reading Ease Analysis

	Reading Test Score			Grade[a] equivalent
	N	*X*	SD	
Total catalogs	42	33.5	11.2	Upper college (very difficult)
Total catalogs: *specific sections*				
Academic policy	42	37.6	16.5	Upper college (very difficult)
Admissions	42	31.8	13.5	Upper college (very difficult)
Financial aid	42	33.7	15.0	Upper college (very difficult)
Catalogs by Type of Institution				
2-Year colleges and institutes	10	33.6	6.1	Upper college (very difficult)
Liberal-arts college	10	40.7	5.4	College level (difficult)
Comprehensive colleges and universities	11	35.1	11.9	Upper college (very difficult)
Research universities	11	25.2	13.3	College graduate (very difficult)

[a]From Smith and King (1977). Reading ease score intervals corresponding to grade equivalents are reported in Table 1.

After uncovering the high reading competency needed for reading the enrollment materials, the authors developed the *College Terminology Quiz,* to assess commonly occurring terms in college enrollment materials. The quiz consisted of 18 terms was and was administered to 206 high school students. Students were presented a common enrollment term that was used in four different sentences, then students had to select which sentence correctly used the term.

Students, on average, could correctly identify 56% of the terms (Chapman & Johnson, 1979). The initial benchmark set by the researchers was a pass rate of 80%, which clearly was not attained. Students who had parents who did not attend college scored significantly lower on the assessment compared to students who had college-educated parents, lending evidence to the argument that first-generation college students lack the social capital of their peers (Chapman & Johnson, 1979). Since almost half of community college students are first-generation, this research suggested that community college applicants may experience a social and academic capital disadvantage.

Another qualitative research project examined how rural high school students comprehended academic enrollment jargon. The researcher interviewed rural high school students to determine how they comprehended university jargon via a qualitative case study that utilized one-on-one interviews, document analysis, and participant observation (Ardoin, 2013). Eight students and two guidance counselors, from two high schools, were interviewed. The students participated in semi-structured interviews that focused on identifying specific vocabulary words and how they came to know what the words meant. Ardoin (2013) also observed interactions between guidance counselors and the participating students to record the questions that the students asked and to observe the kinds of resources the counselors were using with students in meetings. Lastly, she analyzed recruitment information from seven neighboring colleges and the information the high school provided to students regarding college choice and preparation.

Almost none of the students could name any college terminology on the spot when asked (Ardoin, 2013). Emily Anne, a student, brought up one of the terms from the list provided to them: “sorority.” “I mean, I’ve heard a lot about sorority life,” she notes, showing she recognized

the term but maybe did not understand what a sorority was (Ardoin, 2013). Brittany, another student, recognized that there were different academic credentials but could not name them. "The only thing would be different degrees," she suggested when asked (Ardoin, 2013, p. 63). Another male student's comment seemed the most illustrative: "I might hear an adult say words [about college] that I don't know what they mean. I'm not too good with words" (Ardoin, 2013, p. 65).

Ardoin (2013) also found that guidance counselors witness students' unfamiliarity with jargon frequently. Tobi Smith, one of the two counselors interviewed, explained:

> Like for instance when they are registering for the ACT or trying to enroll in university, they won't know what a Bachelor's or an Associate—you know, they'll ask about those terms. And then financial aid, they always ask, 'What is this work study?' They have no clue what that is. They understand room, board, scholarships, fees, TOPS [the state tuition opportunity program] (they are all familiar with TOPS), semester, certificate, full-time, part-time, college, university. But there's significant things they don't know. Like I said, major, minor, they don't know what that is. Liberal arts, the different degrees that they can aspire to, they don't know what that is. They think they pay tuition but they don't realize they have to pay all kinds of fees. Syllabus—I don't know if they know—they've never asked me about that but I don't know if they would know what that is. (p.72)

Allie Soileau, the second counselor interviewed, has similar interactions with students:

> When we do [high school] schedules, I'll say, 'Okay, 2 years is an Associate's. 4 years is a Bachelor's.' But if you hear it once a year and you're looking at your friends and [focusing on] the [high school] classes you're going to take, you're not even paying attention to me [and the college information]. When they come in here

> [to the counselor's office], probably 90% will ask me again, 'What's the difference between this? Why do I have to have that one [class] instead of this one?' Then they'll ask me about all kinds of careers. I don't know exactly what they [all the 127 careers] do. They do not understand lots of it. As I said earlier, there are some things [jargon] I wasn't too sure of either. We do talk about it. They find it very confusing. Credit hours. Okay, in high school, it's one credit per class. In college, you're there almost three hours, so you get three credit hours. That still blows their mind. They don't know a lot of this. Most of the terms they probably would not know unless their parent or sibling has talked about it. They'll say, 'A 4-year degree or a 2-year degree,' instead of saying "A bachelor's degree or an associate degree." And now everything is called a college. So, they say, 'yeah, I'm going to college.' And they mean a technical school. (Ardoin, 2013, p. 74)

This initial problem of how colleges communicate with potential students is detrimental to attracting, and retaining, students. Many students do not have a basic understanding of how colleges differ, nor do they understand the advantages and disadvantages of attending community colleges and four-year colleges.

Financial Aid Terminology

Community college students often face the challenge of traversing through the college financial aid application process without the advantage of a support network to assist them (Juszkiewicz, 2014). On a national level, only 70% of students apply for some type of federal or state or financial aid. That number drops to 61% when only considering community college students (Juszkiewicz, 2014). Since community colleges have low tuition rates, students who apply for aid, if awarded, may receive funds that offset the entire cost of their tuition without

needing to apply for loans. Identifying reasons why students are not applying for aid may increase the college enrollment as well as retention rates of these students.

A 2009 study sponsored by accounting firm H&R Block explores the success students have in applying for financial aid under different conditions (Bettinger et al., 2009). The study focused on low- and moderate-income families where at least one member was between the ages of 17 and 30 who did not have an undergraduate degree. After the families completed their tax returns and agreed to participate, the researchers randomly assigned them to one of three groups. The first group received assistance completing the FAFSA using a partially automated process that entailed using the family's tax return to pre-populate the FAFSA and then finishing the rest of the form using a brief oral interview protocol (Bettinger et al., 2009). The second randomly selected group only received individualized aid eligibility estimates on data from their tax return as well as information on the tuition costs of nearby institutions, but they did not receive professional assistance in completing the FAFSA. The final set of families included those who were randomly assigned to a control group, which only received a brochure on the importance of higher education and general information on college costs and financial aid (Bettinger et al., 2009).

The results of the H&R Block FAFSA experiment suggest seemingly small changes to the college application process that focus on clarity and making sure that families understand the process can have large effects on enrollment and the amount of aid received (Bettinger et al., 2009). Written information about likely grant and loan eligibility on its own did not increase financial aid applications and college enrollment, but this information plus personal assistance with filling out a simplified application form did (Bettinger et al., 2009). This may indicate that families are having problems reading and understanding the written instructions without

assistance. This improvement in the aid application and college enrollment rates holds for students who were just graduating from high school as well as for independent adults without prior college experience.

Another example of the gap between what colleges think students can interpret, and what they truly understand, took place at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNCCH). In 2014, the college paid specific attention to creating a more transparent and easier communication system for prospective students, particularly regarding financial aid letters and financial aid forms (Supiano, 2015). The institution created the administrative position of Assistant Director of Communication in the Office of Scholarship and Financial Aid whose task was to translate confusing and technical financial aid jargon into "plain English" for students and parents. In her conversation with the Assistant Director, Supiano noted, "In addition to being full of jargon, that language has a lawyerly precision and an institutional tone… [it is] a clear message to certain groups of people this is not for you (2015, n.p.)." Johnson also noted that the college financial aid language is difficult, but no one seems to know what to do about it. While a handful of colleges nationally have invested in creating positions that focus on communications, most colleges have not identified strategies to assist students in demystifying jargon. This becomes magnified when working with students who read at a developmental level and who are academically underprepared.

Access to College Information

Regardless of a student's background it's been shown that family, community resources, and high school counselors profoundly impact the likelihood of a student attending college. For many students these resources are needed to fill gaps in their own knowledge about the college enrollment process. The quality of these resources may vary, impacting the progression of the

student. If the student is facing language and concepts that are unfamiliar to them these resources close the "gap" between the student and their goal of attending college.

Family structure impacts how we access information. Significant research has been conducted on how students may face the cultural "mismatch" that exists between academia and first-generation students that makes assimilation into college culture confusing (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Understanding how to access help, and having the confidence to ask for help, are traits most associated with middle and upper-class students. Stephens et al. (2012) noted that, traditionally, academia is a place rooted in student independence, meaning students are expected to be autonomous, but that many first-generation students who are more likely to come from working-class or poor backgrounds are more likely to value interdependence. Conversely, children from middle-class households are apt to be encouraged to explore things independently, be assertive with adults, and to have room to fail and retry things (Lareau, 2011). This difference in social norms between children of lower socioeconomic status and more affluent children is relevant to community college applicants in that they are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and may be less likely to seek help during the college enrollment process, and more likely to drop out of the process if they feel they have made mistakes (Moschetti & Hudley, 2014; Raby & Valeau, 2014; Roscingo & Wilbur 2016)

An example of how students respond to independent versus interdependent social norms as it pertains to the language used in higher education focuses on how acceptance letters are written. The acceptance letter welcomes students to the college and prompts them as to what their next steps are, and it may also include descriptions of the social activities, amenities, and alumni associated with the college. Phillips, Markus, Townsend, and Stephens (2012) examined

the cortisol levels of first-generation college students after reading two versions of a college acceptance letter to determine whether the tone of the letters could cultivate two different physical responses within the student.

The first version of the letter was written with "independent" social norms in mind. For example, it encouraged the students to accomplish tasks on their own and highlighted their autonomy during the enrollment process. It did not emphasize seeking assistance from the admissions staff for help with forms or understanding processes. The second letter highlighted interdependence; it encouraged students to readily seek assistance and emphasized their role in the larger campus community. Phillips et al. (2012) discovered that first-generation students experienced greater negative emotions when reading the letter focused on independent norms compared to the letter written emphasizing interdependent interactions. This finding indicates that the tone in which we communicate with students affects their enrollment experience. Additionally, the positive response to the interdependent language indicates that students want a sense that they can access assistance when completing the enrollment steps. The anxiety that students feel may cause them to leave the enrollment process entirely or to select a college that they found to be more accessible during the enrollment process. This attrition is also reflective of research from multiple sources showing that first-generation students may struggle with a "cultural mismatch" upon entering college, because students from a working-class background may be more apt to embrace interdependent cultural norms versus the independent cultural norms found within academia (Oyserman, Fryberg, & Yoder, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).

College choice and matriculation has also been shown to be influenced by the biases and perceptions of high school guidance counselors (Somers et al., 2006; Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar,

2005). High school guidance counselors aid students in developing a plan through solidifying educational and career goals, according to a description derived from the ASCA (2005). According to Tierney et al. (2005), the guidance process impacts students through discrete measures. Guidance counselors become more influential as students' progress through high school and begin to engage in the college choice process. If that counselor has a bias toward community colleges, or other factors in the student's life, it may impact the information the student has available to them regarding community college enrollment.

Little research has been conducted to gauge the kind of attitudes that guidance counselors have toward community colleges. However, from the research available, it seems guidance counselors may not hold a favorable view of community colleges, or fully understand the role that they can play for students. Mitkos and Bragg (2008) investigated the perceptions of community colleges held by high school counselors and advisors to assess how those viewpoints were reflected in the counselors' and advisors' postsecondary advising. Mitkos and Bragg (2008) found the following:

> High school counselors may not consider community colleges an equal option to four-year colleges. They may hold perceptions of the diminished value of community colleges and may hold an unfavorable perception of those institutions because community colleges have open door admissions policies and may base their unfavorable perception on the belief that academic rigor and standards are not upheld at community colleges. (p. 2)

When considering the barriers that many students face regarding selecting a college, understanding the enrollment processes, and mediating what may have been an unsuccessful high school experience, community colleges can provide realistic options to students who may

otherwise not elect to attend college. The strong influence that guidance counselors have over college selection and transition coupled with the fact that they may be less than supportive of students considering community college may present additional barriers to students.

Summer Melt: Retention Through the Enrollment Process

"Summer melt" refers to the applicants who drop out from the college enrollment process during the summer after high school graduation. Nationally, 10–20% of college-eligible high school graduates "melt away" and do not enroll in college during the fall semester after high school graduation (Ceja, 2013). That number grows to 37% when examining community college applicants (Ceja, 2013). Most applicants who "melt" are from economically and socially vulnerable backgrounds and cite family obligations, financial hardship, and an unsure feeling about college as influences on their decision to not fully enroll.

During this period, many technical tasks need to be completed to solidify college plans. For example, students often need to locate additional funds to cover college tuition that their financial aid does not cover. Newly admitted students also typically need to complete a series of forms and requests for additional information that require multiple steps to fully complete the enrollment process: course registration, housing forms, and academic placement tests are some of the additional requirements (Castleman & Page, 2014). Nevertheless, high school students may fail to ask for help from high school or college guidance counselors. Often, they are caught between no longer being a part of their high school community and not being part of the college community. These students have no "safety net" to catch them when they fall out of the enrollment process (Castleman & Page, 2014). This isolation from support may be particularly detrimental for first-generation college-bound students, who represent a significant portion of

community college students, and whose families and extended social networks may lack the skills to navigate through the college admission process (Castleman & Page, 2014).

Best practices have been established to prevent attrition in community college applicants. Many focus on offering detailed college and career planning resources early in the enrollment process to prevent confusion and burnout and to establish a clear set of admission guidelines that help them navigate the system. For example, the Promise Pathway of Long Beach City College (LBCC), a community college in California, has introduced a comprehensive program linking high school students with academic services and prescriptive scheduling and has eliminated placement testing as a guideline for English and math course recommendations (Fain, 2013). This continuous pipeline approach creates a "connection" to help students seamlessly move from high school into the community college system with a clear plan and clear expectations.

Strategies to Reduce Summer Melt

Strategies do exist at the community college level to retain applicants during the matriculation process. For example, federal TRIO programs are outreach and service programs designed to identify and provide support for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Summer bridge programs are widely used to provide assistance to students who are under-prepared, underrepresented, first-generation, minority, low-income, and/or at-risk (Kallison & Stader, 2012; Kezar, 2000; McCurrie, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The following provides examples of applicant retention initiatives at both four-year and community colleges that focus on assisting students with moving through the enrollment process, understanding the instructions they have been given regarding enrollment, and clarifying what the expectations are of the applicant.

ClauDean Kitzart (2014) provided an example of the effectiveness of TRIO programs by comparing the persistence rates and attitudes of students who completed a TRIO program during their freshman year to students who did not. Kitzart (2014) gathered empirical data from one-on-one interviews with 20 first-generation students, from two universities, who were past their freshman year and earned a 2.0 or higher GPA. The study focused on understanding the obstacles and views of first-generation students who defied the odds of persisting beyond their first year of college.

The study focused on two groups. One of the groups included TRIO participants, and the second group did not have TRIO services. The data indicated that involvement in programs like TRIO seemed to aid students in managing college life by providing mentorship, book stipends, and grants as well as opportunities to connect with other success-driven, first-generation college students (Kitzart, 2014). The students also noted that participating in TRIO assisted them with understanding how to navigate college services such as advisement, career services, and financial aid as they were making the transition to college. This focus on creating early literacy in regard to how college enrollment "works" and offering mentorship to assist with paperwork is a core aspect of TRIO.

Similar summer melt reduction programs exist in community colleges; a notable example includes South Suburban Community College's (SSCC) Summer Bridge Program serving underrepresented and under-prepared students for over a decade (Lopez, 2014). The six week program is offered the summer before the student's freshman year with the intention of familiarizing the student with support services, creating positive academic habits, and integrating them into the SCC community. Students receive detailed assistance selecting classes, interpreting financial aid information, and using the advisement system. Lopez's (2014) mixed methods

evaluation found that the students valued instruction around time management, college culture, and emotional intelligence. Lopez (2014) also found that the students attributed their success and continued interest in post-secondary education to the Summer Bridge Program (2014). An interesting, and unintended, outcome that students noted was their ability to guide other students who did not participate in the program as they moved through the enrollment process and their first semester of college (Lopez, 2014). Ultimately, participation in the Summer Bridge Program has been shown to address the social, cultural, and academic needs of at-risk students entering community college.

Another example of an enrollment collaboration between community colleges and high schools is The Promise Pathways project of the Long Beach Unified School District. Its largest effort in support of transitioning students to college is the Long Beach College Promise (LBCP program (LBCC, 2015). The partnership created a handoff point between the school district and the college that ultimately increased enrollment and reduced the need for developmental courses. LBCP designed several innovations in collaboration with LBCC, including an evidence-based, multiple measures placement for English and math along with prescriptive first-semester success plans with registration priority for Promise Pathways students. Students were placed in English and math courses based on the body of evidence presented by their high school achievement (e.g., high school GPA, last grade in discipline) rather than traditional standardized tests (LBCC, 2015). This intensive, prescriptive approach to college enrollment eliminates the need for students to navigate the enrollment process using the written instructions included in admissions materials. Therefore, access to and entry into transfer-level courses increased for all demographic groups.

Additionally, rates of achievement for reading and math milestones increased for every demographic group, and some of the largest relative gains were made by Latino and African American students (LBCC, 2015). In fact, in every case but one, the rates of achievement by students of color in Promise Pathways in 2012 matched and often significantly outpaced the highest achieving group in 2011 (LBCC, 2015). This collaboration between the community college and the high school has increased retention and serves as an example of the value of early communication to alleviate summer melt.

A similar strategy was influential at South Texas College that not only reduced summer melt but also fostered a college-going culture early in a student's educational career. The program was established in 1997 to provide dual enrollment opportunities for high school students to earn college credits before starting college (South Texas College, 2015). In community colleges, "dual enrollment" refers to high school students who register for college courses while they are still in high school. This process admits them to the college and many times alleviates the need for placement testing in the future. Part of dual enrollment is also creating a relationship with students to help them understand college culture, processes, and expectations. As of 2013, the program has served over 12,000 high school students, an increase from only eight students who were enrolled in 1997 (South Texas College, 2015). This example of growing enrollment, in addition to fostering student success, is valuable for community college enrollment professionals seeking to understand how to recruit and retain high school students. The High School Programs & Services Office aggressively promotes a "college-going" culture through dual enrollment courses, programs in academies, drop-out Recovery Early College High Schools, and college readiness enrollment initiatives (South Texas College,

2015). College readiness initiatives focus on enrollment procedures, including how to navigate complicated enrollment materials and understanding financial aid applications.

Another example of programs designed to reduce summer melt can be found in Rhode Island. Castleman, Arnold, and Wartman's (2012) experimental study focused on the post-secondary enrollment patterns of low income, urban students from seven public schools in Rhode Island. School-based counselors worked with students in the treatment group throughout the summer to close gaps in financial aid awards, to complete necessary enrollment paperwork, and to alleviate concerns about going to college (Castleman et al., 2012). It was found that, due to the counseling intervention and assistance with paperwork, members of the treatment group were 14 percentage points more likely to enroll in college during the following fall semester. The counselors noted that 47% of their recorded interactions with students dealt with financial issues and that 31% dealt with students needing help to communicate with a college or university (Castleman et al., 2012). These interventions demonstrate the difficulty that students face when trying to connect with a college.

Financial aid information and assistance communicating with the college were problems identified by the uAspire staff in Boston (Castleman & Page, 2014), who noted several summer-specific barriers to on-time fall matriculation. uAspire is an initiative put in place for students in the Boston public school system that explicitly seeks to help students connect with post-secondary education via dual enrollment options. The program assists with financial aid paperwork, and the college enrollment process. When considering the enrollment process and understanding the jargon around higher education, the uAspire team anecdotally noticed students expressing difficulty registering for classes and completing other requisite paperwork (such as loan paperwork or a master promissory note), trouble paying the first college bill, and difficulty

understanding additional fees, including those associated with health insurance (Castleman & Page, 2015).

Summary

Community college applicants are often under-prepared academically and lack the social capital to confidently navigate the enrollment process. In addition, they are reading at a developmental level, and often have difficulty completing the enrollment process. When completing a college enrollment process that is heavily reliant on high level vocabulary they often fail to navigate complicated admissions forms. During the summer, many colleges experience "summer melt," and 37% of community college applicants "melt away" before starting classes (Ceja, 2013). This is problematic in two ways. First, for many students, community college may offer their only pathway to higher education. Second, in a culture of declining college enrollments, retaining as many applicants as possible is vital to the financial health of the institution.

Poor reading skills of many community college students been identified as a major problem for students. Other problems include lack of financial resources, lack of cultural capital, potential biases in high school counselors, parents who lack college knowledge, and a mismatch between the social norms of academia and poorer students (Ishitanti, 2006; Moschetti & Hudley, 2014; Raby & Valeau, 2014; Sorcinelli, 2012; Stripplin, 1999; Thayer, 2000; Vargas, 2004). Understanding how the terminology used in college admissions compounds these vulnerabilities will allow admissions professionals to create more strategic and helpful communications for prospective students.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study surveyed community college applicants' perceptions of the terminology used in their admissions and enrollment process. Additionally, it surveyed the level of assistance they had during the process, and how difficult they perceived the process to be. Language and terminology conveyed in community college enrollment materials is often a source of confusion for potential community college students (Ishitanti, 2006; Moschetti & Hudley, 2014; Raby & Valeau, 2014; Sorcinelli, 2012; Stripplin, 1999; Thayer, 2000; Vargas, 2004). The admissions forms can create two problems. First, if admissions documents are hard to read then students who are trying to enroll in the college fail to complete the process. Second, Pennsylvania's declining community college enrollment means that community colleges need to make sure that admissions procedures are clear and easy to understand. In short, poorly written admissions procedures creates enrollment barriers to students, specifically first generation, as they are completing the enrollment process.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used in admissions and enrollment materials?
2. What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used to describe financial aid, and tuition cost?
3. Does a student's social capital predict their overall perceptions of the admissions process, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age?

4. Does a student's social capital predict whether they viewed the admissions process be difficult while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, high school GPA, parental education level, and reading level?

Independent variables that were taken into consideration include age, gender, race, high school GPA, college reading level, and first-generation student status. The dependent variable is the Likert scale survey tool that was distributed to participants. Scale variable were created that described admissions and enrollment terms, financial aid terms, social capital, and academic capital as composites of multiple survey questions.

Assessment Tool

This quantitative descriptive research study surveyed applicants in two Pennsylvania community colleges regarding their perceptions of the enrollment forms (Creswell, 2002). Descriptive research seeks to describe participants in a way that does not introduce external influences. Since the college applicants had already applied to the colleges in the past, there is no way to introduce external influences, therefore, a descriptive study was appropriate.

Data were collected in a survey tool that utilized Likert scales. Likert scales, named after psychologist and researcher Rensis Likert, are summated scales used to measure perceptions and attitudes toward statements presented to the participant (Likert, 1932). The advantageous side of the Likert scale is that they are universal method for survey collection and are easily understood by the public. Additionally, the responses are easily quantifiable and lend themselves to a variety of statistical analysis.

Most often, participants indicate their agreement with a statement using a 5-point scale where each response is awarded a score from 1-5. Responses in this research included Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly agree (5). For example, students

were asked to respond to the statement, "*When I read the enrollment steps I knew that* ***registration*** *was the step where I made a financial agreement to take the courses I wanted*" (Appendix A). Likert (1932) also noted that "questions were presented in such a form as to permit a "judgment of value" rather than a "judgment of fact" (p. 13) making it an appropriate tool for this research which sought to determine the students' perceptions regarding admissions terminology. If students perceive admissions terminology as being difficult to understand, then it would be a strong indication that community college admissions documents need rewritten.

The survey contained three main areas of questions. The first was comprised of a series of 21 statements that students were to respond to regarding enrollment terminology. Research questions one and two directly address how applicants perceived the admissions, enrollment, and financial terms, which were encompassed in this area. The second section gathered information on who assisted them with the enrollment process and how difficult they perceived the overall process to be, which addresses research questions number three four regarding social capital. The last section gathered demographic information, which supports research questions number three and four which seeks to understand how the independent variables of high school GPA, college reading level, and parental education attainment may predict applicants' responses to the questions.

The first section of the research tool focused specifically on the academic terms that students encounter when applying from college. The terms are grouped into three categories: admissions, enrollment, and financial. The terms included in this survey were influenced by Ardoin's (2013) study of academic jargon, in which she developed a list of terms that high school students need to understand when applying to college (Appendix E). Ardoin (2013) identifies four categories entitled: general terms, academic terms, financial terms, and degree

term. For the purposes of this study, the "general" category was replaced with a category dedicated to admissions terms that are commonly found in community college admissions material. In sum, Ardoin's large list of terms provided the groundwork from which to start.

Second, the selection of terms was influenced by examining the college catalogs and websites of the two institutions included within the study. Ardoin's terms were compared against the websites and catalogs from both participating institutions; if the word did not appear within the vernacular of one of the institutions it was omitted. Words specific to Pennsylvania practices (ie: PHEAA) were included along with terms explicitly related to admissions, such as "admissions application", and "acceptance letter." This process resulted in a total of 34 terms, and a goal of reducing those terms to approximately 20, resulting in the survey having seven to eight terms in each of the three sections. Participants are more likely to complete surveys that are not lengthy, so this reduction in terms would aid survey completion. Terms related to admissions and enrollment were compiled into a scale variable to answer research questions one, and terms related to financial aid created a scale variable to answer research question two. A summary of survey questions and the scale variable they are associated with is provided in Appendix F. The vetting of these terms was completed with assistance from admissions experts in Pennsylvania, and students enrolled in a first-year seminar course, which is discussed in the reliability and validity section.

The second component to the Likert survey gathered information on student perceptions on how much assistance they received when applying for college, and the perceived difficulty of the overall process. Gathering their perceptions of who helped them, such as family, teachers, or high school guidance counselors may be valuable in determining how students are impacted by the admissions vocabulary (Orfield, 1984; Sickles, 2004). Four questions specifically asked

particpants to note their agreement with statements such as, *My parents helped me to apply to college*, to determine their level of social capital, which is relevant to research question four. These four questions created a scale variable to measure *social capital.* Three questions in this section addressed how difficult students perceived the overall process, with questions such as *I found the jargon used in the enrollment materials confusing*. These three questions created a scale variable to measure difficulty. A list of each question and its corresponding scale variable is provided in Appendix F.

Lastly, demographic information on the participants was collected to better understand how independent variables, such as first generation status and college reading level, might correlate with how students perceive the enrollment documents. Research question four sought to understand how high school GPA, placement into developmental reading, and parental education level might predict difficulty students encountered during the enrollment process. In total, the survey was estimated to take four minutes to complete. Surveys and consent forms were distributed electronically after IRB approval.

Validity and Reliability

Face validity seeks to determine that "at face value" a research tool measures a specific psychological concept (Charles & Mertler, 2011). This form of validity relies on subjective observation of the tool and the expert reviewer's analysis of each statement. Admissions directors and recruitment staff from the Pennsylvania Commission on Community Colleges were asked to review the academic terms suggested for the survey, and to offer their expertise regarding the appropriateness of each Likert statement (Appendix A). The original pool of 34 terms provided to the admissions professionals comes from Ardoin's (2013) study of how rural students understand college jargon. Eight college admissions personnel reviewed and rated each

Likert statement and reviewed the Likert scale and research questions using a survey delivered electronically via Qualtrics (Appendix D). The respondents responded to how important they thought each term was for applicants to know when applying to college with a five point scale ranging from Very unimportant (1) to Very important (5). Only statements that are rated Very important or Important by six or more of the eight respondents were retained, and statements not meeting this threshold were deleted. This process reduced the number of statements in the admissions terms section from 11 to eight, the enrollment terms section from 14 to eight, and the financial aid section from nine to six. Table 3 shows the terminology provided to the admissions experts initially, and which terms were omitted after the face validity tool was administered. The "after face validity" column represents the terms that eventually advanced to the reliability study.

Table 3

Pre and Post Face Validity Terminology

	Before face validity (Ardoin 2013)	After face validity
Admissions terms	Admissions Application Acceptance Letter Placement Testing Student Orientation Transcript Advanced Standing Limited Enrollment Academic Advisement Registration Transfer Developmental Course	Admissions Application Acceptance Letter Placement Testing Transcript Academic Advisement Registration Transfer Developmental Courses
Enrollment terms	SAT AP Accreditation Full Time Part Time Credit Hour Major	SAT Credit Hour Full Time Part Time Major Prerequisite Semester

	Certificate Liberal Arts General Education Credits Section Liberal Arts Prerequisite Section Syllabus Semester	
Financial aid	Fees Tuition FAFSA Scholarship Stafford Loan Pell Grant Work Study TRIO PHEAA	Fees Tuition FAFSA Stafford Loan Pell Grant PHEAA

Research indicates the shorter a survey is the greater the response rate tends to be, which makes this reduction in terms helpful (Bradburn, 1978). Additionally, admissions professionals were given the opportunity to suggest adding Likert statements that may have been omitted. When terms were suggested, each term was located at a later part of the survey, resulting in no additional terms being added.

After determining which terms were appropriate, they were incorporated into statements prompting the respondent to indicate their agreement using a Likert scale. Statements prompted respondents to think back to the enrollment materials they encountered when first contacting the college and asked how those materials helped them to understand the term. For example, *I understood after completing the admissions application that an* ***acceptance letter*** *would then tell me what my next steps were.* These 21 statements were compiled to prepare for the reliability assessment.

First semester, first time students at Westmoreland County Community College are required to take a one-credit freshman year survey type course designed to familiarize them with college life. These courses are mandatory in a student's first semester and are designed to orient students to the college experience. Participants in these courses were asked to respond to the survey, using the terms established via the face validity process, and then a split half analysis was completed to establish reliability (Appendix B). In split half reliability, a test is split into two parts and then both parts given to one group of participants at the same time (Charles & Mertler, 2011). The scores from both parts of the test are correlated, and a reliable test will have high correlation. Twenty-two students participated in the reliability exercise.

A split half reliability coefficient of 0.8 or greater typically demonstrates the tool has strong internal reliability and is measuring the statements with consistency (Charles & Mertler, 2011). A reliability coefficient of r =.89 was established, meeting the r =.8 threshold. Therefore, all the questions were retained and used in the final survey. A summary of the survey tool development process is presented in Figure 1.

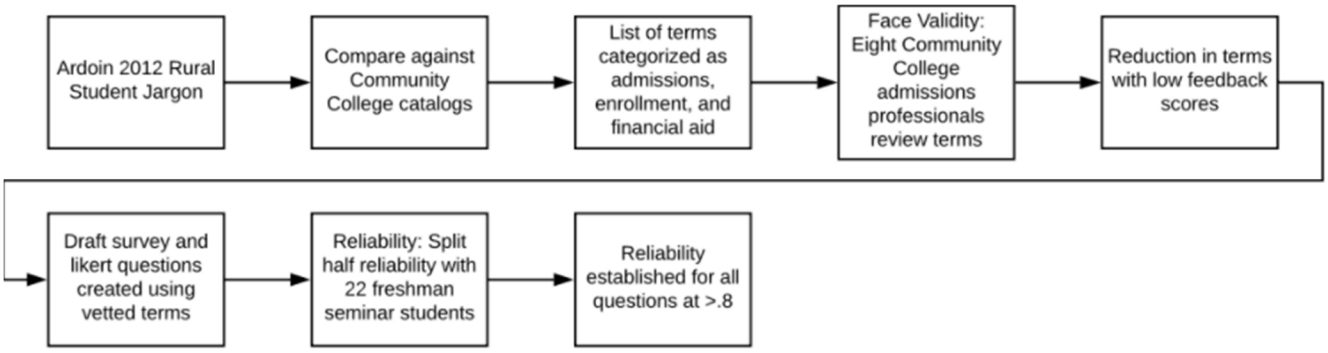

Figure 1. Survey tool development process.

Research Population and Sampling

The survey was sent to 2,569 recent high school graduates, who graduated in 2017, and who applied at two Western Pennsylvania community colleges for the Fall 2017 semester (Appendix C). Students graduating in the same year may have similar access to college preparation materials and would have navigated financial aid forms in a similar way due to their age range. Applicants move through the steps of placement testing, applying for financial aid, and academic advisement before they are considered matriculated students at the institution. It was appropriate to use applicants to the college, as opposed to matriculated students, to include students who may not complete the enrollment process to better understand what obstacles they faced. Therefore, the initial sample includes students who have completed their enrollment as well as students who decide not to complete the enrollment process. This decision was revisited after examining survey response rates and is described later in this chapter.

Two Pennsylvania community colleges, one urban and one rural, participated in the study. The sampling criteria for this study includes applicants who: a) identified 2017 as their high school graduation year, b) are over the age of 18, c) completed an admissions application for the Fall 2017 semester, and d) have provided a personal email address to the college they applied to. The Community College of Allegheny County, which services the Pittsburgh region, had 1,539 applicants that met the sampling criteria. Westmoreland County Community College, a rural college one hour South of Pittsburgh, had 1,030 applicants. Surveys were distributed electronically by the two colleges in mid-November of 2017, and the surveys originated from an email address associated with the college to which they applied. The researcher did not have access to participant email addresses to assure participant privacy.

The initial response rate two weeks after the distribution the survey was 87 completions, or a 3.3% response rate. To increase response rates after the initial email distribution of the survey, several approaches were taken. First, to prompt responses two subsequent email reminders were electronically sent to students resulting in 20 more responses. Understanding that students are inundated with emails the survey was then posted in the online Blackboard course shells for students enrolled in the first year experience courses. This version of the survey included questions regarding high school graduation year, and when they applied to the college, to filter out participants outside of the sample. These public facing surveys were kept open until the end of January 2018 resulting in 151 responses.

During this process, additional attention was paid to the initial sample of 2,569 applicants, as well as to the sampling criteria. Initially, this study sought to examine all applicants, including those who did not register for classes; however, only 19 respondents reported not enrolling. Rather than examining all applicants when only applicants who enrolled were considered, it drastically reduced the sample size from 2,569 to 1,631. Westmoreland County Community College reported 609 of the applicants registered for Fall 2017, meaning over 400 applicants disengaged from the enrollment process. The Community College of Allegheny County reported 1,022 applicants of 1,530 registered for Fall. If the applicant disengaged, it is logical they would cease opening emails from the institution and not see the survey.

Only 1,631 of the original 2,569 applicants registered for classes, and with a fall attrition rate estimated at 20% by November, that left 1,305 applicants who are regularly engaged with the college. When eliminating the 19 applicants who did not register for classes, the return rate decreases to 132 responses. When considering applicants who are still engaged in the college,

who completed their registration, this yields a 12% response rate. Therefore, the initial sample that included Fall 2017 applicants, who recently graduated from high school, who may or may not have registered was altered to include only applicants that did register for classes. One might conclude that the survey correspondence itself is perceived to be another college solicitation or task, which could explain the struggles with the response rate.

Analysis of Data

Descriptive statistics are brief measures that summarize general data points of a study. There are four types of descriptive statistics: frequency, central tendency, variance, and measures of precision. Common descriptive statistics include frequency counts, percentages, means, medians, mode, range, and standard deviation. These differ from inferential statistics, as they do not infer relationships, they only summarize what is observed. This research study is descriptive in nature and used descriptive statistics to present a summary of the data collected.

Research question number one asks, *"What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used in admissions and enrollment materials?* Fifteen survey questions specifically describe terms related to enrollment and admissions. These terms are compiled into a scale variable that addresses the scope of research question number one. Descriptive statistics are used to analyze research question number one, and the scale variable is used to provide a holistic look of how applicants responded. Descriptive statistics include mean, median, minimum and maximum scores, and standard deviation. These measures show instances where patterns in responses may emerge, which is meaningful inm understanding how applicants perceive admissions and enrollment materials.

Research question number two asks, *"What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used to describe financial aid, and tuition cost?* Seven

survey questions specifically describe terms related to financial aid and cost. These terms are compiled into a scale variable that addresses the scope of research question number two. Descriptive statistics are used to analyze research question number one, and the scale variable is used to provide a holistic look of how applicants responded. Descriptive statistics include mean, median, minimum and maximum scores, and standard deviation. These measures show instances where patterns in responses may emerge, which is meaningful to understanding how applicants perceive admissions and enrollment materials.

Research question number three asks, *"Does a student's social capital predict their overall perceptions of the admissions process, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age?* Social capital is defined by the level of support the student received through the process and is measured by four questions that form a scale variable. The scale variable for social capital was comprised of four Likert Scale questions; *My parents helped me to apply to college, My parents helped me with the college enrollment process, My friends helped me during the college enrollment process, and My high school staff helped me during the college enrollment process*.

These three independent variables are captured in the demographic section of the survey. Multiple regression statistics will be used to determine if there is a pattern of relationships between multiple independent variables as a way to predict scores on a dependent variable (Mertler & Charles, 2011). The p-value for each term tests the assumption that the coefficient is equal to zero. A low p-value (< 0.05) indicates that there is likely to be a meaningful correlation between the independent variables and the dependent one. Conversely, a larger p-value suggests that changes in the independent variables are not associated with changes in the dependent variable.

Research question number four asks, *"Does a student's social capital predict whether students viewed the admissions process be difficult while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, HS GPA, parental education level, and reading level?* Social capital is defined by the level of support the student received through the process. The scale variable for social capital was comprised of four Likert Scale questions; *My parents helped me to apply to college, My parents helped me with the college enrollment process, My friends helped me during the college enrollment process, and My high school staff helped me during the college enrollment process*. The difficulty of terminology is measured by three Likert scale questions that comprise a scale variable for difficulty. These questions are; *I found the college enrollment process at this community college confusing, I found the jargon used in the enrollment materials confusing, The jargon used in enrollment materials impacted my enrollment.*

Applicants were asked if they took a placement testing during their enrollment process, and if so they are asked if they placed into developmental English. High school GPA is collected in five bands, which include 4.0-3.5, 3.0-3.49, 2.5-2.99, 2.0-2.49, and below 2.0. Lastly, parental educational level is collected in four groups; neither parent attended college, one parent attended college, two parents attended college, or unsure if parents attended college. Multiple regression statistics will be used to determine if there is a pattern of relationships between multiple independent variables to predict scores on a dependent variable (Mertler & Charles, 2011). For example, do high school GPA and college reading level predict how a student understands admissions and enrollment terms used in enrollment materials? The p-value for each term tests the assumption that the coefficient is equal to zero. A low p-value (< 0.05) indicates that there is likely to be a meaningful correlation between the independent variables and the dependent one.

Conversely, a larger p-value suggests that changes in the independent variables are not associated with changes in the dependent variable.

Summary

Student applicants at a rural and an urban Community College were asked to respond to an online Likert type survey. The survey included terminology commonly used in the admissions and enrollment process to determine if students have a clear idea of the meaning of the words. The survey was divided into three sections; the first asking students to indicate how clear specific terms were to them during the enrollment process, the second asking who helped them with the enrollment process, and the third collecting demographic information. In the first section, students rated their understanding on a scale that ranges from very unclear, clear, somewhat clear, clear, and very clear. Likert scales are used to gather attitudes and perceptions that users hold regarding certain statements (Creswell, 2011). Surveys were distributed electronically, and data were analyzed using SPSS software.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Surveys were distributed electronically to community college applicants for the Fall 2017 semester, who graduated high school in 2017. In total, 2,569 applicants met the sample population criteria, with 1,030 originating from Westmoreland County Community College and 1,530 from the Community College of Allegheny County. Westmoreland County Community College is a rural, multi location institution with approximately 5,500 students, while the Community College of Allegheny County is an urban institution with approximately 1,700 students.

Applicants received direct email notification of the survey, which was open for eight weeks spanning from November 2017 to January 2018. Initial responses rates were low with 83 responses, at 3.2%, which prompted the decision to post the survey in public electronic spaces, such as the student information portal, to increase participation. This public facing survey had the addition of two screening questions related to high school graduation year and the semester they completed an admissions application for which identified students who are in the sample population. At the end of the survey period 154 participants completed surveys were returned, yielding a 6% response rate. The following explains reasons for the low response rate, and why it might be expected.

To further understand the sample population, additional information was retrieved from the two participating institutions. First, data were collected to better understand how many applicants matriculated to become students. At the Community College of Allegheny County 1,022 applicants, of 1,530, registered for courses showing that 33% of the population disengaged from the enrollment process. At Westmoreland County Community College, 609 applicants, of

1,030, registered for fall 2017 showing 41% of students disengaged from the enrollment process. Total, 1,631 applicants registered for courses. While this research is interested in the experiences of applicants who may not have registered, it is reasonable to infer that applicants who disengaged from the enrollment process would not respond to a survey sent from an institutional email. Only 13 surveys were returned from students who did not end up enrolling at the college to which they applied.

Additionally, when considering the response rate, it is worth noting that attrition occurs within the semester as students withdraw from their courses. The survey for this research was distributed in November, after institutional withdrawal dates, meaning that the number of students still engaged with the college is less than the 1,631 who registered. Some community colleges report attrition rates as high as 20% in any given semester.

Lastly, the survey was open into December which is a distracting time for students due to finals and scheduling for the subsequent semester. Initially, surveys were intended to be distributed in September, however, due to difficulties in obtain sample populations, the surveys were postponed.

Due to these factors, the response rate does not meet the 15-20% return rate that serves as an established target for survey data. The non-response rate, in itself, may prove telling in demonstrating that applicants and students are not engaging with materials distributed to them from their institutions.

Community college applicants are highly diverse. Students from both a rural college and urban college were included in this study to represent a spectrum of student demographics. Of total respondents, 63.6% are female, and 36.4% are male, which is proportionate to the national gender ratio of community college students. Regarding ethnicity, 80.4% report as white, 10.5%

as African American, 2.6% as Hispanic, .7% as Asian, and 3.3% as Multiracial. 2.6 % of students declined to identify their ethnicity. Of all the respondents, 39.6% identify as first generation college students, 34.4% indicated one parent attended college, 20.8% indicated both attended, and 5.2% are unsure of their parent's college attainment. This data aligns with national data that estimates high rates of first generation college students pursue community college.

Age varies slightly with most respondents trending under the age of 20 years old. 65.6% are 18 years old, 31.8% are 19 years old, and 2.6% are 20+ years old. In total, 87% of the respondents reported they ended up enrolling at the college to which they applied, with only 19 respondents, or 12.3%, indicating they did not enroll.

Academic success and preparedness of the respondents varied. Of the total sample, 83% reported taking a placement assessment when entering the college, and 17% did not. It is likely that the 17% had completed college credits in high school, had an SAT score exemption, or were in a short term program that did not require testing. Of students who tested, 18.9% of respondents reported placing into developmental English, 66.1% did not, and 15% were not sure what level they placed into. This placement testing data is much lower than national averages for developmental education participation and may indicate the students who responded were more academically prepared. Related to academic preparedness, 40.1% reported having a high school GPA of 3.5-4.0, 28.9% a 3.0-3.49 GPA, 25.7% a 2.5-2.99 GPA, 4.6% a 2.0-2.49 GPA, and .7% lower than a 2.0 GPA. This GPA spread does not align with national data showing community college students having low high school GPAs, and it may indicate that more engaged and prepared students completed the survey.

Demographics trend differently when comparing the urban students to the rural students. Seventy-eight students responded from the urban institution, and 76 students responded from the

rural institution. Lower GPAs, more need for developmental courses, and students of color were more represented among urban respondents. First generation students were more represented among rural students. Demographic trends are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Demographic Summary

Independent Variable		Urban institution *n* =78	Rural institution *n* =76
Gender	Male	41.0%	31.6%
	Female	59.0%	78.4%
Ethnicity	White	70.5%	89.5%
	African American	19.2%	2.63%
	Hispanic	1.2%	0%
	Asian	2.6%	1.3%
	Multiracial	1.2%	5.3%
	Prefer not to say	5.1%	0%
	Native American/Pacific Islander	0%	0%
Age	18 yrs.	67.9%	63.1%
	19 yrs.	28.2%	35.5$
	20+yrs	3.8%	1.3%
First Generation	Yes	33.3%	46.1%
	No, one parent attended	34.6%	34.2%
	No, both parents attended	28.2%	13.2%
	Not sure	3.8%	6.6%
High School GPA	3.50-4.00	32.1%	47.4%
	3.00-3.49	33.3%	23.1%
	2.5-2.99	25.6%	25.0%
	2.00-2.49	6.4%	2.6%
	Below 2.00	1.3%	0%
Developmental English	Yes	17.9%	13.2%
	No	53.8%	55.3%
	Not sure	15.4%	9.2%

Survey Instrument Reliability

Cronbach's alpha is a measure used to assess the internal consistency, or reliability, of a set of scale or test items. The reliability of a measurement refers to what extent it is a consistent measure of a concept, and Cronbach's alpha is one way of measuring the strength of that consistency (Goforth, 2015). Alpha reliability was used to investigate the strength of the scale and individual test items. The first scale measured perceptions of admissions and enrollment terms. The second scale measured perceptions of financial aid terms, and the third measured social capital. The final scale measured how difficult an applicant perceived the enrollment process to be.

The scale that measured applicants' perceptions of admissions and enrollment terminology was analyzed first. Perceptions of admissions and enrollment terminology are measured by fifteen questions and received an alpha reliability score of $\alpha = .917$. All fifteen items were positively related to the scale; therefore, removing a specific item did not increase the alpha reliability score. Goforth (2015) suggested that an alpha reliability score exceeding $\alpha = .50$ is acceptable.

The scale that measured applicants' perceptions of financial aid jargon was analyzed second. Perceptions of financial aid terminology are measured by seven questions and received an alpha reliability score of $\alpha = .837$. All seven items were positively related to the scale; therefore, removing a specific item did not increase the alpha reliability score. Goforth (2015) suggested that an alpha reliability score exceeding $\alpha = .50$ is acceptable.

The scale that measured applicants' perceptions of social capital was analyzed third by four questions and received an alpha reliability score of $\alpha = .666$. All four items were positively

related to the scale; therefore, removing a specific item did not increase the alpha reliability score. Goforth (2015) suggested that an alpha reliability score exceeding $\alpha = .50$ is acceptable.

Lastly, the scale that measured applicants' perceptions of difficulty was analyzed by three questions and received an alpha reliability score of $\alpha = .850$. All three items were positively related to the scale; therefore, removing a specific item did not increase the alpha reliability score. Goforth (2015) suggested that an alpha reliability score exceeding $\alpha = .50$ is acceptable.

Summary of the Results

This section will provide a brief summary of the results. Each research question will be stated, followed by the results of the analysis. Research questions one and two were answered using descriptive statistics, and research questions three and four were answered using regression modeling.

Research question one asked, "*What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used in admissions and enrollment materials?"* Largely, students agreed with statements asking them to note how well they understood specific terms after reading the admissions and enrollment materials. The mean score for the admissions and enrollment scale variable was 4.27, indicating a strong level of agreement, and implying clarity of understanding. Outliers did exist when examining the terms individually. Specifically, *registration, credit hour,* and *developmental courses* all reporting a mean score below 4.0. When examining those same three terms, 4.0% of students scored *developmental courses* with score of neutral or below, 30.4% scored *credit hour* with a score of neutral or below, and 19.2% scored *registration* with a score of neutral or below.

Variances in age, gender, and ethnicity are largely not evident. However, students at the urban institution uniformly rated their understanding of the terms lower than students at the rural institution, both in examining the scale variable and individual terms.

Research question number two asked, "*What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used to describe financial aid, and tuition cost*?" As with research question one, students agreed with statements asking them to note how well they understood specific terms after reading the admissions and enrollment materials. The mean score for the financial aid and tuition scale variable was 4.03, indicating a strong level of agreement and implying clarity of understanding. It is notable that this mean is lower than the mean score for admissions and enrollment terms. Four of the individual terms had a mean score below 4.0; *tuition, Pell grants, PHEAA, and Stafford Loans*. 30.4% of respondents scored neutral or less when asked if the enrollment materials helped them understand the phrase *Pell grant*, 34.8% for *PHEAA*, and 32.6% for *Stafford Loans*.

Variances in age, gender, and ethnicity are largely not evident. However, students at the urban institution uniformly rated their understanding of the terms lower than students at the rural institution, both in examining the scale variable and individual terms.

Research question three asked "*Does a student's social capital predict their overall perceptions of the admissions process, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age?"* A significant regression equation was found (F (129, 4) = 5.16, p = .001, with an R^2 of .14. As expected, students' scores on the social capital measure had the most significant effect on their perceptions of the admissions process (t = 4.25, p = .000). This data shows that the assistance that a student has from their parents, peers, and high school guidance counselors may predict how difficult they perceive the overall terminology to be, and how difficulty they perceive the

overall process. Gender, ethnicity, and age did not predict student responses to overall perceptions of terminology and processes.

Research question four asked, "*Does a student's social capital predict whether students viewed the admissions process be difficult while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, HS GPA, parental education level, and reading level* ?" The multiple regression model statistically significantly predicted students views about whether they believed the admissions process was difficult, F (7, 116) = , $p < .001$, $R^2 = .254$. As before, students' scores on the social capital measure had the most significant effect on their views about difficulty ($t = 5.014$, $p = .000$). Students' gender, ethnicity, age, high school GPA, parental education level, and reading level were not significant predictors of their views related to difficulty. On control for the other variables, a one-unit increase in students' social capital is associated with a half-point (.449) increase in views about difficulty ($B = .449$, $p = .000$).

Details of the Analysis and Results

The following section will describe in detail the statistical procedures used to analyze the data. Each research question will be stated, followed by the specific procedures used in analyzing the data. Descriptive statistics are used to address questions number one and two, and multiple regression is used to address questions number three and four.

Research Question One

Research question number one asked "*What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used in admissions and enrollment materials*?" these data can be summarized by examining descriptive statistics such as mean, median, minimum and maximum score, and standard deviation. The variable for perceptions, measured by the Likert scale responses, are treated as ordinal data. The scale variable that measures admissions and

enrollment terms contains 15 questions that pertain to 15 specific terms that applicants may encounter during the enrollment process.

When detailed descriptive statistical procedures were applied to the variable of admissions and enrollment, the results were as follows: The mean was 4.23, the mode was five, and the median was 4.27. The range was 3.33 with a minimum observation of 1.67 and a maximum observation of five. The standard deviation was .63, the variance was .39, the skewness was -.95, and the kurtosis was 1.29.

When examining mean scores across institution types it was noticed that the rural respondents score higher than the urban respondents both when considering the scale variable and individual questions.

Table 5

Individual Question Mean Responses, Total and by Institution Type

Survey Statements	Total Mean	Urban Mean	Rural Mean
I understood after completing the admissions application that an **acceptance letter** would then tell me what my next steps were.	4.12	4.08	4.27
The enrollment materials explained that a **transcript** is a record of my grades.	4.17	4.13	4.27
When I read the enrollment steps I knew that **registration** was the step where I made a financial agreement to take the courses I wanted.	3.98	3.90	4.16
I know that **developmental courses** are noncollege level courses that help me to prepare for college level work after reading the enrollment materials.	3.67	3.41	3.96
When researching the college, it was clearly explained that the **admissions application** was the first step in getting started.	4.36	4.29	4.47

After reading the enrollment materials I understood that **placement testing** helps to match me with English and math courses.	4.37	4.31	4.49
After I read the enrollment materials I understood that **academic advisement** was a process to help me select my classes.	4.10	4.19	4.08
The enrollment materials explained to me that **transferring** means taking my completed credits to another school.	4.28	4.22	4.38
After reading the enrollment information, I understood that **SAT scores** are not required for admission.	4.12	4.06	4.17
The enrollment materials clearly explained how many credits a **full time student** takes.	4.13	4.05	4.26
Semesters were explained in the enrollment materials as the blocks of time in which a set of classes are offered, usually running about 15 weeks.	4.15	4.10	4.24
After reading the enrollment materials I understand how many credits a **part time** student takes.	4.01	3.86	4.20
When I read the enrollment materials it was clear how **credit hours** relate to the amount of time spent in class.	3.87	3.76	3.99
When reading the enrollment materials, I understood that my **major** would direct the types of classes I would take.	4.46	4.40	4.54
When I read the enrollment materials I understood **prerequisite** courses are courses that come before another course in a series.	4.36	4.27	4.46
Total Admissions and Recruitment Terms	**4.23**	**4.07**	**4.26**

The scale for admissions and enrollment materials when considering demographic groups is shown in tables six through eight. When considering gender, the mean score for men is *n* =47, the mean is 4.15, with a standard deviation of .52. The scores for women are *n* =88, the mean is 4.28, and the standard deviation is .67.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics: Admissions and Enrollment Scale by Gender

Gender	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
Male	4.1518	47	.52211
Female	4.2788	88	.67296
Total	4.2346	135	.62554

When considering age the mean score for 18 year old applicants is *n* =88, the mean is 4.26, with a standard deviation of .64. The scores for 19 year old applicants are *n* =46, the mean is 4. 17, and the standard deviation is .59. Only one respondent over the age of 19 responded, with a mean of 4.73. Table 7 summarizes mean scores by age.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics: Admissions and Enrollment Scale by Age

Age	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
18	4.2629	88	.64449
19	4.1696	46	.59225
20+	4.7333	1	.
Total	4.2346	135	.62554

When considering ethnicity, Caucasian applicants represent *n* =112, the mean is 4.24, with a standard deviation of .64. The scores for Hispanic or Latino applicants are *n* =4, the mean is 4. 55, and the standard deviation is .18. African American respondents reported *n* =10, with a mean score of 4.21, and the standard deviation is .64. Multiracial respondents reported *n* =5, with a mean score of 3.83, and a standard deviation of .63. The scores for applicants who did not report an ethnicity are *n* =3, the mean is 4.20, and the standard deviation is .47. Table 8 summarizes mean scores by ethnicity.

Table 8

Descriptive Statistics: Admissions and Enrollment Scale by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
White	4.2417	112	.63826
Hispanic or Latino	4.5500	4	.18359
African American	4.2067	10	.64210
Multi Racial	3.8267	5	.62999
Prefer not to say	4.2000	3	.46667
Total	4.2318	134	.62708

High school GPA, parental education level, and reading level were also included in the independent variables in the study. When examining the mean scores by subgroup for these demographics using the scale variable for admissions and enrollment, little differences can be seen between groups. Students who reported both of their parents attended college showed a slightly lower mean score than students from other subgroups; 4.02 for students with two parents who attended college, 4.28 for first generation students, and 4.26 for students with one parent attending college. Students who required developmental reading and those who did not require developmental reading showed almost identical mean scores, and high school GPA yielded almost identical scores except for the lone student with a GPA below 2.0. This student reported a much lower mean score of 3.40 compared to other GPA bands all scoring over 4.0. Tables 9, 10, and 11 summarize the mean score for the admissions and enrollment scale variable by parental education level, reading level, and high school GPA.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics: Admissions and Enrollment Scale by Parental Education Level

Did your parents graduate from college?	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
No, neither parent	4.2780	53	.62740
Yes, one parent	4.2625	48	.66587
Yes, two parents	4.0247	27	.55536
I'm not sure	4.5238	7	.44627
Total	4.2346	135	.62554

Table 10

Descriptive Statistics: Admissions and Enrollment Scale by Reading Level

Regarding your placement test(s), did you place into developmental English?	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
Yes	4.2381	21	.48652
No	4.2886	82	.55403
I'm not sure	4.0800	15	.94119
Total	4.2531	118	.60310

Table 11

Descriptive Statistics: Admissions and Enrollment Scale by High School GPA

What was your high school GPA?	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
3.5-4.0	4.3135	57	.60931
3.0-3.49	4.2496	39	.59741
2.5-2.99	4.1373	34	.68006
2.0-2.49	4.2333	2	.70711
Less than 2.0	3.4000	1	.
Total	4.2416	133	.62456

Table 12 describes the percentage of participants who responded Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly agree to each individual statement. The terms

developmental courses and *credit hour* show the lowest scores of agreement that the student felt the admissions materials clarified those terms.

When considering the scale variable for admissions and enrollment materials the percentage of respondents that Agree or Strongly agree that the enrollment materials helped them understand the fifteen terms is 72.6%. The percentage of respondents that indicated that they Disagreed or Strongly disagreed that the enrollment materials explained the terms is 3.7%.

Table 12

Summary of Likert Scale Responses for Admissions and Enrollment Statements

Survey Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I understood after completing the admissions application that an **acceptance letter** would then tell me what my next steps were.	2.2%	4.4%	9.6%	34.1%	49.6%
The enrollment materials explained that a **transcript** is a record of my grades.	2.2%	2.2%	10.4%	39.3%	45.9%
When I read the enrollment steps I knew that **registration** was the step where I made a financial agreement to take the courses I wanted.	2.2%	4.4%	12.6%	39.3%	41.5%
I know that **developmental courses** are non college level courses that help me to prepare for college level work after reading the enrollment materials.	4.4%	14.8%	14.8%	30.4%	35.6%
When researching the college, it was clearly explained that the **admissions application** was the first step in getting started.	.7%	3.0%	5.9%	33.3%	57.0%

After reading the enrollment materials I understood that **placement testing** helps to match me with English and math courses.	.7%	3.0%	6.7%	28.1%	61.5%
After I read the enrollment materials I understood that **academic advisement** was a process to help me select my classes.	1.5%	4.4%	11.9%	37.0%	45.2%
The enrollment materials explained to me that **transferring** means taking my completed credits to another school.	1.5%	3.0%	5.9%	34.8%	54.8%
After reading the enrollment information, I understood that **SAT scores** are not required for admission.	2.2%	5.9%	8.1%	37.8%	45.9%
The enrollment materials clearly explained how many credits a **full time student** takes.	1.5%	6.7%	11.9%	25.2%	54.8%
Semesters were explained in the enrollment materials as the blocks of time in which a set of classes are offered, usually running about 15 weeks.	1.5%	5.2%	9.6%	40.0%	43.7%
After reading the enrollment materials I understand how many credits a **part time** student takes.	.7%	8.1%	11.9%	37.0%	42.2%
When I read the enrollment materials it was clear how **credit hours** relate to the amount of time spent in class.	.7%	10.4%	19.3%	32.6%	37.0%
When reading the enrollment materials, I understood that my **major** would direct the types of classes I would take.	0%	1.5%	5.9%	31.1%	61.5%

When I read the enrollment materials I understood **prerequisite** courses are courses that come before another course in a series.	0%	.7%	11.1%	34.8%	53.3%
Average percentage	1.5%	5.2%	10.4%	34.3%	48.6%

Some terms scored lower, specifically *registration, credit hour,* and *developmental courses* all reporting a mean score below 4.0, indicating that if there was an area of improvement to focus on language in this area may be worth consideration. When examining those same three terms, 34.0% of students scored *developmental courses* with score of neutral or below, 30.4% scored *credit hour* with a score of neutral or below, and 19.2% scored *registration* with a score of neutral or below.

Research Question Two

Research question number two asked "*What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used to describe financial aid, and tuition cost*?". These data can be summarized by examining descriptive statistics such as mean, median, minimum and maximum score, and standard deviation. The variable for perceptions, measured by the Likert scale responses, are treated as ordinal data. The scale variable that measures perceptions of financial aid and tuition terms contains seven questions that pertain to seven specific terms that applicants may encounter during the enrollment process.

When detailed descriptive statistical procedures were applied to the variable of Financial aid and tuition, the results were as follows: The mean is 4.03, the mode is four, and the median is 4.17. The range was three, with a minimum score of two and a maximum

score of five. The standard deviation was .79, the variance was .63, the skewness was -.67, and the kurtosis was -.19.

When examining mean scores across institution types the rural respondents score higher than the urban respondents both when considering the scale variable and individual questions. Table 13 summarizes mean scores by institution type.

Table 13

Mean Scores for Admissions and Enrollment Terms by Institution Type

Survey Statements	Total Mean	Urban Mean	Rural Mean
The enrollment materials helped me understand that **tuition** is the cost of courses.	4.37	4.32	4.41
The enrollment paperwork helped me understand that **Pell grants** are based on how much money I earn, and that they are monies I don't have to pay back to the federal government.	3.88	3.74	4.01
PHEAA was explained in the enrollment materials as state based financial aid that I do not need to pay back.	3.77	3.58	3.96
When reading the enrollment materials **fees** were clearly explained as costs that are in addition to tuition.	4.06	3.99	4.13
When I read the enrollment materials I understood that **Stafford Loans** are funds that I will need to eventually pay back.	3.81	3.74	3.87
When reading the enrollment paperwork, I understood that the **FAFSA** was how I accessed grants and loans.	4.35	4.32	4.39
Total Financial Aid	4.03	3.95	4.12

The scale for admissions and enrollment materials when considering demographic groups is shown in tables 14 through 16. When considering gender, the mean score for men is n =47, the

mean is 4.09, with a standard deviation of .77. The scores for women are *n* =88, the mean is 4.09, and the standard deviation is .81.

Table 14

Descriptive Statistics: Financial Aid and Tuition Scale by Gender

Gender	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation	Median
Male	4.0887	47	.75649	4.1667
Female	4.0890	88	.81491	4.0833
Total	4.0889	135	.79222	4.1667

When considering age, the mean score for 18 year old applicants is *n* =88, the mean is 4.08, with a standard deviation of .81. The scores for 19 year old applicants are *n* =46, the mean is 4.08, and the standard deviation is .76. Only one respondent over the age of 19 responded, with a mean of five.

Table 15

Descriptive Statistics: Financial Aid and Tuition Scale by Age

Age	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation	Median
18	4.0814	88	.81257	4.1667
19	4.0833	46	.75747	4.0833
20+	5.0000	1	.	5.0000
Total	4.0889	135	.79222	4.1667

When considering ethnicity, the mean score for Caucasian applicants is *n* =112, the mean is 4.10, with a standard deviation of .81. The scores for Hispanic or Latino applicants are *n* =4, the mean is 3.41, and the standard deviation is .55. African American respondents reported *n* =10, with a mean score of 4.23, and the standard deviation is .46. Multiracial respondents reported *n* =5, with a mean score of 3.63, and a standard deviation of .97. The scores for applicants who did not report an ethnicity are *n* =3, the mean is 4.50, and the standard deviation is .50.

Table 16

Descriptive Statistics: Financial Aid and Tuition Scale by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation	Median
White	4.1042	112	.81223	4.1667
Hispanic or Latino	3.4167	4	.55277	3.5000
African American	4.2667	10	.45947	4.1667
Multi Racial	3.6333	5	.97468	4.0000
Prefer not to say	4.5000	3	.50000	4.5000
Total	4.0871	134	.79491	4.1667

High school GPA, parental education level, and reading level were also included in the independent variables in the study. When examining the mean scores by subgroup for these demographics using the scale variable for financial aid and tuition, little differences between groups. Students who reported both of their parents attended college showed a slightly lower mean score than students from other subgroups; 3.83 for students with two parents who attended college, 4.12 for first generation students, and 4.18 for students with one parent attending college. Students who required developmental reading and those who did not showed almost identical mean scores, and high school GPA yielded almost identical scores except for the lone student with a GPA below 2.0. This student reported a much lower mean score of 3.00 compared to other GPA bands all scoring over 4.0. Tables 17, 18, and 19 summarize the mean score for the financial aid and tuition scale variable by parental education level, reading level, and high school GPA.

Table 17

Descriptive Statistics: Financial Aid and Tuition Scale by Parental Education Level

Did your parents graduate from college?	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
No, neither parent	4.1164	53	.79096
Yes, one parent	4.1806	48	.77248
Yes, two parents	3.8333	27	.74248
I'm not sure	4.2381	7	1.06657
Total	4.0889	135	.79222

Table 18

Descriptive Statistics: Financial Aid and Tuition Scale by Reading Level

Regarding your placement test(s), did you place into developmental English?	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
Yes	4.0079	21	.86839
No	4.1138	82	.72288
I'm not sure	4.1889	15	.92124
Total	4.1045	118	.77128

Table 19

Descriptive Statistics: Financial Aid and Tuition Scale by High School GPA

What was your high school GPA?	Mean	*N*	Std. Deviation
3.5-4.0	4.1023	57	.80780
3.0-3.49	4.1026	39	.71901
2.5-2.99	4.1078	34	.85564
2.0-2.49	4.0833	2	1.29636
Less than 2.0	3.0000	1	.
Total	4.0952	133	.79410

When considering the scale variable for financial aid and tuition materials, the percentage of respondents that Agree or Strongly agree that the enrollment materials helped them

understand the six terms is 62.6%. The percentage of respondents that indicated that they Disagreed or Strongly disagreed that the enrollment materials explained the terms is 8.1%.

Of the 15 individual terms Table 20 describes the percentage of respondents who answered Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree to each individual statement. The terms “PHEAA” and “Stafford Loans” show the lowest scores of agreement that the student felt the admissions materials clarified those terms. Table 20 summarizes the Likert scale data for financial aid and tuition statements by percentage.

Table 20

Summary of Likert Scale Responses for Financial Aid and Tuition Statements

Survey Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The enrollment materials helped me understand that **tuition** is the cost of courses.	1.5%	3.7%	5.2%	28.9%	60.7%
The enrollment paperwork helped me understand that **Pell grants** are based on how much money I earn, and that they are monies I don't have to pay back to the federal government.	3.0%	12.6%	14.8%	28.1%	41.5%
PHEAA was explained in the enrollment materials as state based financial aid that I do not need to pay back.	5.2%	11.1%	18.5%	27.4%	37.8%
When reading the enrollment materials **fees** were clearly explained as costs that are in addition to tuition.	1.5%	8.1%	11.9%	31.9%	46.7%
When I read the enrollment materials I understood that **Stafford Loans** are funds that I will need to eventually pay back.	5.9%	11.9%	14.8%	28.9%	38.5%
When reading the enrollment paperwork I understood that the **FAFSA** was how I accessed grants and loans.	.7%	4.4%	6.7%	31.1%	57.0%
Average percentage	2.8%	8.6%	12.0%	29.4%	47.0%

Research Question Three

Research question three asked "*Does a student's social capital predict their overall perceptions of the admissions process, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age?***"** A multiple linear regression was calculated to predict students' perceptions of the admissions process based on reported social capital, gender, ethnicity, and age. Prior to conducting the multiple linear regression, eight assumptions were checked to ensure the data were valid for analysis (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2003). The first two assumptions were met as the dependent variable (ORF) used a ratio scale, and the analysis include two or more predictor variables that were continuous (i.e., used an interval or ratio scale) or categorical (i.e., used an ordinal or nominal scale). Next, the assumption of independence of observations (i.e., independence of residuals) was checked using the Durbin-Watson statistic (Cohen et al., 2003). The Durbin-Watson statistic was .192, which indicated that there was no correlation between residuals.

Next, the assumption of linearity was tested in two parts: (a) a scatterplot of the studentized residuals against the (unstandardized) predicted values was created, using SPSS; and (b) the researcher established the existence of a linear relationship between the dependent variable and each of the independent variables using partial regression plots between each independent variable and the dependent variable (with categorical independent variables removed; e.g., gender). Fifth, the assumption of homoscedasticity was checked by plotting the studentized residuals against the unstandardized predicted values, which were produced as part of the multiple regression procedure. Visual inspection of the plot indicated that there was homoscedasticity.

Table 21

Bivariate Correlations Between Predictor Variables

		Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Social Capital
Gender	Pearson Correlation	1	.085	-.107	-.128
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.325	.219	.138
	N	135	135	134	135
Age	Pearson Correlation	.085	1	.041	-.062
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.325		.641	.473
	N	135	135	134	135
Ethnicity	Pearson Correlation	-.107	.041	1	-.233**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.219	.641		.007
	N	134	134	134	134
Social Capital	Pearson Correlation	-.128	-.062	-.233**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.138	.473	.007	
	N	135	135	134	135

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Sixth, the assumption of multicollinearity was checked. Multicollinearity occurs when you have two or more independent variables that are highly correlated with each other. This leads to problems with understanding which independent variable contributes to the variance explained in the dependent variable, as well as technical issues in calculating a multiple regression model (Cohen et al., 2003). Table 21 presents bivariate correlations among the predictor variables. Correlations ranged from .085 to .233 (ethnicity and social capital). Thus, bivariate correlations were moderate to low, which helped to maximize the predictive power and interpretation of regression weights. Moreover, VIF scores for the four predictor variables were less than 10 (with a tolerance recommendation of .10).

Last, the final two assumptions (i.e., the presence of outliers, and normality of the distribution of residuals) were checked as follows. First, using SPSS, the measure of influence of data points was checked using Cook's Distance. The mean score for Cook's Distance was .008 (minimum = .000, and maximum = .104), indicating that none of the data points in the sample warranted further investigation (or might be influential on the overall mean of students' social capital scores). Second, the assumption of normality of the residuals were checked using a histogram with superimposed normal curve (Figure 2). As demonstrated, the standardized residuals appear to be approximately normally distributed.

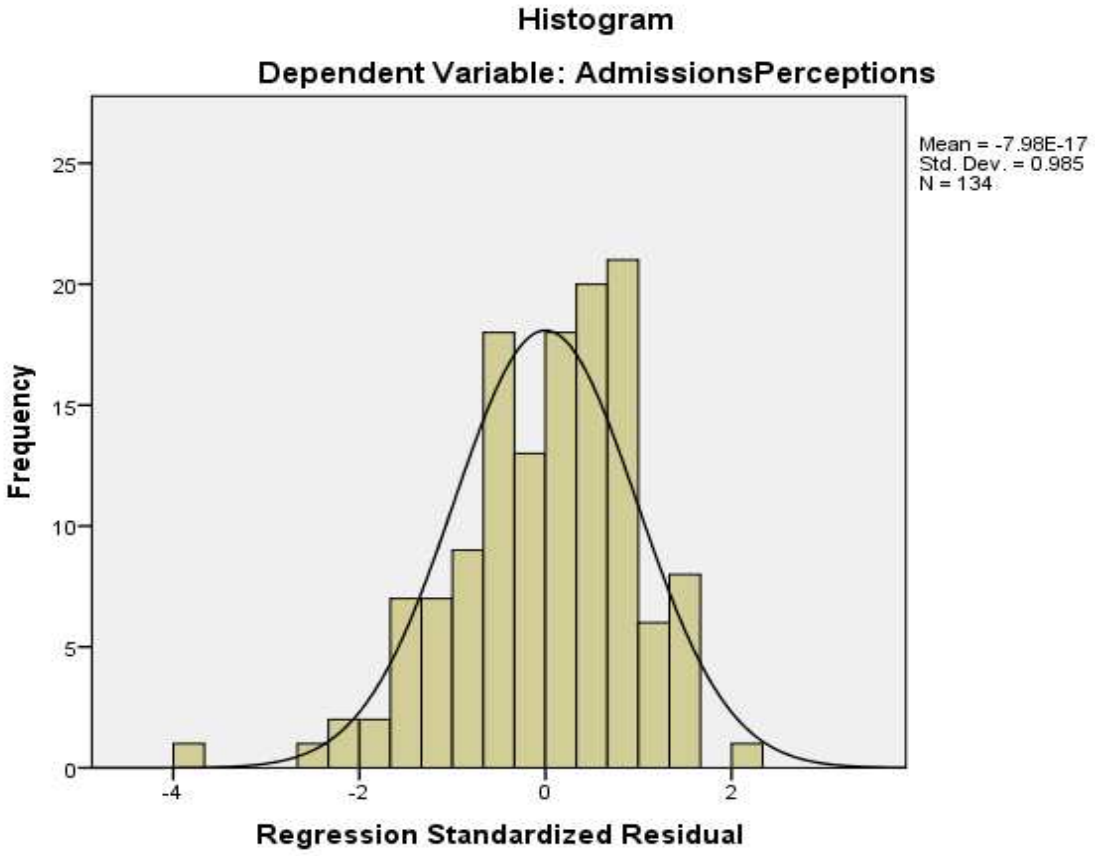

Figure 2. Histogram of superimposed normal curve.

To confirm the findings of visual analysis, a P-P Plot was created using SPSS (Figure 3). As demonstrated, although the points are not aligned perfectly along the diagonal line, they are close enough to normal for the analysis to proceed (Cohen et al., 2003). As multiple regression analysis is fairly robust against deviations from normality, these findings suggest that no transformations need to take place, and that the assumption of normality has not been violated.

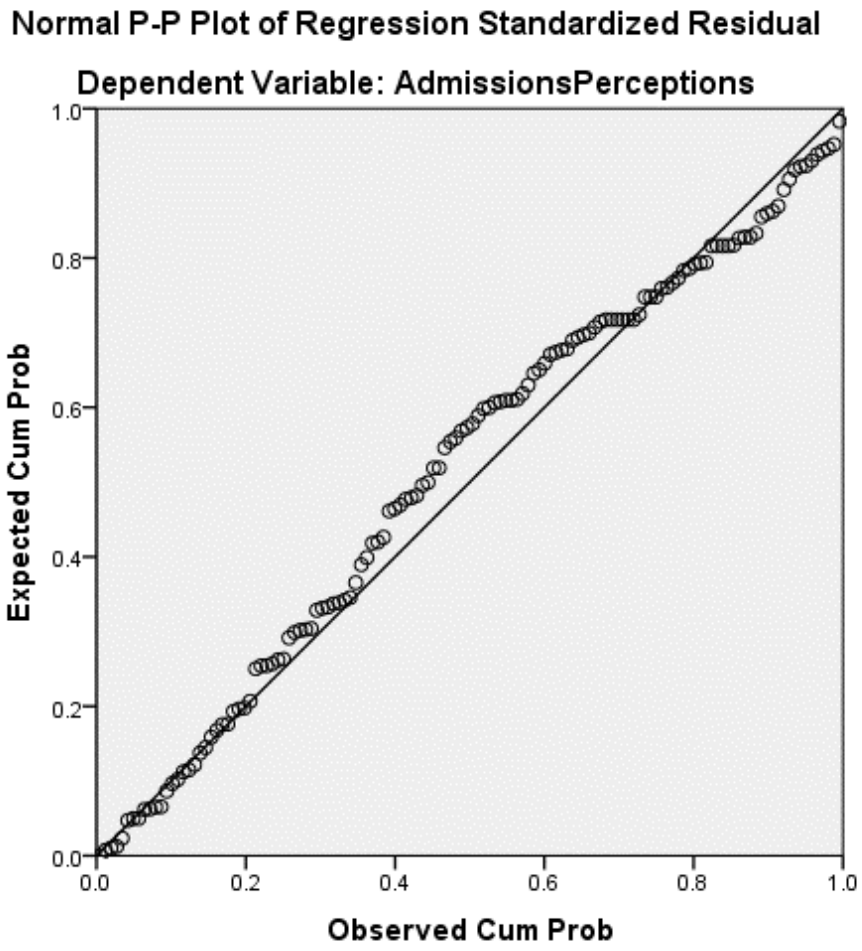

Figure 3. Normal P-P plot of regression standardized residuals.

A significant regression equation was found ($F(129, 4) = 5.16$, p = .001, with an R^2 of .14. As expected, students' scores on the social capital measure had the most significant effect on

their perceptions of the admissions process ($t = 4.25$, p = .000). Students' gender, ethnicity, and age were not significant predictors of their perceptions of the admissions process. On control for the other variables, a one unit increase in students' social capital is associated with a .214 point increase in perceptions of the admissions process ($B = .214$, $p = .000$).

Research Question Four

Research question four asked ***"****Does a student's social capital predict whether students viewed the admissions process as difficult, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, high school GPA, parental education level, and reading level?"* A multiple regression was conducted to examine the relationship between students' social capital and whether they viewed the admissions process as difficult, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, high school GPA, parental education level, and reading level. There was linearity as assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against the predicted values. There was independence of residuals, as assessed by a Durbin-Watson statistic of 1.543. There was homoscedasticity, as assessed by visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values. There was no evidence of multicollinearity, as assessed by tolerance values greater than 0.1. There were no studentized deleted residuals greater than ±3 standard deviations, no leverage values greater than 0.2, and values for Cook's distance above 1. The assumption of normality was met, as assessed by a Q-Q Plot (Figure 4). The multiple regression model statistically significantly predicted students views about whether they believed the admissions process was difficult, $F(7, 116) = , p < .001$, $R^2 = .254$. As before, students' scores on the social capital measure had the most significant effect on their views about difficulty ($t = 5.014$, $p = .000$). Students' gender, ethnicity, age, high school GPA, parental education level, and reading level were not significant predictors of their views related to difficulty. On control for the other

variables, a one-unit increase in students' social capital is associated with a half-point (.449) increase in views about difficulty (B = .449, p = .000).

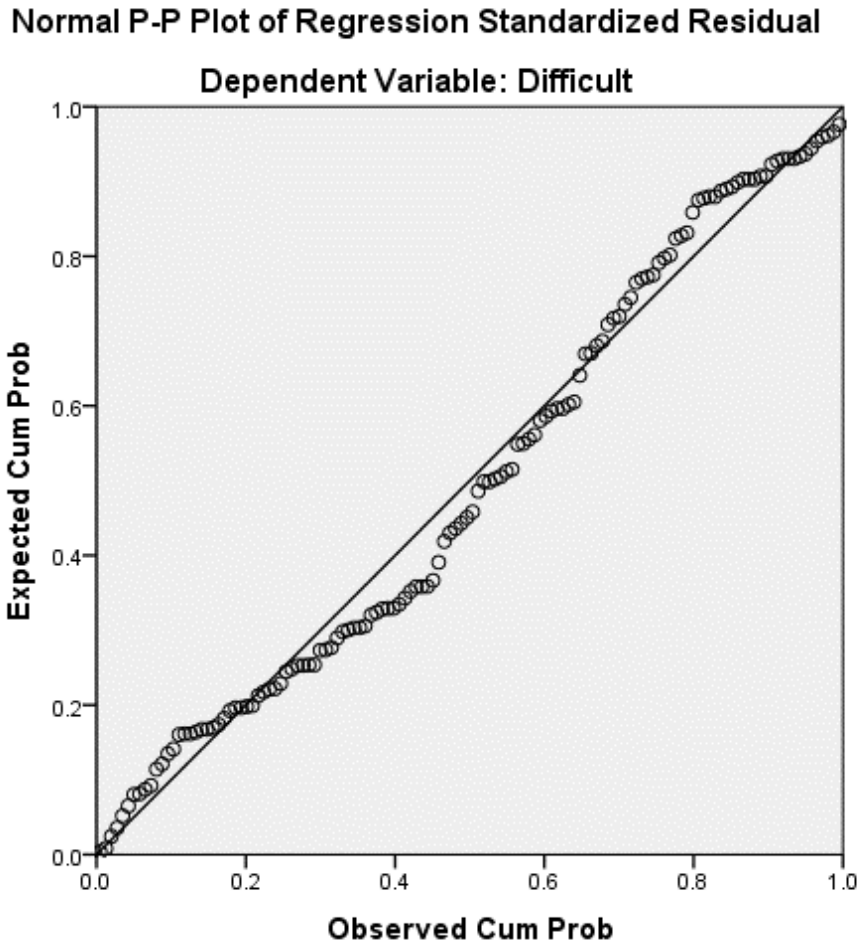

Figure 4. Normal P-P plot of regression standardized residuals.

Conclusion

Chapter four presented the results related to each of the research questions from this study about perceptions of admissions and enrollment terminology. The chapter described, in detail, the survey responses received. A brief summary of the results was presented followed by the details of the analysis for each research question, which utilized descriptive statistics and

regression modeling to answer the four research questions. A summary of the demographics of the respondents was provided to created a context in which to later interpret the data, and to related the data to existing literature.

Chapter five will present a detailed discussion of the data findings, along with recommendations for community colleges and further research. Recommendations include cultivating relationships with families, guidance counselors, and peers of applicants to strengthen the social capital outlets students are utilizing to navigate the enrollment process.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPLICATIONS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research study sought to understand how students perceive the written materials they receive during the community college enrollment process, how those materials can influence their enrollment decisions, and whether there are variations in these experiences among different student demographics. Extant literature shows that nationally, almost half of the students entering community college need developmental courses, and a significant number are first-generation students who may not have the familial capital that students from successive generations have. The intersection of jargon, heavy paperwork for enrollment, lack of familial resources, and skill gaps in English and math enacts a scenario that may impede students from completing the college enrollment process even if they desire to attend college.

This study surveyed applicants at two Pennsylvania community colleges – one rural and one urban – to examine their perceptions of the language used in enrollment materials. Electronic surveys were distributed to Fall 2017 applicants to both institutions who indicated a high-school graduate date of 2017 when applying to the college. The survey used a Likert-scale questionnaire to study how well students understood specific vocabulary associated with admissions, financial aid, and general college. Students also reported about information regarding their access to assistance when applying, including how much help they received from family, friends, and high school staff. Lastly, students reported about demographic information, including their high-school GPA, if they required developmental reading, and if their parents attended college.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

This quantitative study distributed among applicants to community colleges, who were recent high school graduates and community college applicants, a Likert-scale survey that asked

them to describe how well their enrollment materials explained specific academic "jargon." These questions were arranged according to enrollment area, admissions, financial aid, and general terms. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of the respondents, and regression modeling was used to describe how various independent variables (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) may be predictors of how students perceived the enrollment terminology. The analysis included 132 respondents.

Research question one was "*What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used in admissions and enrollment materials*?" The study indicated that largely, students' perceptions of the terms related to admissions enrollment were positive. Students indicated that they felt that the enrollment materials adequately explained the terminology in question. For each of the 21 individual terms given, less than 20% of the respondents "Strongly Disagreed" or "Disagreed" with the statement. When considering the total scale variable for admissions and enrollment terms, 17.1% of students indicated that they "Strongly Disagreed," "Disagreed," or were "Neutral" to statements regarding the clarity of the terms. While this percentage may be low, in an institution with 1,500 applicants who have recently been out of high school, this number represents 255 students who report that the admissions and enrollment forms did not adequately explain the terms and jargon.

Some terms scored lower, specifically *registration, credit hour,* and *developmental courses* – all reporting a mean score below 4.0, indicating that it is worth considering language as a potential area of improvement on which to focus. Understanding the term *placement testing* is particularly vital to community college applicants, as they are less likely to have completed the SAT or ACT than their four-year course peers, which require them to take a placement test (Xu & Dadgar, 2018). When examining these three terms, 34.0% of students scored *developmental*

courses Neutral or below, 30.4% scored *credit hour* Neutral or below, and 19.2% scored *registration* Neutral or below. When considering an applicant pool of 1,500 prospective students, this percentage could mean that 510 people have confusion around a process as critical as developmental courses and 456 might not understand the definition of a credit hour.

Misunderstanding constructs, such as registration, credit hour, and developmental courses, can not only impact enrollment but financial aid and transfer planning, as well. However, the majority of students surveyed seemed confident in their grasp of the terminology. Part of this confidence may be attributed to that respondents indicating fairly high GPAs, with only one respondent indicating a GPA below 2.0. Students who have been academically successful may not have developmental coursework on their radar, and only 15.6% of respondents responded that they required developmental English. However, this does not account for nearly a third of the students indicating uncertainty with regard to the definition of a credit hour. Credit hours are not just associated with progress towards graduation, they are also relevant for satisfactory progress regarding federal financial aid. This insight to how students perceive the jargon reveals an area that community colleges can improve clarity in when creating enrollment materials.

It must be noted that across all terms and the scale variable for admissions and enrollment, students from the urban institution expressed less clarity to the terms than rural students, which may be a function of the enrollment materials or a function of the preparation of the students. The scale admissions and enrollment scale variable mean for urban institutions was 4.07 as compared to 4.26 for the rural institution. The urban institution included in this study services 18,000 credit students, with only eight professional admissions staff within the entire institution. The rural institution has three dedicated admissions staff members and five education

center directors who provide admissions assistance in an institution with 5,000 credit students. This disparity in the staff-to-student ratio may have influenced the differences in the mean scores.

Notable differences across gender and age were not noted. Multiracial students ($n = 5$) had a lower mean score for the admissions and enrollment scale variable than other racial groups, with a score of 3.83. All other racial groups scored means over 4.0. There is no literature to explain why this discrepancy may exist with multiracial students; and with the small sample size of the study, it is hard to conclude that the lower score is not an outlier.

No notable differences were observed across reading levels, and two small observations can be seen among parental education level and high school GPA. First, surprisingly students who reported that both of their parents attended college scored their understanding lower than students from other demographics. One reason for this finding may be that their parents were more heavily involved in their enrollment, thereby taking enrollment tasks away from the student. If the parents completed many of the forms and processes for the student, it would be logical that they would be unfamiliar with the terms. Also, the single student who indicated a high school GPA below a 2.0 scored their understanding of the terms much lower than their peers with higher GPAs. This single student points to an area in need of future exploration. It has been shown that community colleges attract underprepared students, and that underprepared students need more assistance, so it is unsurprising that this student indicated that the admissions and enrollment materials were unclear.

These outcomes, where students largely indicated that they had clarity about admissions and enrollment terms used in enrollment materials, does not align with the outcomes noted by Chapman and Johnson's (1978) College Terminology Quiz (CTQ). The CTQ showed that half of

the high-school students could not correctly identify the terms provided to them from college catalogs. While this study asked students about their perceptions, and not competency, it is notable that there may be a discrepancy between the two. This demonstration of competency is valuable because while students may perceive that they understand the terminology, if they are using it incorrectly in practice, this perception becomes moot. Dunlosky and Rawson's (2012) research of student recall of vocabulary terms reveals how this misplaced confidence in understanding the terminology is possible. The researchers asked students to learn the definitions of key terms and rate their confidence regarding the accuracy of their definitions during practice cued recall trials. The results demonstrated that when students were overconfident about the correctness and completeness of their responses, they stopped studying earlier. This overconfidence did not correlate with the accuracy with which students responded, showing that students would have benefitted from more study time. This potential for overconfidence warrants further exploration, by comparing their perceptions to their ability to define college jargon in future research.

Research question two asked, "*What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used to describe financial aid and tuition cost?"* Mean scores for individual terms tended to be lower than those for the admissions and enrollment terms, and the scale variable for financial terms also averaged lower than admissions and enrollment. The mean score for the financial terms scale variable for all six terms is 4.03, indicating that students largely perceived the terms to be clear. Four of the individual terms had a mean score below 4.0; *tuition, Pell grants, PHEAA, and Stafford Loans*. Interestingly, *FAFSA* scored the highest, with a mean score of 4.35. These differences in scores may show that while students may understand ways to initiate the financial aid process, they may be less confident in working with the

information provided in the financial aid awards. Pell grants, PHEAA, and Stafford loans represent the funding streams available to students for paying their tuition. Potentially misunderstanding the difference between a loan and a grant award could result in unexpected student loan commitments or missed opportunities for entitlements.

No notable differences were reported between gender and age when examining descriptive statistics related to financial aid and enrollment terms. Hispanic and Latino students, four of the surveyed students, scored much lower than white and African American students, with scores of 3.42, 4.10, and 4.23 respectively. This difference in perception among ethnic groups is reflected in McKinney and Novak's (2015) study of trends in FAFSA completion. The analysis indicated that in some scenarios, Hispanic students may be less likely to complete the FAFSA process than their white counterparts. By not completing the FAFSA, the student would not receive subsequent award letters that outline Pell grants, Stafford Loans, and PHEAA awards.

No notable differences were observed across reading levels, and two small observations can be seen among parental education level and high school GPA. As with the admissions and enrollment terms, students who reported that both of their parents attended college scored their understanding lower than students from other demographics. It may be that students who come from families with two college educated parents are not applying for financial aid, and they are paying out of pocket because of the low cost of tuition. If the student and their family was not applying for financial aid, and if their parents were paying the tuition bill, the student may be unfamiliar with the terminology. Also, the single student who indicated a high school GPA below a 2.0 scored their understanding of the financial aid and tuitions terms much lower than their peers with higher GPAs. This points to an area in need of future exploration.

Only 71% of community college students apply for any student aid, the lowest percentage of any branch of post-secondary education; 80% of all undergraduates, at all post-secondary institutions, apply for some type of student aid (Juszkiewicz, 2014). Students under the age of 24 are typically required to report their income and their parent's income on their FAFSA. This financial-aid application process requires that multiple people in the household have an understanding of the forms and feel confident in reading the subsequent award letters that they will receive describing their package. Students who responded with low perception scores could be students who did not apply for aid and therefore, did not receive a whole section of information that is typically generated after the FAFSA has been completed. A common pitfall that families experience is not understanding that Stafford loans are still considered "aid," even though they will need to be paid back. Financial aid offices often create award letters that list federal financial aid, state financial aid, and a student's loan eligibility as one comprehensive package. This categorization of loans as "aid" may be confusing to students who perceive aid as help given to them without any type of future commitment.

This study showed that financial aid terms related to award streams were, on an average, the most confusing for community college applicants. When asked whether the enrollment materials helped them understand the phrase *Pell grant*, 30.4% responded Neutral or below, 34.8% for *PHEAA*, and 32.6% for *Stafford Loans*. In an institution receiving 1,500 applicants a semester, this could represent 456 people who are unclear about the definitions of Pell grants, 522 who are unclear about state financial aid, and 489 about federal loans. This lack of clarity is unsurprising, yet concerning, given that students indicate financial barriers as one of the primary reasons for either not attending college or leaving it once enrolled. Additionally, as with admissions and enrollment terms, the urban institution showed a lower mean score for the scale

variable than the rural institution, 3.95 compared to 4.12. Allegheny County, where the urban institution is located, has a poverty rate of 11.5%, while Westmoreland County has a poverty rate of 9.8% (US Census Bureau, 2016). Community colleges in these areas, especially given the poverty rates, may wish to consider investing resources in providing clarity to the funding streams available to prospective students. Additionally, it is worth noting that all three financial aid terms that students found most difficult are related to federal and state funding streams, which indicates that community colleges may need to tackle creating resources that accompany forms, including literature developed by government entities.

Research question three asked, "*Does a student's social capital predict their overall perceptions of the admissions process, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age*?" Students' scores on the social capital measure had the most significant effect on their perceptions of the admissions process ($t = 4.25$, $p = 0.000$). Students' gender, ethnicity, and age were not significant predictors of their perceptions of the admissions process.

In this analysis, social capital was measured using a four-question scale variable that accounted for how much assistance the student received during the enrollment process, and perceptions of difficulty were measured using a three-question scale variable that was related to the overall experience of the student with the enrollment process and jargon. The data indicated that the level of assistance a student receives from family, friends, and guidance counselors can predict how difficult they perceive the process and language to be. Examining the descriptive statistics and mean scores for the questions that have higher ratings than other perceptions, it is reasonable to suggest that increased ratings for social capital align with an increase in positive perceptions of the process and jargon.

Admissions professionals should recognize that students with multiple vulnerabilities, who do not receive assistance from parents, friends, or high school counselors, may benefit from materials that are written keeping them as an audience in mind. The admissions demographic information can be used to target students who are the most vulnerable with offers for assistance with enrollment materials, glossaries of terms, video tutorials of how to complete forms, and connections to peers who have completed the process. Additionally, if social capital, as it pertains to the assistance students receive during the process, is a predictor of how students perceive the admissions and financial jargon, it may indicate that colleges need to fill the role that parents, family, and high school counselors are not. Programs that offer high levels of staff to student assistance, such as programs in Rhode Island (Castleman et al., 2012), may be effective because they address the information gaps that students with less social capital experience. Castleman et al. (2012) found that due to the counseling intervention and assistance with paperwork, members of the treatment group were 14 percentage points more likely to enroll in college during the following fall semester. The counselors noted that 47% of their recorded interactions with students dealt with financial issues and 31% dealt with students requiring assistance with communicating with a college or university.

Gender, ethnicity, and age did not act as predictors of how students perceive the enrollment process and jargon. This area is worth exploring further, specifically with a more diverse age group than the narrow group included in this study. Additionally, exploring larger samples of non-Caucasian respondents and respondents from immigrant populations is also worth considering.

Research question four asked, "*Does a student's social capital predict whether students viewed the admissions process be difficult while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, HS GPA,*

parental education level, and reading level?" As before, students' scores on the social capital measure had the most significant effect on their views about difficulty (t = 5.014, p = .000). Students' gender, ethnicity, age, high school GPA, parental education level, and reading level were not significant predictors of their views related to difficulty. On control for the other variables, a one-unit increase in students' social capital is associated with a half-point (.449) increase in views about difficulty (B = .449, p = .000). Difficulty was determined by asking the student explicitly if they found the process difficulty, and if it impacted their enrollment. It would appear from this data that students that report high levels of social capital, or simply put, access to assistance from family, peers, and high school staff, show high agreement that the process was not difficult. This confirms research indicating that access to social capital positively impacts the likelihood of a student attending college and confidently navigating the enrollment process.

In summary, paying attention to the intersectionality of how multiple underprivileged identities and lack of academic preparedness predict how students' perception of enrollment materials is warranted. This research affirms that efforts focused on addressing students with multiple layers of vulnerability is a valid approach for admissions professionals to consider.

Discussion

This discussion will focus on the perceptions of respondents regarding the enrollment terms and the assistance they received during the enrollment process. The research, in general, did not yield an indication that first-generation status, reading level, or high school GPA are predictors of how an applicant will perceive the enrollment jargon they encounter in the college admissions process. However, it is important to note that only one of the respondents reported a high school GPA below 2.0, potentially skewing the responses. Only 17.9% of urban students

and 13.2% of rural students reported requiring developmental English, which also deviated from national data that places the number of developmental education students at more than twice this number. The high participation from academically prepared students may be telling in two ways. First, it shows that students with academic capital may be more likely to engage with materials sent by the institution, such as a survey. Second, it shows that students who lacked academic capital may have left the enrollment process, and thereby, ignored emails from the institution. In summary, it is possible that the level of positive perceptions could have been influenced by the level of academic capital the respondents possessed.

Overall, it seems that in all aspects measured, the level of support a student receives when navigating the enrollment paperwork, whether from family, friends, or high-school staff, can influence their perceptions of the terminology and difficulty of the process. Understanding the role that such external support plays is vital to community colleges in order to improve their matriculation rates. If these factors are predictors, community colleges need to consider proactive approaches, rather than reactive approaches, which reach students and their support groups early in the college choice process to improve the probability that the student will matriculate.

Recommendations for Community Colleges

If social capital, defined as the support from family, peers, and high school counselors, is shown to predict how students perceive jargon and processes, recommendations can be made regarding effectively interacting with these groups to community colleges. Additionally, the most difficult area of jargon was shown to be financial aid, which also warrants that the recommendations made by community colleges should provide information specifically addressing financial aid terminology and ways to support parents, peers, and guidance counselors with jargon laden paperwork.

When examining how social capital may predict student perceptions of enrollment terminology, it is important to consider the role that parents, and families play and the ways in which they interact with the financial aid terminology and paperwork. If students' home support predicts their perceptions of academic terminology, it is reasonable to conclude that parents need to be supported during this process. While "college financing perceptions" (Mundel & Coles, 2004) may be less important for students from upper-income households, low-income students and students of color who believe that college is affordable are more likely to aspire to college, apply for financial aid, and ultimately enroll in a postsecondary institution (Greenfield, 2015). As Dynarksi and Scott-Clayton (2006) stated, "for the typical household, the aid application is longer and more complicated than the federal tax return" (p. 2). Additionally, a report by the Rethinking Student Aid study group claimed that the financial aid process is mired by "bureaucratic hurdles [and] information barriers" that disproportionately affect low-income students (Baum et al., 2008, p. 6).

In recent years, the FAFSA has been simplified to some extent, allowing families to import IRS information into the form, but there are still approximately 100 questions from seven content categories that families must work through. Dynarksi and Scott-Clayton (2006) stated the following:

> The U.S. system for subsidizing college students buries information about the affordability of college within a thicket of paperwork. It delays sharing information with prospective college students about the affordability of college until it is too late. As a result, the impact of federal student aid remains far below its potential. (p. 33)

Research in this study demonstrated that the greatest area of vulnerability may be regarding the perceptions of financial aid terminology. A recommendation for community colleges would be to

follow the model of institutions that have implemented strategies specific to financial aid literacy, such as The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNCCH). UNCCH paid specific attention to creating a reader-friendly communication system for prospective students. More specifically, the university refined the financial aid letters and paperwork (Supiano, 2015). The institution created a position of Assistant Director of Communication in the Office of Scholarship and Financial Aid, whose primary task was to translate the confusing and technical financial aid jargon into "plain English" for students and parents. The Assistant Director notes "You can't understand how much the college is going to cost, in the end, without learning all this lingo." Financial aid is "like an entire language" (Supiano, 2014, n.p.). Acknowledgment that the language needs to be deciphered, explained, compiled in glossaries, and deinstitutionalized into plain speak is a valuable step forward in increasing engagement with families.

Additionally, many of the interventions, bootcamps, and resources created for families aiming to help them navigate the enrollment process are designed with four-year institutions in mind.

Examples of large college enrollment support efforts include UCEazy, which focuses on supporting first generation students and families applying to competitive schools (UZEazy, 2018). The College Board has a litany of tools, including their BigFuture initiative, available to help families prep for SAT, ACT, and AP tests, along with providing tips on admissions letters and other competitive entry strategies. Many of these postsecondary preparation tools are geared towards gaining entry into a college as opposed to what to do after being accepted or what to do if you do not gain admission. Little space in the larger, national, parent preparation conversation is reserved for how community college admissions differ from four-year institutions and how to navigate open admissions procedures. Even the language used in four-year and two-year

processes may vary. For example, “admissions” at four-year institutions is a process with multiple steps, but at a two-year college is an instantaneous action. Or, the phrase “program” at a two-year institution may span multiple credentials, such as a certificate or diploma, while at a four-year institution, it almost universally means a baccalaureate degree.

To counter this information imbalance, and sometimes incongruence, between two-year and four-year institutions, some community colleges have begun preparing in-house parental education resources that support their unique processes. This action is recommendable and has had positive outcomes when implemented. For example, Herkimer County Community College has a parent-resource section on its website called “HCCC Parents.” Topics in this section include academic advisors, the bursar’s and registrar’s offices, safety and security, and student conduct policies (Chen, 2017). They also have a section on college terms, where they explain the various community college credentials and other jargon such as “credit hour,” “full-time student,” “part-time student,” “drop/add,” and “plagiarism” (Chen, 2017). Their onsite JUMPSTART orientation series includes a track dedicated to parents and families that shares information and research on how family support can make a difference in the student’s academic success. Additionally, the orientation program offers the opportunity for parents to meet, network, and trade information in the same manner as parents participating in more affluent college preparatory programs.

Another example of family support is from Skagit Valley College, which has several campuses in Washington and has a section on its website called “No Parent Left Behind” (Chen, 2017). Detailed sections of information explain a parent’s limited access to a community college student’s grades and records and a student’s rights to review records under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. Skagit Valley has also partnered with local school districts

to offer information sessions focused on community college admissions and has earmarked parts of their new student orientation program exclusively for parents. According to the Dean of Students, Linda P. Woiwod, one third of the new students were accompanied by their parents when arriving for orientation (Chen, 2017) after the family sessions were implemented. Due to the positive feedback received from parents, the institution is implementing Parent Academies to proactively assist bringing parents into the admissions and enrollment process in 2018.

Sonja Ardoin (2013) notes a similar need for colleges to behave proactively when working in the areas of jargon and admissions information, both with families and with high-school professionals. In her forthcoming book that cites her research on how rural students navigate academic jargon, she notes:

> My goal is for folks involved in higher education or policymaking to pay attention to students at rural schools and their needs, and to not assume that everyone has access to the same information. I also wanted to emphasize the importance of high school counselors as college counselors, and the need for better funding and resources to support them. (Boston School of Education, 2017, n.p.)

This reference to high school counselors is valuable, as this research shows that the level of support received from high school counselors may predict how students perceive enrollment jargon. Dr. Ardoin also noted that the counselors she interviewed were best informed about schools within an hour of their high school and less informed about colleges further away (Boston School of Education, 2017). Dr. Ardoin makes an argument for the elimination or better explanation of some of the jargon used by colleges in their recruiting efforts in the forthcoming publication, which may be useful for community colleges. In summary, a worthwhile practice

would be to investigate ways to cultivate relationships with high school counselors that brings information to them as opposed to shifting this burden to the often-overtaxed counselors.

Negative stereotypes of community colleges may also be something worth considering when working with high school guidance counselors and families, while paying attention on educating the public to the rigor of programs in addition to clarifying questions about enrollment processes. Tangible practices may include joining counseling advisory boards, participating in events sponsored by intermediate units or other centralized offices, and creating viewbooks and collateral specifically for guidance counselors. In an era of financial limitations, web conferences may also provide opportunities for guidance counselors to participate in seminars offered by community colleges aimed at promoting understanding about procedures, jargon, and admissions timelines.

Social capital in this research also included peer resources within its definition. The research suggests that peer support may predict how a student perceives enrollment terminology. Some research explores the relevance of peer interactions as opposed to family interactions. Marciano's recent work analyzes how and why ten Black and Latina 12th-grade students enrolled in an urban public high school and how they engaged in culturally relevant peer interactions as they prepared for, applied to, and/or enrolled in college (2017). This lateral mentorship, as opposed to a vertical one, provides support to students in terms and contexts that are relatable and less intimidating. She notes that research undertaken to explore the ways in which college preparatory programs assist applicants while preparing for college enrollment often focuses on academic considerations of the programs (Watt et al., 2007). As a result, students who participate in preparatory programs experience limited opportunity to engage with peers as cultural resources supportive of engagement in college-going tasks (Marciano, 2017).

Recommendations from her work include, "Designate time and space for youth to interact with peers of their choosing about issues related to preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college, with adult support available as needed to provide information and respond to student questions" (Marciano, 2017, p. 184). Community colleges should consider how to build strong lateral connections that allow peers to interact with each other, which could include using current college students as mentors, leveraging dual enrollment relationships, creating purposeful preparatory programs, and continuing to research the relationship between lateral mentorship and college enrollment.

Recommendations for Future Research

Chapman and Johnson's 1979 *College Terminology Quiz* invited participants to demonstrate their knowledge of college terminology by correctly matching terms to their definition. While the whole quiz is not available at this time, a redevelopment of the quiz may be valuable for determining whether students can correctly identify academic jargon. Further, it is worth considering how demographic variables, such as first generation status, high school GPA, and exposure to college knowledge activities, may impact how well students score on the quiz.

In the same vein, administering a college terminology quiz to parents and high school guidance counselors may reveal specific areas of strength or weakness, which could guide community colleges on where to direct their efforts while working with families. For example, if financial aid terms are shown to be a weakness, it would be logical prioritize the investment of resources into that area.

Another consideration is for research institutions witnessing an increase in enrollment to determine what strategies work and whether they relate to simplifying the enrollment process. While college enrollment in Pennsylvania may be decreasing, this does not necessarily mean that

all college enrollment, specifically community college enrollment, is also decreasing. Del Mar Community College surpassed the state higher education board's estimated enrollment in credit courses by nearly 16%, which is around 12,000 students, while also increasing non-credit enrollment. Additionally, Lone Star College, Houston set an all-time enrollment record of 85,661 credit students for Fall 2016, which was a 2% increase from the previous year (Smith, 2016). While several factors may have influenced these gains in enrollment, it's reasonable to believe that attention to the admissions and frontloading processes may have played a role and examining the forms as well as the enrollment materials of these institutions may aid to determine the same. Future research that compares the practices of comparable institutions that are experiencing differences in enrollment may reveal the areas that need attention.

Last, a limited amount of literature presents the importance that peer groups can have while navigating the college enrollment process, but little literature has been exclusively dedicated to peer interactions. Choy et al. (2000) found that having friends with college plans was a strong predictor of college enrollment for first generation students. Additionally, Wohn et al. (2013) found peer influence on college aspirations to be strong for students from low-income backgrounds. In both these studies, seeking information regarding the influence that peers have on college enrollment was not the goal of the study but information that was stumbled upon. Based on the research conducted in this dissertation, social capital, including peer assistance, can predict the clarity with which students perceive enrollment processes and jargon. Further, deliberately exploring the role of peers as a specific factor while navigating enrollment may be valuable.

Limitations

The majority of the sample population did not enroll at the institution for which they had completed an admission process. Of the 2,569 applicants, 1,631 actually enrolled at the college they applied to. This disengagement from the enrollment process may have affected the response rate, and the respondents may have been actively screening email communications from the institution knowing that they were not going to attend the college. The initial response rate from the targeted emails was low and warranted the pushing out of the survey tool to public facing places, which required additional screening questions. This study cannot account for the motivations or characteristics of the applicants who dropped out from the enrollment process.

Additionally, only one respondent in the survey indicated a high school GPA below a 2.0, which is out of alignment with the national data that suggested students entering community colleges are more likely to have lower GPAs than students from four-year institutions. Most students responded as having GPAs over 3.0, pointing to a level of academic success that is not always typical of community college students. While some students do "under match" themselves to community colleges, many students enter needing remedial coursework.

This study focused on students who had recently graduated from high school to support the intention of exploring the role that parents, family, and high school guidance staff play in navigating college enrollment jargon. However, difficulties in maneuvering through enrollment forms, letters, and processes are not limited to younger students. This study does not explore how adult learners navigate enrollment jargon, which could be an area for future study.

Also, the two institutions that participated in the research are in Western Pennsylvania, and the experiences of these students may not be reflective of those from other regions. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education implemented standards for career and

college readiness in Pennsylvania public schools in 2014, and the curriculum for this initiative may assist students as they transition to college. However, not every state has implemented these standards. Several states have integrated statewide community college systems, some of which work hand in hand with the k–12 system. For example, California and Nebraska both have community college systems that are centralized and may provide greater consistency in messaging as well as clearer expectations for students entering the system. High-school staff and families in these states may only have to learn one process for enrollment as opposed to a different one for each institution.

Conclusions

Bernstein (1971) suggests that our access to language begins within our families, which is how our families' use of language influences our access to social and academic capital. Children growing up in such homes may be more likely to know what the Electoral College is or the names of various politicians. Bernstein (1971) contended that this restricted code, that is language that is reserved for specific schemas and social circles, can be advantageous to people who are in possession of it. In terms of academia, students who have access to the language used in higher education may have advantages over their peers.

When examining students' social capital, as measured by the amount of assistance they received from family, friends, and high school counselors, a significant relationship between these factors and how students perceive admissions, enrollment, and financial aid terminology emerged. Noting that the interactions that they had with other people, which creates their access to social capital, framed their perceptions may be an indication that they had greater access to restricted code. Additionally, when analyzing the mean scores of the responses to individual academic terms, it's noteworthy that financial aid terms scored the lowest, perhaps indicating

that these terms tend towards a restricted code. Community colleges would benefit from developing the best practices and policies that connect families, high school counselors, and school-aged children with the language as well as the "college knowledge" required to navigate the enrollment process to increase enrollment rates.

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Appendix A

Pilot Study: Face Validity Tool

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Taking note of each bold word indicate *how important that word or phrase is for a student starting college*. The questions are phrased how they would appear to the student when taking the survey, which asks them to related their understanding of the term to their enrollment materials.

Three categories of terms and phrases are provided. Language that falls under the categories of Financial and Academic are drawn from Sonja Ardoin's (2013) study of rural students and academic jargon. The Admissions terms appear commonly in community college catalogs and websites in the areas explaining enrollment.

If there are words you feel have been omitted please enter them in the blank rows provided.

Admissions & application terms:

	Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neither Important or Unimportant	Important	Very Important
When researching the college it was clearly explained that the **admissions application** was the first step in getting started	○	○	○	○	○
I understood after completing the admissions application that an **acceptance letter** would then tell me what my next steps were	○	○	○	○	○
After reading the enrollment materials I understood that **placement testing** helps to match me with English and math courses.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials explained that **student orientation** is an event that can help me prepare for classes.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials explained that a **transcript** is a record of my grades.	○	○	○	○	○

After reading the enrollment paperwork I knew **advanced standing** could relate to college courses someone had already taken.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials clearly explained **limited enrollment** programs may require me to complete an application.	○	○	○	○	○
After I read the enrollment materials I understood that **academic advisement** was a process to help me select my classes.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment steps I knew that **registration** was the step where I made a financial agreement to take the courses I wanted.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials explained to me that **transferring** means taking my completed credits to another school	○	○	○	○	○
I know that **developmental courses** are non college level courses that help me to prepare for college level work after reading the enrollment materials.	○	○	○	○	○

What other terms might a student need to know that are related to the college application?

Academic terms:

	Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neither Important or Unimportant	Important	Very Important
After reading the enrollment information, I understood that **SAT scores** are not required for admission.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read about **AP scores** I understood they may be used for college credit.	○	○	○	○	○
When reading about the college I realized **accreditation** relates to the authority the college has to offer degrees.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials clearly explained how many credits a **full time** student takes.	○	○	○	○	○
After reading the enrollment materials I understand how many credits a **part time** student takes.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment materials it was clear how **credit hours** relate to the amount of time spent in class.	○	○	○	○	○
When reading the enrollment materials I understood that my **major** would direct the types of classes I would take.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials clearly explained that a **certificate** is a short program.	○	○	○	○	○
Liberal arts courses were clearly explained as being related to English, social sciences, and the arts.	○	○	○	○	○
It was clear in the enrollment materials the **general education** credits are a defined set of courses that appear in all associate degree programs.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment materials I understood **prerequisite** courses are courses that come before another course in a series.	○	○	○	○	○

Sections were explained in the enrollment materials as courses that have multiple, individual classes	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials helped me understand that a **syllabus** lists all of the course materials and assignments for a class.	○	○	○	○	○
Semesters were explained in the enrollment materials as the blocks of time in which a set of classes are offered, usually running about 15 weeks.	○	○	○	○	○

What other general academic terms might a student need to know when starting college?

Financial aid terms:

	Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Neither Important or Unimportant	Important	Very Important
When reading the enrollment materials **fees** were clearly explained as costs that are in addition to tuition	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials helped me understand that **tuition** is the cost of courses	○	○	○	○	○
When reading the enrollment paperwork I understood that the **FAFSA** was how I accessed grants and loans.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials clearly explained that **scholarships** are monies I don't have to pay back.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment paperwork helped me understand that **Pell grants** are based on how much money I earn, and that they are monies I don't have to pay back to the federal government.	○	○	○	○	○

When I read the enrollment materials I understood that **Stafford Loans** are funds that I will need to eventually pay back.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials explained that **work study** jobs are based on how much money you are given from your FAFSA.	○	○	○	○	○
PHEAA was explained in the enrollment materials as state based financial aid that I don't need to pay back.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment materials I realized **TRIO** is a program for first generation college students.	○	○	○	○	○

What other financial terms might a student need to know when starting college?

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Appendix B

Split Half Reliability Student Pilot Survey

Instructions

The purpose of this survey is to better understand how familiar applicants are with the terminology that is used in college enrollment materials. In the survey you will find survey questions that are divided into four categories, and a section that captures demographic information. Participation in this survey is confidential, and the survey should take about 10 minutes.

Admissions

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the statements below. "Enrollment materials" refer to items you received in the postal mail and your email when you applied to the college.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
When researching the college it was clearly explained that the **admissions application** was the first step in getting started					
After reading the enrollment materials I understood that **placement testing** helps to match me with English and math courses.					
After I read the enrollment materials I understood that **advisement** was a process to help me select my classes.					
The enrollment materials explained to me that **transferring** means taking my completed credits to another school					
I understood after completing the admissions application that an **acceptance letter** would then tell me what my next steps were					
The enrollment materials explained that a **transcript** is a record of my grades.					
When I read the enrollment steps I knew that **registration** was the step where I made a financial					

agreement to take the courses I wanted.					
I know that **developmental** courses are non college level courses that help me to prepare for college level work after reading the enrollment materials.					

Academic Terms

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the statements below. "Enrollment materials" refer to items you received in the postal mail and your email when you applied to the college.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
After reading the enrollment information, I understood that **SAT** scores are not required					
The enrollment materials clearly explained how many credits a **full time** student takes.					
When reading the enrollment materials I understood that my **major** would direct the types of classes I would take.					
Semesters were explained in the enrollment materials as the blocks of time in which a set of classes are offered, usually running about 15 weeks.					
After reading the enrollment materials I understand how many credits a **part time** student takes.					
When I read the enrollment materials it was clear how **credit hours** relate to the amount of time spent in class.					
When I read the enrollment materials I understood **prerequisite** courses are courses that come before another course in a series.					

Financial terms

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the statements below. "Enrollment materials" refer to items you received in the postal mail and your email when you applied to the college.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The enrollment materials helped me understand that **tuition** is the cost of courses					
The enrollment paperwork helped me understand that **Pell grants** are based on how much money I earn.					
PHEAA was explained in the enrollment materials as state based financial aid that I don't need to pay back.					
When reading the enrollment materials **fees** were clearly explained as costs that are in addition to tuition					
When reading the enrollment paperwork I understood that the **FAFSA** was how I accessed grants and loans.					
When I read the enrollment materials I understood that **Stafford Loans** are funds that I will need to eventually pay back.					

Enrollment experience

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the statements below. "Enrollment materials" refer to items you received in the postal mail and your email when you applied to the college.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My parents helped me apply to college					
May parents helped me during the college enrollment process					
My friends helped me during the college enrollment process					
My high school staff helped me during the college enrollment process					

I found the college enrollment process at this community college confusing					
I found the jargon used in enrollment materials confusing					
The jargon used in enrollment materials impacted my enrollment					

Demographic questions:

These questions are optional. They help to indicate trends in different demographics of students so we can better understand a variety of experiences.

1. Gender
   _____ Male
   _____ Female

2. Age
   _____ 18
   _____ 19
   _____ 20+

3. Ethnicity
   _____White
   _____Hispanic or Latino
   _____Black or African American
   _____Native American or American Indian
   _____Asian / Pacific Islander
   _____ Multi racial
   _____ Prefer not to answer

4. Did your parents graduate from college?
   _____ No, neither parent
   _____ Yes, one parent
   _____ Yes, two parents
   _____ I'm not sure

5. Did you take a placement test when you applied to college?
   _____ Yes
   _____ No

6. If yes, did you place into developmental English? These would be courses that are not college level and prepare you for high level work.
   _____ Yes
   _____ No

_____ I'm not sure

7. What was your high school GPA?
   _____ 3.5-4.0
   _____ 3.0-3.49
   _____ 2.5-2.99
   _____ 2.0-2.49
   _____ Less than a 2.0

Thanks! Your participation is helpful and appreciated.

Appendix C

Survey Tool 1, Direct Emailing

"Enrollment materials" refer to items you received in the postal mail and your email when you applied to the college.

Please indicate to what extent you strongly disagree to strongly agree with each of the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I understood after completing the admissions application that an **acceptance letter** would then tell me what my next steps were.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials explained that a **transcript** is a record of my grades.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment steps I knew that **registration** was the step where I made a financial agreement to take the courses I wanted.	○	○	○	○	○
I know that **developmental courses** are non college level courses that help me to prepare for college level work after reading the enrollment materials.	○	○	○	○	○
When researching the college it was clearly explained that the **admissions application** was the first step in getting started.	○	○	○	○	○
After reading the enrollment materials I understood that **placement testing** helps to match me with English and math courses.	○	○	○	○	○
After I read the enrollment materials I understood that **academic advisement** was a process to help me select my classes.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials explained to me that **transferring** means taking my completed credits to another school.	○	○	○	○	○

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"Enrollment materials" refer to items you received in the postal mail and your email when you applied to the college.

Please indicate to what extent you strongly disagree to strongly agree with each of the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
After reading the enrollment information, I understood that **SAT scores** are not required for admission.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment materials clearly explained how many credits a **full time** student takes.	○	○	○	○	○
Semesters were explained in the enrollment materials as the blocks of time in which a set of classes are offered, usually running about 15 weeks.	○	○	○	○	○
After reading the enrollment materials I understand how many credits a **part time** student takes.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment materials it was clear how **credit hours** relate to the amount of time spent in class.	○	○	○	○	○
When reading the enrollment materials I understood that my **major** would direct the types of classes I would take.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment materials I understood **prerequisite** courses are courses that come before another course in a series.	○	○	○	○	○

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"Enrollment materials" refer to items you received in the postal mail and your email when you applied to the college.

Please indicate to what extent you strongly disagree to strongly agree with each of the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
The enrollment materials helped me understand that **tuition** is the cost of courses.	○	○	○	○	○
The enrollment paperwork helped me understand that **Pell grants** are based on how much money I earn, and that they are monies I don't have to pay back to the federal government.	○	○	○	○	○
PHEAA was explained in the enrollment materials as state based financial aid that I don't need to pay back.	○	○	○	○	○
When reading the enrollment materials **fees** were clearly explained as costs that are in addition to tuition.	○	○	○	○	○
When I read the enrollment materials I understood that **Stafford Loans** are funds that I will need to eventually pay back.	○	○	○	○	○
When reading the enrollment paperwork I understood that the **FAFSA** was how I accessed grants and loans.	○	○	○	○	○

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Thinking about when you started the college admission process, please indicate to what extent you strongly disagree to strongly agree with each of the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My parents helped me to apply to college.	○	○	○	○	○
My parents helped me with the college enrollment process.	○	○	○	○	○
My friends helped me during the college enrollment process.	○	○	○	○	○
My high school staff helped me during the college enrollment process.	○	○	○	○	○
I found the college enrollment process at this community college confusing.	○	○	○	○	○
I found the jargon used in the enrollment materials confusing.	○	○	○	○	○
The jargon used in enrollment materials impacted my enrollment.	○	○	○	○	○

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Which college did you apply to?

- ○ Community College of Allegheny County
- ○ Westmoreland County Community College

Are you taking classes at the college you applied to?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Gender

- ○ Male
- ○ Female

Age

- ○ 18
- ○ 19
- ○ 20+

Ethnicity

- ○ White
- ○ Hispanic or Latino
- ○ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ○ Asian
- ○ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ○ African American
- ○ Multi Racial
- ○ Prefer not to say

Did your parents graduate from college?

- ○ No, neither parent
- ○ Yes, one parent
- ○ Yes, two parents
- ○ I'm not sure

Did you take a placement test when you applied to college?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

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Regarding your placement test(s), did you place into developmental English? This would be courses that are not college level but prepare you for college level work.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No
- ○ I'm not sure

What was your high school GPA?

- ○ 3.5-4.0
- ○ 3.0-3.49
- ○ 2.5-2.99
- ○ 2.0-2.49
- ○ Less then 2.0

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Appendix D

Survey Tool 2, Public Facing

Screening questions:

Please indicate the year you completed high school:

2017 ▼

Was Fall 2017 the first time you applied to this community college?

- Yes
- No

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Appendix E

Ardoin's (2013) College Jargon Words

This list is a compilation of terms used in university admissions and financial aid documents, course catalogs, and viewbooks. These terms/acronyms are not necessarily known by people prior to going to college.

General terms	Community College Junior College Technical College College University (with Colleges and/or Schools) Public (and/or Land-Grant) Private PWI HBCU HSI AANAPI Faculty Staff Alumni
Academic terms	ACT/SAT AP IB Accredited Full-Time Part-Time Credit Hours Major Minor Specialization Certificate Liberal Arts General Education Requirements Degree Audit Degree Requirements Prerequisite Section Drop/Add Open/Closed/Waitlist Syllabus Semester

	Quarter
Financial aid terms	FAFSA Tuition (in-state and out-of-state) Fees Room and Board Scholarships Grants Loans – Subsidized and Unsubsidized Work Study TOPS (other state tuition aid programs) TRIO/Transition Programs

Appendix F

Survey Question and Scale Variable Matrix

Research question	**Questions relevant to research question**	**Name of scale data set**
Question 1: What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used in admissions and recruitment materials?	I understood after completing the admissions application that an acceptance letter would then tell me what my next steps were. The enrollment materials explained that a transcript is a record of my grades. When I read the enrollment steps I knew that registration was the step where I made a financial agreement to take the courses I wanted. I know that developmental courses are non college level courses that help me to prepare for college level work after reading the enrollment materials. When researching the college it was clearly explained that the admissions application was the first step in getting started. After reading the enrollment materials I understood that placement testing helps to match me with English and math courses. After I read the enrollment materials I understood that academic advisement was a process to help me select my classes. The enrollment materials explained to me that transferring means taking	Admissions and enrollment

	my completed credits to another school. After reading the enrollment information, I understood that SAT scores are not required for admission. The enrollment materials clearly explained how many credits a full time student takes. Semesters were explained in the enrollment materials as the blocks of time in which a set of classes are offered, usually running about 15 weeks. After reading the enrollment materials I understand how many credits a part time student takes. When I read the enrollment materials it was clear how credit hours relate to the amount of time spent in class. When reading the enrollment materials I understood that my major would direct the types of classes I would take. When I read the enrollment materials I understood prerequisite courses are courses that come before another course in a series.	
Question 2: What is the perception of community college applicants regarding the terminology used to describe financial aid, and tuition cost.	The enrollment materials helped me understand that tuition is the cost of courses. The enrollment paperwork helped me understand that Pell grants are based on how much money I earn, and that they are monies I don't have to pay back to the federal government.	Financial

	PHEAA was explained in the enrollment materials as state based financial aid that I don't need to pay back. When reading the enrollment materials fees were clearly explained as costs that are in addition to tuition. -When I read the enrollment materials I understood that Stafford Loans are funds that I will need to eventually pay back. When reading the enrollment paperwork I understood that the FAFSA was how I accessed grants and loans.	
Question 4: Does a student's social capital predict whether students viewed the admissions process be difficult while controlling for gender, ethnicity, age, HS GPA, parental education and reading level?	I found the college enrollment process at this community college confusing. I found the jargon used in the enrollment materials confusing. The jargon used in enrollment materials impacted my enrollment.	Difficult
Question 3: Does a student's social capital predict their overall perceptions of the admissions process, while controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age	My parents helped me to apply to college. My parents helped me with the college enrollment process. My friends helped me during the college enrollment process. My high school staff helped me during the college enrollment process.	Social capital