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Influences that Affect First-Generation College Students' College Choice: A Qualitative Inquiry of Student Perceptions

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INFLUENCES THAT AFFECT FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS' COLLEGE

CHOICE: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY OF STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Influences That Affect First-Generation College Students' College Choice:
A Qualitative Inquiry of Student Perceptions

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College choice is the three-stage process of aspiring, searching and choosing to attend college. There are many models pertaining to college choice, however, this study uses the Hossler and Gallagher Model—aspiration, search and choice. This qualitative study explored first-generation college students' perceptions about the influences affecting their college choice process. This study is guided by status attainment and social mobility models that show students want to earn a college degree to gain access to greater status and move up status groups (Blau & Duncan, 1978; Collins, 1994; King 2009). The study describes how habitus, social and cultural capital can be used to gain or lose status in American society (Banks and Esposito, 2009; Nora, 2004). The study found students aspired to have a better life yet faced many barriers that influenced their college choice. To overcome these barriers, the participants activated resources through relationships with other people.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

When I was a high school senior, I wanted to go to college the next fall, but I did not

know where I should I go, how I should go about applying, selecting or choosing a college, or

what I would need to take with me. One spring afternoon, my mother and I sat on the floor of the

living room, surrounded by college view books, piled on the floor with handwritten lists of pros

and cons in our hands, and discussed my options. I needed to find a college that I could afford,

that wasn't too far from home, and offered the degree I wanted.

Although my parents encouraged me to attend college, it was not an expectation to attend,

because they believed I could earn a productive living with or without a degree. My mother began

nursing school, but never finished. She eventually started her own business in direct sales. My

father finished a few college classes, but did not earn a degree. He worked in the construction

field for twenty years until becoming a project manager for a construction company.

Because of my experiences as a first-generation college student, and now a college-

graduate working in higher education, I have developed programs that support the needs of first-

generation college students. As I worked with the students, I yearned to understand their

perception about college choice and what influenced their path to a college education. I sought to

understand the influences of first-generation college students in their college choice process,

which led me to this dissertation topic.

For the purpose of this study, I chose to study a group of first-generation college students

at a small campus of a large research university to explore their perceptions about what influenced

their college choice process. Through this exploration, I add to the understanding of how class

works to produce educational disparities and influence options for educational attainment. This research will provide new insights into the decision-making processes of prospective students and inform higher education recruitment efforts that could provide faculty, staff, and administrators with knowledge about the experiences and options of their potential students.

This chapter begins with an overview of the context of first-generation college student college choice. Then, a discussion about the problem statement, the purpose, research questions, the research approach, the research location, and the researcher's perspective follows. This section concludes with an explanation of the assumptions, the rationale and significance of the study, as well as the definitions of key terms for the conceptual and theoretical framework, which is explained in greater detail in Chapter 2.

Context

Because colleges and universities must increase enrollment to keep pace with budget requirements, there is a need to increase recruitment of students that haven't typically attended college (Holland, 2010; King, 2009). These recruitment efforts have targeted adult learners, veterans, minority students and first-generation college students (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob & Cummings, 2004; London, 1992; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990).

In addition to colleges and universities seeking out first-generation college students, students are now realizing to gain equality in the job market, a college degree is a necessity (Reid & Moore, 2009). First-generation college students may realize that not having a college degree may limit their ability to compete for jobs in this educated economy (McDonough, 1997).

College choice research can improve access to higher education for first-generation college students by demonstrating the need for programs that help students overcome the obstacles they face (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler, Vesper & Schmitt, 1999; Paulsen, 1990).

Understanding first-generation college students' college choice increases the likelihood of implementing programs that will increase retention and persistence (Hossler et al., 1999; King, 2009). Furthermore, improving retention and persistence of first-generation college students will increase the educated workforce, an important component to our American society and economy (Hossler et al., 1999).

First-generation college students tend to have lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students (Bui, 2002; Engle, 2005; Hossler et al., 1999; Reid & Moore, 2009; Saenz et al., 2007). Having lower aspirations may put first-generation college students at a disadvantage before applying to college because they may start the process later than other students, they lack information about deadlines and they have less knowledge about the college choice process which means they may not actually enroll. Because this study focuses on first-generation college students, it is important to define generational status by measuring the mother and father's highest educational attainment (Hossler et al., 1999; Nora, 2004). First-generation college students' parents did not complete a college degree, whereas, continuing generation college students have parents who completed their education (Bui, 2002; Engle, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2009).

Research Study

Problem Statement

Despite the recruitment efforts to reach first-generation college students, students face many obstacles related to completing their college choice process (Hossler et al, 1999; Kinzie et al, 2004; McDonough, 1997). Because of the higher education interest in first-generation college students for potential enrollment, I explored the factors that first-generation college students perceive to influence their college choice decisions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore students' perceptions about the influences affecting their college choice process. This study seeks to understand the experiences of first-generation college students.

Research Questions

To explore the college choice process of first-generation college students, several research questions are addressed:

1) What factors did participants perceive to influence their college choice?

2) To what extent, and in what ways, do students perceive their college choice to be influenced by significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, other family members, or guidance counselors, friends)?

Research Approach

This study, using critical theory as a framework, explores students' perceptions about the influences in their college choice decisions. Critical theory focuses on how injustice shapes people's experiences and understandings of the world, which provides a useful framework for data collection and data analysis (Patton, 2002). Critical theory goes beyond studying a topic, but also attempts to improve the individual's community and to give them a voice (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Patton, 2002). The particular variant of critical theory utilized in this dissertation research is the reproductive theories grounded in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

For the purposes of this study, I conducted three focus groups and 25 interviews of first-generation college students at Penn State Schuylkill. I used a semi-structured focus group format using open-ended questions intended to develop dialogue and conversation within the group. For each focus group, I planned to recruit between 6-9 volunteers to participate in a discussion that

focused on the students' personal experiences and perceptions about their influences. Five students attended the first focus group; eight students participated in the second focus group; and nine students attended the third focus group. At the conclusion of each focus group, participants completed a paper demographic survey to collect information about their family income level, parents' education level, the students' educational goals, hometown, and high school G.P.A.

Following the focus groups, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews. Ten students who participated in focus groups volunteered to participate in an in-depth individual interview to provide a deeper understanding of college choice. I recruited an additional 15 students who would only participate in an in-depth individual interview. To recruit participants, I emailed several staff members at Penn State Schuylkill asking them to distribute flyers and email students to ask for volunteers to be interviewed.

After the completion of the focus groups and the interviews, a professional company transcribed the digitally recorded audio files. All names and identifying information were removed from the transcript. Pseudonyms were created and used during data analysis, reporting, and interpretation. During the data analysis, I examined themes and trends that developed. These themes are discussed in Chapter 4 and 5.

Research location

Penn State Schuylkill.

Understanding the context in which the participants were selected is important to the research. The location provides background information about the students and provides and understanding of the circumstances and experiences of the students' college choice.

Within the working-class communities of Schuylkill County, several opportunities exist for higher education; Temple University offers part-time options for classes at a satellite location

in Pottsville; Alvernia University, located in Reading, Pa., opened a Schuylkill Campus in Cressona primarily for working adults, and Penn State offers classes at Penn State Schuylkill in a more traditional college campus environment.

Penn State Schuylkill is located in a quiet, rural town in eastern Pennsylvania and provides a higher education experience where administrators, faculty and staff generally adhere to the Penn State mission of teaching, research, and service. The campus offers classes taught by faculty, many with terminal degrees and relevant research contributions in their respective fields. Students have the option to study there for two years before transferring to University Park or remain at Penn State Schuylkill to compete one of four bachelor's degree programs—criminal justice, psychology, information science, and business. Although enrollment has fluctuated over the last decade, yearly enrollments have averaged 1,000 students (Penn State University, 2012). The campus offers a faculty/student ratio of 16.5 to 1.

More than 45 percent of Penn State Schuylkill students were in the bottom half of their high school graduating class—compared to just 2% at Penn State's University Park campus (Penn State University, 2012). This may suggest Schuylkill students are less academically prepared and unable to be admitted to other Penn State campuses. The average SAT score for a Penn State Schuylkill student is 990, compared to 1300 at University Park, the largest and oldest campus of Penn State University. Moreover, a majority of the campus's students are first-generation college students (Hillkirk, 2008), providing a potential population of students for this study. Penn State Schuylkill is one of Penn State's most diverse campuses. Forty-three percent of degree-seeking students reported their ethnicity as Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, or African American (Penn State University, 2012).

Located in eastern Pennsylvania, Penn State Schuylkill is located in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, which is comprised of working class communities facing many challenges including an aging population, out-migration, and lack of industry. Schuylkill County has a higher-than-the-state-average rate of firearm related death, suicide, unintentional injury and the maltreatment of children (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2009). Nestled between Interstates 78 and 81, Schuylkill County is only a few hours from major metropolitan areas like Philadelphia, New York City, Baltimore, and Washington D.C., yet I've often heard the area referred to as being in the 'middle of nowhere.' There are few shopping malls, few restaurants, few fitness centers, and similar to many working-class communities, a church and a bar on every corner. Many young people share that they can't wait to get out—to move somewhere where residents perceive better opportunities for employment, recreation and cultural diversity.

Schuylkill County boasts small towns whose coal-mining residents helped stimulate the Industrial Revolution (Schuylkill County Chamber of Commerce, 2009). In 1900, Schuylkill County's population was 200,000. At that time, textile manufacturing and agriculture joined coal mining as important elements of the local economy. Since then, the population has decreased to its present count of about 147,000 (U.S. Census, 2008). As a result of the out-migration and disinvestment in the communities, some of the small towns are facing decaying building facades, broken down sidewalks and decrepit housing conditions. In addition, the unemployment rate in Schuylkill County is 8.8% which is typically higher than the statewide average, currently 7.4% and the cost of living is much lower than in other communities in Pennsylvania (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

The strong industrial history of this county has perhaps led residents to prioritize work over higher education, resulting in low educational attainment compared to other PA counties

(Hanes, 2002). U.S. Census data (2008) shows only 82.6% of Schuylkill County residents have a high school diploma and only 8.6 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. This is compared to the state average where 87% of Pennsylvanians graduated from high school and 26.3% of Pennsylvanians have earned a bachelor's degree.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this study, I developed several assumptions based on my personal and professional experience. First, I assumed that the participants' parents would not be as supportive about a college education as parents who graduated from college because they had not attended college. Next, I believed the college choice was based on many factors and not solely based on cost. In addition, I assumed that relationships with other people would influence the college choice of these students. Finally, I believed that students would value a college education and think it is important to their future.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study was developed by the researcher's interest in discovering ways for colleges and universities to encourage first-generation college students to enroll and be retained. Understanding the college choice process for first-generation college students may increase the likelihood that these students enroll in college, providing them with potential benefits in status and social mobility that a college degree may offer. Increased understanding of the college choice process for first-generation college students has the potential to improve access and attainment of a college education for more students. A college degree affords these students increased opportunities for personal and professional advancement, status attainment and social mobility.

The Researcher

As a graduate of Penn State University, I have worked in higher education specifically developing programs related to enrollment and retention, which fueled my interest in the topic of college choice. In addition, I have been working with first-generation college students for more than a decade through first-year programs, co-curricular development, programming and service learning. I have been a part of retention committees and coordinated new student orientation. I have presented on various topics of student involvement and the first-year experience, as well as instructed courses in leadership development, communication and intercultural community-building. As a white middle-class woman, growing up in a small town in Pennsylvania, I have not been discriminated for my race, gender or class which may have influenced the assumptions that the participants had about me, as well as my understanding about their experiences.

Definitions

The concepts, models and theories associated with college choice and first-generation college students are defined below. In addition, I discuss the concepts of college choice models and the theoretical framework for this study including social capital, cultural capital and habitus, as well as social mobility and status attainment theory. The theories draw from the work of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu.

Models of college choice.

Using the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (Hossler, et al., 1999), college choice can be understood as the three-stage process of aspiring, searching and choosing to attend college. Predisposition, the first stage, is the desire to attend college (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). Search, the second stage, explains the sorting, sifting and discovery process (Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Students search for universities that fit

their list of criteria. Choice, the final stage, is where the student weighs all factors and makes a decision (Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Within the stages of college choice, student characteristics may influence decision-making. Student characteristics are defined as attributes a student develops or was born with including race, gender, income, high school performance, hometown, and social class (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). Institutional characteristics may also influence a student's choice. These include factors about the college or university such as quality, location, size, and marketing efforts (Hossler et al., 1999). In college choice, students are also influenced by external constituents, defined as the people in a student's life who can influence their decision-making, including parents, friends, siblings, and counselors (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997).

Theoretical framework.

The theories of status attainment, social mobility and social reproduction guide the exploration of this study. In this section, I define the concepts of social class using Weber's four levels of social class and Field's definition of status. Then, definitions of social mobility and status attainment are provided. The section concludes with definitions of social capital, cultural capital and habitus used in social reproduction theories.

Weber's (1978) four levels of social class include 1) the working class, 2) the middle class, 3) the white-collar employees, technicians, civil servants, and specialists, and 4) the privileged class. Social class is closely related to social status, an individual's reputation within society, which can be either achieved or ascribed (Field, 2003). Achieved status is gained through the effort of the individual while ascribed status is based on characteristics from birth. Social mobility, upward or downward, is the process of movement or change of an individual's social status throughout the course of his or her lifetime (Hossler et al., 1999). Finally, status attainment

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is the process by which individuals use resources to gain status (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1999).

This study also explores several theoretical concepts including social capital, cultural capital and habitus. Social capital is the investment in social relationships with expected returns in the marketplace (Holland, 2010). Social capital is a result or product of a social relationship. Cultural capital refers to a social relationship in a marketplace that involves cultural knowledge (i.e. education) that can increase status and power (Nora, 2004). Habitus refers to a common set of social perceptions, thoughts and actions developed in response to an individual's environment (Smith, 2007).

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the problem statement, the purpose, research questions, as well as a discussion of the research approach, researcher's perspective and assumptions. In addition, Chapter 1 provided an overview of the context and background information about Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania and Penn State Schuylkill. Finally, this chapter concluded with a discussion about the rationale, the significance and the definitions of key terms for the models of college choice and the proposed theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review

To explore the college choice of first-generation college students at Penn State Schuylkill, two research questions were addressed. What factors did participants perceive to influence their college choice? To what extent, and in what ways, did students perceive their college choice to be influenced by significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, other family members, guidance counselors, friends)? Because of the research questions, this literature review explores several theories and concepts associated with college choice and first-generation college students. The literature review is divided into several sections. First, I explain the prevalent models of college choice. Next, using the Hossler & Gallagher Model, I discuss relevant empirical research about college choice related to first-generation college students. Finally, I provide the theoretical framework for the study using social mobility, status attainment and the concepts of social and cultural capital and habitus.

Conceptual Models

The first college choice models were developed more than 20 years ago and have been used to increase understanding of the decision-making process for students. This section discusses the Chapman model, the Hansen and Litten model and the Hossler and Gallagher model as tools to understand college choice.

Chapman Model of College Choice

Providing a foundation for college choice research, Chapman (1981) established a causal model of college choice to examine the individual's characteristics--- socioeconomic status, aptitude, high school performance and educational expectation as they relate to three categories of

external influences--- significant people, characteristics of the institution and the institution's marketing and communication efforts.

Although it does not account for how the influences and interactions of these characteristics and external influences might change over time, this model was one of the first to attempt to explain the college choice process and it was used by many scholars to further the discussion and research on this topic (Ceja, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Because it does not address the stages of college choices or the timeframes in which a student may make decisions, Chapman's (1981) model is a static model suited for quantitative analysis, but offers limited applicability to a qualitative study concerned with process. After researching the Chapman model, I continued to search for a model that may be more relevant, one that provided the potential for examining the timing of choices. To address the issue of timeframe, Hansen and Litten established a much more complex model.

Hansen and Litten Model of College Choice

Hansen and Litten's model, developed in 1982, describes college choice as a continuing process with five steps (Hossler et al., 1999). The first step is deciding to attend college; the second step is developing a set of colleges to consider; the third step is gathering information. The fourth step in this model is applying and the final step is enrolling at a college or university. Hansen and Litten identified many variables that affect college choice including background characteristics, such as parental income and education, personal characteristics, such as academic ability and self-image, high school experiences, and college characteristics, such as cost, size, programs, and timeliness responding to student questions (Hossler et al., 1999). In Figure 1, I developed a graphic depiction of the Hansen and Litten Model which illustrates the five steps in linear order beginning with college aspirations. Each step filters to the next, concluding with the

process of enrolling. I illustrated Figure 1 based on the information discussed by Hossler et al. (1999).
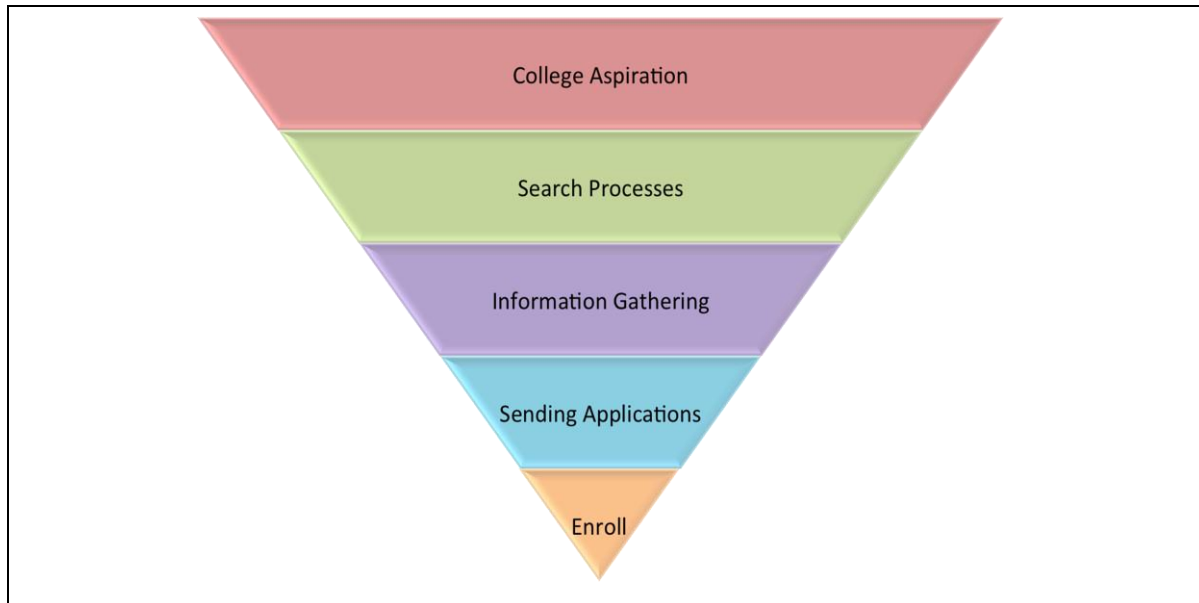
Figure 1

Hansen and Litten Model Illustration

Despite its complexity, this model elaborates on the various possible environmental influences including characteristics about the student, the high school, personal attributes, family and media influences, characteristics of and actions by the college, and policies affecting higher education attainment (Hossler et al., 1999). Based on this model, college choice is often described as a funnel (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). This depiction emphasizes the importance of understanding the beginning stages of the decision-making process (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990).

Although comprehensive, this model's list of factors can be overwhelming when trying to apply to college choice. Because of the number of variables, I found this model too complicated for this qualitative study. This type of model would be best suited for a large-scale quantitative

study. As I continued my review of college choice research, I searched for a model that would be both practical and applicable.

Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice

The Hossler and Gallagher Model is one of today's most popular models in college choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Ceja, 2006; Teranishi et al., 2004). This model explains college choice using a conceptual framework consisting of just three stages: predisposition, search and choice (Hossler et al., 1999). The first stage, predisposition, involves the formation of educational aspirations; the second stage, search, includes gathering material and examination information; the final stage, choice, involves the evaluation of alternatives to choose a college selection for enrollment (Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990).

Although many researchers utilize different terms for the concepts of predisposition, search and choice, this model continues to provide a framework in much of the research reviewed. Table 1 depicts the varying terms used to describe the stages in the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice as well as the name of the researcher and the year the research was conducted.

Table 1

Concepts used to explain Hossler & Gallagher Model of College Choice

Hossler & Gallagher Stage	Other term used	Researcher	Year
	College Aspiration	Paulsen	1990
Predisposition	Preference	Jackson	1982
	Application	Paulsen	1990
Search	Exclusion	Jackson	1982
	Attendance	Paulsen	1990
Choice	Evaluation	Jackson	1982

Table 1 shows that predisposition has been called college aspiration or preference in other research (Jackson, 1982; Paulsen, 1990). The table shows that the search phase has been called

application or exclusion and the search phase has been called attendance or evaluation in other literature (Jackson, 1982; Paulsen, 1990).

The benefit of the Hossler and Gallagher model is that it presents college choice as an ongoing process rather than a decision made at one-point in time (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler et al., 1999). Because this model is the most widely accepted model for college choice research and fits best for a study with a population of first-generation college students, it guides the framework and the reporting of findings in this study. The following section explains each stage and the types of factors that influence a student in that stage. Following this description of each stage, I discuss the relevant empirical research related to that stage. The discussion begins with predisposition, followed by a description of the search stage, and concludes with an explanation of the choice stage.

Predisposition

Past research has been criticized for focusing on individual factors of college choice, such as family attributes, academic achievement and the high school experience, as opposed to examining predisposition as an emerging process that occurs over time (Paulsen, 1990). Literature about predisposition lacks a comprehensive view of factors that influence college choice. The predisposition stage includes formation of college aspiration and the desire to advance from secondary education to higher education but the research does not fully explain how these factors are integrated (Paulsen, 1990; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

In the predisposition stage, parental encouragement becomes an integral factor (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; Sewell and Shah, 1968). Socioeconomic status and academic ability are also factors in this stage (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; London, 1992; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). During the predisposition stage, a student's

socioeconomic status, parents and family influence his or her potential college choice. In addition, during predisposition, the student's culture and his or her academic preparation are influences. The following section will describe the empirical research related to the predisposition stage of college choice.

Socioeconomic status.

Socioeconomic status, based on occupation, education, wealth, and income, continues to be an influential factor in college choice (Hossler et al., 1999; Kinzie et al., 2004; McDonough, 1997; Nagaoka, Roderick & Coco, 2009; Teranishi and Behringer, 2008). First-generation college students are more likely to be from lower socioeconomic status and as a result, face many obstacles in college degree attainment (Bui, 2002; Nagaoka et al., 2009). Students with lower socioeconomic status (low-income families) are more likely to have parents who lack the knowledge, information, and experience to help their children navigate the college choice process. These students are also more likely to be negatively affected by a lack of support from guidance counselors, parents, families and others (Bui, 2002; Teranishi & Behringer, 2008).

In addition to challenges related to knowledge and support, first-generation college students report they were pursuing a college degree to help their family financially after college and worry about applying for and receiving financial aid to subsidize the cost of higher education (Bui, 2002). These students have added stress because they are not only going to college to earn a degree, but also are expected to contribute to the family's financial stability (Bui, 2002; King, 2010). Parents may expect the student to contribute financially to the family's expenses, which may mean they want or need to the child to work full-time after high school.

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Role of parents and family.

Access to college is closely related to the level of education by the parents (London, 1992; Choy et al., 2000). The opportunities for educational and career advancement are limited by an individual's status as the result of his or her family (Blau & Duncan, 1978). Having parents who did not attend college indicates the likelihood of not going to college (Choy, Horn, Nunez and Chen, 2000). Again, these challenges provide obstacles to be overcome for first-generation college students. First-generation college students face obstacles in knowledge and resources, but for many students, there is a great deal of encouragement from their parents.

Despite the parents' lack of a college degree, parental encouragement is the single most important factor in predicting educational plans (Ceja, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Parents, who lack the knowledge to help navigate the college choice process, nonetheless provide encouragement to their children to pursue an education (Ceja, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999). Specifically, Saenz et al. (2007) found that 47 percent of first-generation students surveyed reported a very important reason for going to college was because their parents wanted them to go—compared to 43 percent of continuing-generation students.

Despite the importance of support in a student's degree attainment, not every student receives outright encouragement from parents. Although they may not specifically discourage college attendance, some parents do not encourage their children, often because they are unaware of the process of college choice. Parents without degrees are less likely to attend information sessions, seek out financial aid information, or visit colleges (Engle, 2007). The parents of first-generation college students may have demanding work schedules with limited flexibility so it is difficult to be involved in the student's academic life (Engle, 2007; McDonough, 1999).

Parents who did not attend college often worry that they cannot relate to their children because the parents have limited knowledge about the college environment (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). In addition, relatives sometimes become critical of students' choices because they feel the students are changing from the family—or not fulfilling the family responsibilities (Engle, 2007). Going to college involves a major change in family patterns and life. By being the first to attend, they are breaking from family tradition. Although many people may see college attendance as positive, this breaking of tradition can be difficult.

Role of culture.

First-generation college students often face a disconnection between their culture and the culture of a college campus (Engle, 2007; McDonough, 1997). First-generation students are often stuck between two views of the world and can feel isolated in both communities (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; Hossler et al., 1999). The students may describe the cultures as being from different worlds (Engle, 2007). Students may experience conflict between the home and college communities because the values of their home life and the values of the collegiate environment may be different (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). Our American higher education system values individual success and independence, while many of the students are again disconnected because their cultures focus on cooperative communities that value unity (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007; McDonough, 1997). These circumstances can create stress, anxiety and difficulties in the college environment, which decreases students' likelihood of earning a degree.

Academic preparation for first-generation students.

 In addition to limited knowledge about college applications, deadlines and processes, first-generation college students often lack the rigorous academic preparation needed to be successful in college (Choy et al., 2000; Engle, 2007; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Reid & Moore,

2009). McCarron and Inkelas (2006) found first-generation college students have lower GPAs and score lower on standardized tests. These students are less likely to have access to the most rigorous curricula, especially in math (Choy et al., 2000; Engle, 2007; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). First-generation students spent less time studying in high school, have lower academic self-confidence, and less proficient math and writing skills than continuing generation students (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). Engle (2007) found that nearly half of the first-generation students surveyed were not qualified for admission to college.

Search

The search phase is defined as the collection and review of information necessary to develop students' potential list of colleges (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Paulsen, 1990; Hossler et al., 1999). During the search stage, individuals seek out admissions materials, brochures and viewbooks (McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). This is the stage that a choice-set, the list of colleges a student may be interested in, is developed (Hossler et al., 1999). Counselors, friends and family can have influence in helping students create this list of colleges (Kinzie et al., 2004). Students are less concerned with financial factors during this stage; it seems that financial concerns enter the process at a later time in the decision-making process (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). The fewest number of studies have been done about this stage of the college choice model (Paulsen, 1990).

Knowledge.

First-generation college students lack knowledge regarding college applications and financial aid (Engle, 2007; Reid & Moore, 2009; Saenz et al., 2007). Although parental encouragement remains high for first-generation college students, the expectation to attain a college degree is low. Engle (2007) found only 53% of first-generation college students expected

to earn a bachelor's degree compared to 90% of students whose parents earned a college degree. Similarly, McDonough (1997) found that students from poor families feel less entitled to future education. First-generation college students' expectations may be lower because they lack knowledge about college.

Role of guidance counselor.

Guidance counselors have become part of an interesting dichotomy; they could have a great deal of influence in the student's choice, however the guidance counselors themselves try to minimize their role (Rosenbaum, Miller & Krei, 1996; Teranishi & Behringer, 2008). Guidance counselors do not want to discourage students, diminish self-esteem, or incur the anger of parents about students' future plans, which may limit the guidance the counselor actually provides (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). They leave advising to parents, even if the parents are not equipped with adequate information about the process (Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

Because guidance counselors are minimizing their roles, students may be entering college with a severe lack of awareness of college choices, deadlines, application processes and financial preparation (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). Many students do not believe they receive adequate help from guidance counselors (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; Reid & Moore, 2008; Rosenbaum et al., 1996). Often, students with average grades and average SAT scores are navigating the college choice process alone—with parents who did not attend or graduate from college themselves. The students needing guidance the most, including the economically- disadvantaged students from school districts in rural areas, are least likely to receive assistance from the guidance counselors (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987). The findings in existing literature were supported by the findings in the pilot study about the role of guidance counselors I conducted during my doctoral coursework.

During the final phase of college choice, the student actually chooses to enroll. In this stage, the institutional factors become an influence; at this point, the student-institution fit becomes an influence.

Choice

The final stage, choice, is often defined as applying to college and enrolling in the selected institution (Hossler et al., 1999). This is the stage in which universities must establish student-institution fit, or the congruence between its own characteristics and the characteristics of potential students (Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Most research about the choice stage focused on specific institutions for practical application to improve enrollment, recruitment and marketing for that specific institution (Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Because this research was often tailored towards measuring marketing impact, it does not provide broad applicability (Hossler et. al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990).

Institution-fit.

As discussed previously, first-generation college students may encounter cultures at colleges to be in conflict with the cultures of their family and neighborhood (Weis, 1992). Students expressed concerns they would not be accepted by either their communities after going to college or accepted by the collegiate environment (McDonough, 1997; Weis, 1992). First-generation students often view the institutional environment as an important characteristic of college choice because they may feel out of place on college campuses (Kinzie et al., 2004).

Summary

In conclusion, this section discussed the relevant empirical research related to each stage of the Hossler and Gallagher model of college choice. Within the college choice framework, several key concepts were examined including socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and

the influences of guidance counselors, parents, and community. These factors affect the social and cultural capital and are framed by the habitus of the first-generation college students, which in turn affects the student's status attainment and social mobility. Depending on the level of social and cultural capital of a first-generation student when it comes to navigating the field of education, they may be at-risk for not persisting to graduation at the various higher education institutions.

Theoretical Framework

In the previous section, I reviewed empirical research, which looked at the specific influences of college choice, such as students' characteristics and environmental elements. This section moves from the review of empirical research to a discussion about the theoretical frameworks, which seek to locate these influences within models of deep structural processes. The purpose of this section is to deepen our understanding of exactly how and why socioeconomic status, or class, affects college choice.

Many researchers have developed and applied diverse frameworks, methods, and perspectives for examining college choice using models of economics and sociology including status-attainment models, the concept of social mobility, and social reproduction theories (Hossler et. al., 1999; McDonough, 1997, Paulsen & St. John, 2002). By reviewing the literature about first-generation college students and the literature about college choice, the concepts of reproduction theorists, including social and cultural capital and habitus, surfaced as important to understanding the decisions these students were making. As previously stated, limited social and cultural capital can lead to reduced social mobility and lower status attainment. In the next section, I discuss the status attainment and social mobility models and the concepts of habitus,

social and cultural capital to understand the processes at work for a first-generation college student in the college choice decision.

Status Attainment

Status attainment models explain that a student's choices and opportunities have been limited since the time of their birth (Hossler et al., 1999). I use status attainment theory to show how a college education can advance the students' status. Lin (1999, p. 467) explains that status attainment is a "process by which individuals mobilize and invest resources for returns in socioeconomic status." According to Weber (1978), status is defined as honor or prestige attached to an individual's position in society. For Weber, status was not defined solely by economic wealth. In contrast, Weber defines class as an individual's economic position. For this study, I use the term class to represent socioeconomic status, which incorporates income and wealth in combination with an individual's occupation and education.

Although it is very difficult for people to change their status based on where they are from, college degree attainment is seen as an acceptable way to improve the likelihood of increased status. Status attainment models assert that every life decision an individual makes influences future opportunities related to jobs, careers, or education, which in turn could create or minimize capital-- social, economic or cultural (Lin, 1999; Sewell & Hauser, 1972; Sewell & Shah, 1967). In addition, Sewell and Hauser (1972) showed that educational attainment has a large direct effect on occupational status. Researchers have used status-attainment models to explain how a student's desire to attend college is influenced by many factors of college choice including socioeconomic status, academic ability, high school, gender, and the views of significant others (Hossler et al., 1999; Kinzie et al., 2004).

Social Mobility

Social mobility models help to explain why students want to get better jobs to move to a higher social class. A college education is viewed as a key to achieving social mobility in American society and first-generation college students are at a substantial disadvantage in earning a college degree (Engle, 2007; Hossler et al., 1999). I use the concept of social mobility to understand the motivations for a student to choose to apply, enroll and attend college.

As discussed previously in the section about student-institution fit, first-generation college students face obstacles related to social mobility and class structures. Through culture, these class positions provide powerful influence on the way people think and behave (Collins, 1994; McDonough, 1997). For many first-generation college students, the educational environment is much different than the home environment. For first-generation college students, it may be difficult to identify with both their educational environment and with their communities (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). First-generation college students have two sets of status symbols: one set of status symbols for the community in which they grew up and one set of status symbols for the collegiate environment. Status symbols, including types of music, car, technology, and travel, are belongings or goods that denote status in one's society. Individuals who take on a group's culture and symbols become the insiders. If one dismisses the culture or symbols, one risks being removed, rejected or questioned.

With education, students may find themselves moving up to another social group (Bui, 2002; Hossler et al., 1999; London, 1992; McDonough, 1997). An individual's social class is largely influenced by how much education he acquires (Collins, 1994; McDonough, 1997). For first-generation college students, achieving a college degree can provide potential in career advancement and income, which may lead to a change in status. By changing statuses, a student

may become an outsider in the neighborhood in which they grew up which can cause stress and anxiety and tension in the family relationships.

Despite their desire for social mobility, it can be very difficult for students to move to a higher social class. Blau and Duncan (1978) state that the main factor that determines a man's chance of upward mobility is the level at which he starts. They add that an individual's social origins influence his or her chance of occupational achievement. Insight about socioeconomic status and social mobility can be seen with the following quote by Mollie Orshansky found in Blau and Duncan's *American Occupational Structure* (1978, p. 164), "It would be one thing if poverty hit at random with no group singled out. It's another thing to realize that some groups seem destined to poverty from birth—by color or by economic status or occupation of their parents." This quote sets the stage for exploring college choice and provides understanding about the issues that first-generation students face because it explains the inequality of poverty, related to class found within our society.

Social Reproduction

Social reproduction concepts originate from Pierre Bourdieu who theorized that systems and processes were established to reproduce existing class structures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Grusky & Szelenyi, 2003; Kingston, Hubbard, Lapp, Schroeder, & Wilson, 2003; Robbins, 2006). For example, the U.S. economic system allowed for the natural emergence of class structures (Bond, 1981). Many social reproduction theories analyze class systems that explain inequalities in educational stratification (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Tzanakis, 2011). Bourdieu purported that schools set up standards that favor the upper and middle class children, which reproduce class status (Kingston et al., 2003). Bourdieu believed that to maintain their class status, the upper class implemented processes to reproduce inequality evident in the educational system. For example,

through their study about financial constraints on college choice, Paulsen and St. John (2002) used reproduction theory to explain that class-based enrollment patterns are related to students' expectations and perceptions. Similarly, Lareau and Norvat (1999, p. 37) concluded that 'Bordieu's insight on educational inequality is that students with more valuable social and cultural capital earn better grades than those with less valuable social and cultural capital'. Bourdieu's theories suggest how educational inequalities continue to reproduce current class structures (Lareau & Norvat, 1999; Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

In this section, I present an overview of the model developed by Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For Bourdieu, all behavior is situated within a field, where individual have different forms of capital which can be utilized to reach their goals. Bourdieu explains that all individuals have social or cultural capital to activate or invest in a field, but not all social or cultural capital has the same value within the field. The value of the individual's capital will be influenced by his or her habitus. For this study, I will discuss several of the concepts related to Bourdieu's social reproduction theories including habitus, cultural capital and social capital. The next section discusses each concept as it relates to college choice.

Habitus

A concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu, habitus is a combination of experiences and beliefs about the world developed within of the individual's environment (Hillier & Rooksby, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2007). As Reay (2004, p. 432) explains,habitus is 'embodied, not only mental attitudes and dispositions, but standing, speaking, walking, as well as feeling and thinking.' This means that habitus is not only encompassed in an individual's thoughts and attitudes, but also is personified in an individual's life and bodily way of being in the world.

Habitus can explain differences in educational attainment in social classes (Maton, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2003). For this study, I use the concept of habitus to explore the students' memories of wanting to go to college, their families' attitudes toward college and how their high school experience influenced their expectations and attitudes about going to college. Habitus captures a student's understanding of the world based on his or her early childhood experiences (Reay, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McDonough, 1997) and informs how individuals act in ways congruent with their class culture (Reay, 2004). This concept has been described as the rules of the game, or the skills for playing the game (Reay, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McDonough, 1999) and can be used for understanding how first-generation college students may face obstacles getting into college, feel uncomfortable on a college campus, or do not think they can apply to college (Reay, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Habitus explains why disadvantaged students may believe they are inferior to students of upper or middle class statuses. Habitus also explains why aspirations may be lower for working class youth than their upper or middle class counterparts. Or as Maton (2008, p. 2) explains, why "working class kids get working class jobs."

This concept is not applied alone Bourdieu and other researchers combine habitus with capital to understand an individual's attainment (Maton, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Within social reproduction theories, habitus is closely tied to cultural capital and social capital. Cultural and social capital may transmit different values in different situations depending on an individual's habitus (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Reay, 2004).

Cultural Capital

Economic inequality can create differential forms of cultural and social capital among social classes, which can lead to the exclusion of disadvantaged groups in society (Flora & Flora,

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2008; Smith, 2007). Cultural capital represents the knowledge a student has to navigate the processes involved in college choice. Cultural capital is not fixed or determined. In this study I employ the concept of cultural capital to understand how high school experiences yielded information and resources that students activated in the college choice process.

Cultural capital is defined as the knowledge that upper and middle class families share with their children as means for maintaining class status (Dalmage, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Cultural capital is shown through an individual's language, vocabulary, taste in music, and arts (Dalmage, 2008; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Although cultural capital does not have monetary value, a college degree is treated as a status symbol in our society (Reay, 2004; McDonough, 1997; Smith, 2007). McDonough (1997) explains that upper and middle class families promote earning a college degree to ensure economic security for future generations. For college choice, cultural capital could be an individual's parent's knowledge of admissions procedures. Cultural capital includes the student's knowledge and academic preparation such as the students' perception and responses about how prepared they felt to go to college, what options they explored and what information they had to make their decisions.

Unlike students from higher classes who often assume and expect they will attend college; the expectations are not the same for their lower socioeconomic classmates (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000). The entitlement, expectation and mobilization of resources of upper and middle class students and families are strong illustrations of cultural capital. The dominant class, or ruling class, finds great value in transferring its cultural capital to economic capital (McDonough, 1997). Even if the upper or middle class parents cannot provide financial support, the parents' greater cultural capital influences the children to earn their degrees. Members of the

upper and middle class youth may have access to knowledge about the processes, policies and paperwork for college choice by contacting friends, family or colleagues that may work in college administration that the lower class youth can't mobilize or activate.

Social Capital

Bourdieu's concept of social capital emphasizes the importance of relationships to explain organizational structures and behaviors within society (Field, 2003; Lin, 1999). Examples of social capital are an individual's network of friends, colleagues, and neighbors. The idea of 'who you know' to help you reach your goals becomes evident in social capital discussions. Students with higher social capital are more likely to 'know' someone with connections to someone with information about the college admissions process than those who do not have a network of adults who have attended college—potentially providing an advantage. Social capital represents the relationships students have with other people that help them navigate the stages of college choice. To explore social capital's role in college choice, I focus on the relationships the students had with parents, other family members and guidance counselors to seek support, help and information about college choice.

Social capital is defined as the opportunities that result from an individual's relationships (Ceja, 2006; Field, 2003; Lin, 1999). Individuals acquire social capital through education, which increases the student's opportunity for improved social standing (Collins, 1994). The social capital acquired provides the potential for increased networking, an important component in job searches and career advancement.

Social capital is a resource an individual gains from networking or knowing other people in his or her community. These networks can connect our society together (Field, 2003). In terms of clichés, social capital can be understood by the saying, "it's all about who you know." Many

people believe social capital helps students get into college, get jobs, or internships. Social capital involves trust, norms and networks that work to improve efficiency while encouraging upward mobility (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Field, 2003). Social capital is important in enhancing status attainment (Lin, 1992).

Social capital is currency for students to make decisions and is available outside the home so it is not dependent on the parents' status (Blua & Duncan, 1978; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). Social capital, through strong social and academic support networks, is important to the transition from high school to college—especially for first-generation college students (Bui, 2002; Reid & Moore, 2009). There must be an ongoing process of information sharing about the college search and enrollment for students and their families for families and prospective students to navigate the college choice process (Reid & Moore, 2009).

Students with more educated parents have an advantage in navigating the college choice process because they have greater social capital. For example, college educated parents may know someone who works in the college's administration who they can call with a problem. First-generation college students may have less social capital than students whose parents are better connected in terms of knowledge, awareness, and information (Saenz et al., 2007). Networks with limited resources, like potentially those of the first-generation college student, who are not as likely to have a network of college graduates, will yield poor social capital in the field of education (Hossler et al., 1999; Lin, 1999; McDonough, 1997). Disadvantaged students must acquire resources beyond their usual social circles to gain better status. In this study, social capital will be examined by discussing the relationships with family, friends and community, the relationship with the guidance counselor and the relationship with the university.

Conceptual Model Illustration

To illustrate the concepts of social and cultural capital and habitus, I created the following graphic as a model of college choice for the first-generation college student. For clarity, I use the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice to show the process of college choice decision-making. Figure 2 shows the concepts: habitus, social capital, and cultural capital. I assert that cultural capital is influenced by academic preparation and knowledge. Similarly, social capital is influenced by the student's relationships with other people, while habitus is influenced by socioeconomic status and parent's education. In addition, status attainment and social mobility theory frame this study. Status attainment and social mobility theory state that individuals seek ways of mobilize capital to create gains in status and ultimately move status groups. The conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 2.

Conceptual Model of First Generation College Choice
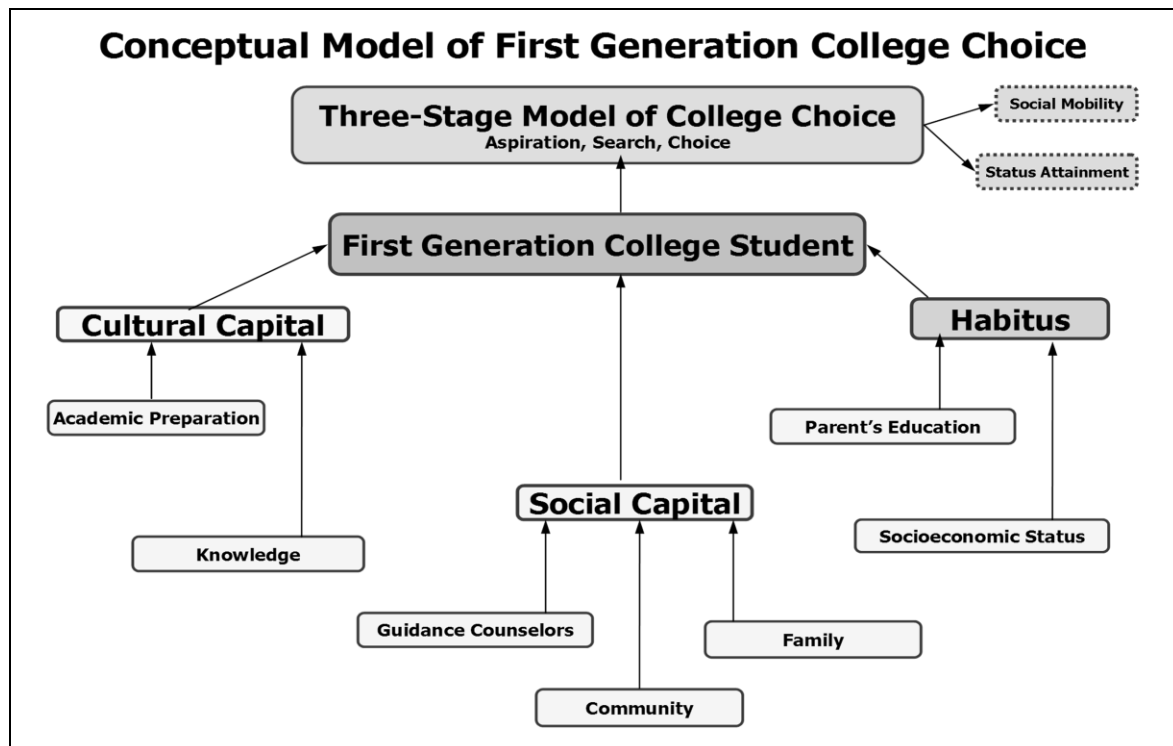
Figure 2

Conceptual Model

Figure 2 shows cultural capital, social capital and habitus influencing the first-generation college student through the stages of college choice. Following data analysis and interpretation, to accurately reflect the findings of this study, Figure 2, the conceptual model, was adapted. The adapted model can be found in Chapter 5, Figure 4.

Summary

College choice models describe a very complicated process influenced by multiple factors. The theoretical frameworks for college choice are diverse, originating from both economics and sociology. The social contexts of college choice are integral because the research has shown legitimate concerns facing first-generation college students. The lack of information, knowledge and the concern of 'fitting in' could put a first-generation student at a severe disadvantage before ever setting foot on a college campus.

Status attainment and social mobility models, in conjunction with the concepts of social reproduction theory-- social and cultural capital and habitus provide the most insight to studying first-generation college students because the models depict the aspirations that students have to achieve greater status and become socially mobile. The concepts of social capital, cultural capital and habitus help us understand the resources and barriers that students face through the college choice process.

Although I believe that upward mobility is not the sole motivation for students in pursuing a higher education, social mobility and status attainment are important factors in understanding inequality and access in education. In the context of social mobility and status attainment, my study attempts to fill in the gaps in the research by establishing a theoretical framework to explore how the students overcome barriers and utilize resources during college choice. Previous research has been criticized for being more practical than theoretical (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990).

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the influences of first-generation college students in their college choice process. To explore the college choice of first-generation college students, two research questions were addressed:

1. What factors did participants perceive to influence their college choice?

2. To what extent, and in what ways, do students perceive their college choice to be influenced by significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, other family members, guidance counselors, friends)?

This chapter is organized in several sections. First, I explain the two pilot studies that guided this research. I also discuss research participants, the research design, the data collection methods and the data analysis. Also, I address the ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with the study's limitations and a chapter summary.

Pilot study

I conducted two pilot studies about college choice. The first study, conducted in the fall of 2006 for the qualitative research class in my doctoral program, focused on first-generation college students and how they made their college choice decisions. To collect the information, I conducted two focus groups of first-generation students and an interview of a student staff member in the admissions office. I found that first-generation students' parents had limited experience and information about the college choice process. Because of the findings related to the limited knowledge of parents, I wanted to conduct future research about how the students' guidance counselors helped in the college choice process. Also, I wanted to examine how the

guidance counselors felt about their role and importance in the college choice process. This led me to conduct an additional pilot study about the role of guidance counselors.

I conducted a second study focusing on commuter students and college choice during my doctoral program field experience course. I conducted three focus groups of students at Penn State Schuylkill and three interviews of guidance counselors from high schools located less than 20 miles from Penn State Schuylkill. I chose to study commuter students because I felt this population needed to be better understood because most research in higher education at the time was conducted using residential students, where the findings are not necessary generalizable to commuter students.

In this small qualitative study, I found that guidance counselors minimize their role because they feel they lack the time to really help students. The guidance counselors also shared that they would like to have more time to devote to college choice, but they had to focus on paperwork and crisis intervention programming. They also added that they worry that parents will blame them for not encouraging their students to attend college. These guidance counselors did not take on the role of gatekeeper as would be suggested by Bourdieu, but more the role of a librarian, housing the information, but not wanting to influence the students' decision making about college choice.

During the focus groups, the students shared they felt neglected by guidance counselors and often discouraged by their lack of attention. The students stated that they felt supported from friends and families, but they felt that they made their choices independently. The demographic survey revealed that out of 18 students, 11 students reported an annual household income of less than $49,999, showing that more than half of the students who participated in the pilot studies

were of lower socio-economic status. The pilot studies have helped guide the development of this research study.

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative data, found in quotations, observations and documents, describes and explores a phenomenon in great detail as it occurs in real world settings (Patton, 2002). Qualitative methods allow researchers to study issues with great detail (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Patton, 2002). In using open-ended interviews, the students' perception can be understood in the students' own words. Qualitative research is inductive and lends itself to discovery, inquiry, and exploration (Patton, 2002). Individuals draw meaning from events and experiences, which is paramount to this research study (Kraus, 2005).

This study explored first-generation college students' experiences using qualitative approach to provide "rich insight into human behavior" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106). Because first-generation college students face many obstacles, I wanted to understand their experiences in their voice—providing support for the use of qualitative methods.

The ontological perspective for this study lends itself to qualitative inquiry. I believe that the construction of reality is socially based on the experiences of the individuals. Qualitative methodology assumes that there is not one true reality, but realities based on the perceptions of the individuals (Kraus, 2005). This study uses a subjectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) because I interacted with the participants to understand their story. Because the purpose of the study is to explore and understand the experiences of first-generation college students, it is set in the constructivism framework.

Overview of Research Design

The following list summarizes the steps employed to implement this research. Following this list is a more in-depth explanation of these steps.

1. Prior to data collection, a literature review was conducted. The literature review examined the empirical research about college choice, first-generation college students, and social and cultural capital and college choice.

2. After the dissertation proposal was approved, the researcher received IRB approval to proceed with the research. The IRB process involved outlining all procedures and methods to conduct the study with strict compliance to the standards of treatment of human participants including confidentiality and informed consent. IRB approval was received at both institutions; IUP, where I am enrolled as a doctoral student and Penn State, where the study was conducted.

3. Potential participants were solicited by distributing flyers on campus and a mass email from Student Affairs, Learning Center, Athletics and the Registrar's Office. If students were interested, they contacted the researcher to set up the time of the focus group. Three focus groups were scheduled.

4. Prior to the start of the focus group, the participants completed a demographic survey about their GPA, SAT scores, hometown, parent's education, income levels, gender, and race.

5. Following the three focus groups, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with students at Penn State Schuylkill.

6. Focus group data was transcribed and responses were analyzed.

7. Interviews were conducted with 25 students at Penn State Schuylkill.

8. Interview data responses were transcribed and analyzed.

Research Participants

    Sampling criteria.

Students at Penn State Schuylkill, a small campus of a major research university, were eligible to participate. Penn State Schuylkill was selected for the sampling because of its large population of first-generation students (Hillkirk, 2008). The criteria for selection of participants were:

- All participants were students at Penn State Schuylkill at the time the study was conducted.

- All participants were self-reported first-generation college students. This is defined as parents that did not earn a college degree.

- All participants were at least 18 years old.

Although all the participants were students at Penn State Schuylkill, the participants were not homogeneous in terms of gender, sex, socioeconomic status, academic preparation and program, and hometown. The participants were from various geographic locations and represented diverse racial backgrounds, household incomes and high school G.P.A. The students reported as first-generation college students, and identified as students whose parents did not graduate from college. All participants were at least 18 years of age.

I conducted three focus groups and 25 individual interviews. The first focus group had 5 students, the second focus group had 8 students, and the third focus group had 9 students. Of the 22 students that participated in the focus groups, 10 participated in individual interviews. I then recruited an additional 15 students to participate in individual interviews. In total, thirty-seven students participated in this research study.

Rationale for purposeful sampling.

After receiving IRB approval, purposeful snowball sampling was implemented. This type of sampling provides the information-rich cases that provide 'in-depth understanding of the phenomenon' to be studied (Patton, 2002, p. 40). Purposeful sampling's objective is to provide insight and understanding, as opposed to quantitative research's random sampling, which provides generalizability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Patton, 2002).

Snowball sampling is a type of purposeful sampling that allows for participants to recommend other individuals who meet the sampling inclusion criteria and may also be interested in participating (Patton, 2002). Snowball sampling is implemented by asking individuals who to talk to and who would be willing to share their experiences and perceptions; these people would recommend others they know and the list of possible participants grows and grows—thus the term snowballing (Patton, 2002).

To recruit students, I posted flyers throughout classrooms, the student center, library and gymnasium for students to contact me if interested in participating. The flyer is included as Appendix B. I also asked the Assistant Director of Student Affairs, the Math Specialist in the Learning Center, the Supervisor of Athletics, and the Registrar to send emails or ask students about participation. I provided each colleague with a flyer to explain the study. My colleagues gave my email address to any students who were interested in participating and then students emailed me. I responded to their emails to set up a time to meet. All interviews were held in the Health and Wellness Building on campus reserved through the Office of Student Affairs. In addition, the Assistant Director of Student Affairs offered me the opportunity to explain my study and ask for volunteers during Resident Assistant and Orientation Leader training during August 2010. Following each focus group, I also asked students to sign up to participate in an individual

interview by providing their name and email address. I would then email them to set up a time for the interview.

In response to the two research questions, Table 2 illustrates the information that was collected, what the participant provided and the method of collecting the information.

Overview of Information Needed

Table 2

Information Collection

Type of information	What the researcher requires	Method
Research Question 1 What factors did participants perceive to influence their college choice?	Participants' perception of influences.	Semi-structured interviews or focus group.
Research Question 2 To what extent, and in what ways, do students perceive their college choice to be influenced by significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, other family members, guidance counselors, friends)?	Participants' explanation about their experiences with significant others.	Semi-structured interviews or focus group

Table 2 describes the information required as the response to Question 1 and the participants' explanation of the experience with other people provided the data for Question 2. In addition, Table 2 shows that the responses to both questions were collected through interviews and focus groups.

IRB Approval

Following the proposal approval, the researcher submitted the proposal to the IRB at both IUP and Penn State for approval of all processes, sampling methods, and treatment of

participants. In addition to IRB approval through IUP, because the research was conducted on a Penn State campus and I am a Penn State employee, I submitted and received approval from the IRB at Penn State.

To protect the participants, an informed consent form was completed and signed by each participant. The informed consent form explained the background of the research, the purpose of the study and the risk associated with participating in the study. The research was conducted with an open and honest framework so the participants knew the purpose, the questions and the rationale for the study. In addition, the informed consent form explained that the responses would only be used in conjunction with the other participants and there are no known risks or advantages to participation. The informed consent explained that the researcher would record the focus groups for transcription purposes. A professional transcription company provided word for word transcription. Pseudonyms were provided to the transcription company so the students would not be identified by name. The IRB proposal discussed the requirements of the maintenance of the data. The data was retained for the required time period in a locked drawer. The digital audio files were destroyed after data analysis.

Data Collection Methods

A literature review preceded data collection. The data collection methods for this study included three focus group interviews and 25 semi-structured interviews of first-generation college students. Also, each participant completed a short demographic survey.

Data Collection Information

For the study, I conducted several methods of data collection: demographic surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews, which are discussed in more depth in the following paragraphs and illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Data Collection and Analysis

Method	Analysis	Data collection	Data form
Demographic survey	Simple calculations; averages	Survey form	Survey form
Focus Groups	Trends, categories, codes	Digitally recorded	Transcripts
Interviews	Trends, categories, codes	Digitally recorded	Transcripts

Table 3 shows the method of data collection, how the information will be analyzed, collected and the form. The survey was analyzed by simple calculations, averages and percentages. The focus groups were analyzed by finding trends and categories through coding by the digital recordings and transcripts. Similarly, the interviews provided analysis through trends, categories and codes through the digital recordings and transcripts.

Demographic survey.

I conducted a paper demographic survey asking several questions about the student's background. This survey can be found in Appendix A. These questions included age, SAT scores, high school GPA, mother's education level, father's education level, household income, hometown, ethnicity, and gender. I collected this information to better understand the participant's experiences by knowing their background characteristics. I categorized the students' socioeconomic status using the descriptors: no answer, poor, working class, middle class or upper class. Also, I examined themes related to parents' education level.

Focus groups.

I also conducted three focus group interviews as one of two primary data collection methods. Focus groups are a commonly used method in sociological research. A major strength of the focus group technique includes the social interaction of the participants (Morgan, 1996;

Patton, 2002). In addition, focus groups allow the participants to contrast experiences and participants' interactions with each other. Moreover, focus groups are inexpensive and time-efficient which can increase sample size (Morgan, 1996; Patton, 2002). Focus groups can be enjoyable for the participants (Patton, 2002). Because of these reasons, I believe focus groups were a valuable method and useful in exploring the experiences of first-generation college students.

However, focus groups have several obstacles including the involvement of the moderator in influencing the outcome, the moderator can be distracting to the process, and some participants will not want to answer some questions in the group setting (Morgan, 1996). Despite these weaknesses, I believe that focus groups were a great tool for gathering data.

For the purposes of this study, I conducted three focus groups with 5-9 participants in each group. Morgan (1996) suggests 6-10 participants as the optimum participation. I used a semi-structured focus group format using open-ended questions intended to develop dialogue and conversation within the group, which can be found in Appendix B. Following the focus group, participants were offered the opportunity to follow up by emailing any additional thoughts. This allowed for members to add comments that they may have been inhibited to share during the group. During the data analysis, I examined the themes and trends that developed. I analyzed the data without identifying any individual's information.

Interviews.

Following the focus groups, the researcher conducted 25 interviews to further develop understanding of college choice. Interviews facilitated the ability to understand the other person's perspective (Patton, 2002; Weiss, 1994). I conducted these interviews with participants to provide more in-depth understanding of the college choice process. The interview guide can be found in

Appendix C. Because qualitative interviews allow respondents to answer questions in their own words and with great detail, they provide researchers with rich and valuable insights into places, experiences, and settings in which the researcher has not lived (Patton, 2002; Weiss, 1994). Because I had conducted several interviews during the two pilot studies, I felt comfortable with this method of data collection.

For this study, the interviews were semi-structured. Interviews are the primary data collection method for qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Patton (2002) explains that in standard open-ended interviews, the questions need to be fully developed so that each participant receives the same questions, which can be an advantage in analysis because responses can be compared. Interview questions provide the participant to explain their perspective in their own words (Patton, 2002).

Question development.

The questions for this study were developed by an exercise discussed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) that called for brainstorming four questions for each research question. From this brainstorming, I created a question matrix, which is included as Appendix C. They then suggest practicing all probable responses and continually reframing the questions. There are many types of questions used in interviews such as behavior, knowledge, demographic, and opinion questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Patton, 2002). Table 4 depicts an exercise of developing questions.

Table 4

Question Development Explanation

Type of question	Example of question	Type of information collected
Behavioral	If I followed you through a typical day, what would I observe you doing? Patton, 2002	Behaviors, experiences, and actions
Knowledge	What steps are involved in applying to Penn State?	Facts, processes, rules and regulations
Demographic	What is your mother's highest level of education?	Age, education, gender, race, occupation, background information
Opinion	What do you believe is the most important factor in your decision to attend college?	What a person thinks about an experience or issue

Patton, 2002

Table 4 describes an exercise used to develop the questions for the focus groups and interviews. This table shows the types of questions, an example of question and the information that would be collected.

Recording the data.

For this study, I digitally recorded the focus groups and interviews using a Sony digital recorder. The participants were made aware of the recording prior to signing the informed consent form. I then had a professional transcription company transcribe the interviews and focus groups using word-for-word transcription. Following the transcription, all participants' names were removed from the transcripts and pseudonyms were created. The audio files were destroyed once the analysis was completed.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Using the literature review and current research, I made a list of initial codes. For data analysis, I used NVivo 9, a software program designed to assist for categorizing, coding, and organizing data. I created codes within the NVivo software program and coded the transcripts line

by line. During the data analysis, I examined themes and trends that developed. Initially, I coded the data based on my conceptual framework, which was developed based on college choice research using the concepts of habitus, social and cultural capital within the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (Hossler et al., 1999). As I read through the transcripts, I inductively created codes that allowed the emergent themes to be further examined. The list of codes can be found in Table 5

Table 5 illustrates the concept, the code and the stage within the college choice process that the concept occurs and whether it was one of my initial codes or it emerged after analysis.

Table 5

Coding Scheme for Analysis

Concept	Code	**Stage**	**Initial/Emergent code**
Socioeconomic Status	SOCIOEC	Predisposition	Initial code
Social Mobility	SOCMOB	Predisposition	Initial code
Aspiration to attend college	ASP	Predisposition	Initial code
Parents	PAR	Predisposition	Initial code
Other Family	OTHFAM	Predisposition	Emergent code
Siblings	SIBS	Predisposition	Emergent code
Neighborhood	HOOD	Predisposition	Emergent code
High School	HS	Predisposition	Initial code
Guidance Counselor	GUIDCOUN	Search	Initial code
Visiting Campuses	VISIT	Search	Emergent code
Knowledge	KNOW	Search	Emergent code
Assumptions about college	ASSUMP	Search	Emergent code

College Applications	APPS	Choice	Emergent code
Financial Aid	FINAID	Choice	Initial code
Size of campus	SIZE	Choice	Emergent code
Location	LOC	Choice	Emergent code
Fitting in	FIT	Choice	Emergent code
Friends	FRIEND	Choice	Initial code

There are codes related to each stage, predisposition, search and choice, within the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (1999). The coding scheme was adapted throughout the analysis process through reflection, review of transcripts and line-by-line coding. Through this process, I reviewed, collapsed and expanded codes through the coding process to better reflect what I was finding and the themes that were emerging.

In addition, using the NVivo 9 software, I ran several word count queries based on my observations and initial thoughts about emergent themes. When concepts and ideas repeated, I created a code in nVivo 9. Then, I conducted a word count query for the words, "better", "violence", "parents" and "high school" to see if my initial feelings of repetition held true. In addition, I coded line-by-line in the text. I read and reviewed each transcript of the interviews and the focus groups. I used general codes such as 'family' but then I was able to further differentiate into smaller themes such as "family expectations", "parents' support" and "siblings". I created lists that used the three concepts from the conceptual framework and the stages in the college choice model. Finally, I collapsed codes and combined codes for the data analysis. The purpose of this process of analysis was to establish emergent themes and create models that provide an explanation of the research questions.

Audit Trail

I created an audit trail, a list of decisions related to the development and deletion of codes, to understand how the coding scheme was changing as the themes emerged. The first list of coding was based on the literature review and the pilot studies, which I created prior to the beginning of data collection. After the focus groups, I reviewed the list while listening to the focus group transcripts and added additional codes based on my observations and initial findings. As I continued to code the interview transcripts, I added, created and developed new codes. Finally, I reviewed the codes and re-categorized them for clarity. Table 5 illustrates the coding scheme and whether the codes were developed in the original model or the code emerged through data collection.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the highest ethical standards, there are several issues to address. It is very important to ensure confidentiality and informed consent to maintain the student participant's autonomy. In the beginning of each focus group, I explained that confidentiality is expected and in the research discussion, the findings would only be used in concert with other participants and no participant would be singled out. Also, I ensured that each student signed an informed consent to signify that they understood the purpose of the study and the types of questions and information that I collected.

In terms of ethical consideration, I addressed coercion, power relations, and psychological harm prior to the start of each focus group and each interview. I explained the purpose of the study and the types of information to be collected and how the data would be used. The students volunteered to participate and participation was completely optional. Because of my position in higher education, I informed the participants about my role. My position is located at a different

campus so there is no conflict of interest or any potential benefits or harm in choosing not to participate. In addition, students could withdraw at any time. There was no penalty for not participating. There was no risk associated with answering these questions about college choice, but in case a student was psychologically affected by the questioning, I provided information about counseling services, which was recommended by faculty within my doctoral program.

To support transparency and uphold high ethical standards, I shared that I am an employee of Penn State, although not at Schuylkill campus during the time of the interviews and focus groups, despite having worked there for 9 years. I also explained that I am a doctoral student from IUP. I also explained that I am first-generation college student and a resident of Schuylkill County. I shared that I have conducted two previous pilot studies about college choice.

Issues of Trustworthiness

    Credibility.

I provided self-reflection through descriptive field notes to address and explain any biases or assumptions I realized in terms of first-generation college students. Each day, I would journal about my experiences including themes I felt emerged, categories developed and detailed descriptions of my observations through the focus groups and interviews. I also completed several reflective exercises encouraged by Maxwell (1996). I shared my experiences as a first-generation college student so that the participants knew my background. I explained to the participants that I have conducted focus groups and interviews for the last five years as a student and as a staff member. I explained that I have worked in higher education for 13 years. I also explained that their participation has no effect on their relationship to Penn State.

Dependability.

Patton (2002) explains that audit trails are needed for rigor and to maximize accuracy. To improve dependability, I conducted an audit trail that details how the data was collected and analyzed. The audit trail provided dates and lists of codes. Each time a code was collapsed or expanded, I would write about my decision-making and my thought processes related to the college choice analysis. In addition, extensive field notes were taken to accurately maintain observational data and an awareness of the surroundings and participants.

Transferability.

Although qualitative research is not expected to be generalizable in terms of random sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Hossler et al., 1999; Patton, 2002;), the research may be useful to others in other settings. Transferability refers to the study's ability to provide understanding of the processes at work that may be helpful in other communities and settings. To improve transferability, I included rich descriptions of the students' experiences. In addition, the rich description assists the reader in understanding the context.

Delimitations of the Study

The study was delimited by using a small campus of the Penn State University; all participants were Penn State Schuylkill students. The data was collected in August, September and October 2010. The focus groups and interviews were held on campus at Penn State Schuylkill.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited based on the scope of its sample and sample selection. By using a small rural campus of a larger research university, the research is limited to understanding the students that attend that campus. The study is using two qualitative research techniques-- focus

group and individual interviews, which may also limit the data. In addition, this study is limited by the researcher's biases and experiences, which include formerly working on the campus and being a first-generation college student. Through reflection, journaling and experiential exercises, I addressed my biases and understanding of the first-generation college student. Although I did not work there when I conducted the focus groups and interviews, I had worked at the campus prior to the research study. I worked with the student population closely and felt I had an understanding of their experiences because I grew up in a working class community. I was a first-generation college student taught to value hard work more than educational attainment. Working at Penn State Schuylkill, I was introduced to many situations involving racial and economic disparity through the experience of the students on the campus. Although I had not experienced discrimination based on my class, race or gender, the students shared their experiences and knowledge with me, which made me more aware of societal inequalities.

The use of focus groups as a data collection method has some limitations. Focus groups should be conducted in groups of 'like' people (Patton, 2002). I attempted to create homogeneous groups, but there were differences in age, gender, academic program and ethnicity. I asked the participants to respect the comments of the other individuals and explained that the comments should not to be repeated outside the focus groups, though confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus groups (Patton, 2002). In addition, because there were several people in each group, not all participants had equal time to share experiences. Some people may fear speaking up when they do not agree with the group or they worry that what they say will be treated confidentially by other focus group participants.

Chapter Summary

This chapter was organized in several sections. I explained the research sample, the research questions, the research design, the data collection methods and the data analysis. Also, I addressed the ethical considerations. Because the study's purpose was to explore and understand the experiences of first-generation college students, a qualitative framework was implemented using focus groups and interviews to explore the phenomenon of college choice for first-generation college students.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore first-generation college students'

perceptions about the influences affecting their college choice process. This chapter, focusing on

data analysis and the findings, begins with a review of the research questions. The next section

discusses the participants' demographic information, which includes age, gender, ethnicity/race,

hometown, mother's education, father's education, and household income. The chapter then

summarizes the findings that emerged through the data collection by categorizing each theme

within one of the three stages of the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (1999).

Research Questions

For this research study, there were two research questions.

1. What factors did participants perceive to influence their college choice?

2. To what extent, and in what ways, do students perceive their college choice to be

   influenced by significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, other family members,

   guidance counselors, teachers and friends)?

Findings

This study used the Hossler and Gallagher (1997) Model of College Choice to aid in the

understanding of the findings. Appendix C depicts the findings statements and the emergent

themes of this study. In the appendix, each finding statement is discussed within the framework of

existing literature followed by an explanation of whether the research is consistent, in contrast, or

gains new insights from previous research.

The next section describes the demographic information collected about the participants including gender, age, class, geography, mother's education, father's education and household income.

Description of Participants

The following table, Table 6, shows each participant's pseudonym, race, gender, class and data collection method. The information about age, gender, race and class was collected through the paper survey; the data collection type was determined by whether the student participated in an interview or a focus group or both. There were 37 participants in this study. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to assume confidentiality. Table 6 shows an overview of the information about the participants of this study.

Table 6

Participant's Information

	Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Class	Data Collection Type
1	Sharon	female	Black	Middle	Focus Group 1/ Interview
2	Alexandria	female	Black	Middle	Focus Group 1
3	Carmen	female	Hispanic	Poor	Focus Group 1/ Interview
4	Nicole	female	Black	Working	Focus Group 1
5	Sam	male	Hispanic	Upper	Focus Group 1
6	Andy	male	White	Upper	Focus Group 2
7	Kim	female	Hispanic	Poor	Focus Group 2
8	Jimmy	male	Black	Working	Focus Group 2
9	Vivian	female	Hispanic	Middle	Focus Group 2/ Interview

10	Allen	male	Black	Working	Focus Group 2
11	Raquel	female	Black	Working	Focus Group 2/ Interview
12	Laura	female	Black	Middle	Focus Group 2/ Interview
13	Bob	male	Black	Middle	Focus Group 2
14	Trent	male	White	No answer	Focus Group 3/ Interview
15	Tamara	female	Black	Middle	Focus Group 3/ Interview
16	Ansel	male	White	Middle	Focus Group 3
17	Destiny	female	Black	No answer	Focus Group 3/ Interview
18	Austin	male	White	Poor	Focus Group 3/ Interview
19	Anisha	female	Black	No answer	Focus Group 3/ Interview
20	Kami	female	Black	No answer	Focus Group 3
21	Farrah	female	Black	Poor	Focus Group 3
22	Bianca	female	Hispanic	Working	Focus Group 3
23	Walt	male	Black	Middle	Interview
24	Allison	female	White	Working	Interview
25	Evan	male	Black	No answer	Interview
26	Keisha	female	Black	Poor	Interview
27	Crystal	female	White	Middle	Interview
28	Andrew	male	White	Poor	Interview
29	Karl	male	Black	Poor	Interview
30	Katelyn	female	Black	Working	Interview
31	Cody	male	White	Working	Interview
32	James	male	Black	Middle	Interview

33	Amanda	female	Hispanic	Middle	Interview
34	Tim	male	White	Working	Interview
35	Nikki	female	White	Poor	Interview
36	Sharita	female	Black	Working	Interview
37	Ivan	male	Black	Poor	Interview

The participants were diverse in gender, race and class. Fifty-seven percent of participants of the study were female and 43% were male. Seventy percent of the participants defined themselves as Black, 27% of participants defined themselves as White, 16% described themselves as Hispanics.

As illustrated in this table, I divided participants into four class levels that define class: upper class, middle class, working class and poor. Twenty-four percent of the participants were categorized as poor, 27% of the participants were categorized as working class, and 29% of the participants were middle class. Students who had household incomes higher than $100,000 were categorized as upper class. Students who reported household incomes between $50,000-99,999 were categorized as middle class. Students who reported household incomes between $18,000-49,999 were categorized as working class. Students who reported their household income as less than $18,000 were categorized as poor.

Age

Of the 37 student participants, eight were 18 years of age; 12 were 19 years of age; eight were 20 years of age; five were 21; two were 22 years of age and two did not report their age.

Table 7

Participant's Age

	Age 18	Age 19	Age 20	Age 21	Age 22	No Answer	Total
Focus Group 1	1	2	1	1	0	0	5
Focus Group 2	3	2	2	1	0	0	8
Focus Group 3	2	5	2	0	0	0	9
Interview	2	3	3	3	2	2	15
Total	8	12	8	5	2	2	37

Participants were of traditional college age with most students falling into the 18 or 19 years of age category. Although Penn State Schuylkill does have population of adult learners, none volunteered for the study.

Gender

This study included 21 participants who identified as female and 16 participants identified themselves as male as shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Participant's Gender

	Male	Female	Total
Group 1	1	4	5
Group 2	4	4	8
Group 3	3	6	9
Interview	8	7	15
Total	16	21	37

Women represent a slightly higher percentage (57%) of participants in this study. The campus population is 54% female and 46% male (Penn State University, 2012). Very few participants mentioned gender as an influence or as a barrier to college choice. One reason for this may be that the questions were not tailored to discuss gender. Another possible explanation would be that the female participants shared a strong sense of self-confidence and determination to complete their education and did not seem to believe gender limited their options. Three female students shared a sense of being special, saying things like, "I know I'm special". In comparison, two male students said things like, "I'm just an average guy trying to go to college" or "I'm just a regular guy." In addition, gender disparities in college enrollment seem to have lessened. Ryu (2010) found that gender differences in college enrollment have stabilized for most populations. The Hispanic population is the only group not yet to see a female majority. This is supported by the enrollment data for Penn State Schuylkill, which includes 54% female and 46% male students (Penn State University, 2012). In addition, women are the majority within the U.S. population. Women make up 51% of population of this country (U.S. Census, 2010).

Despite the findings of this study, some research has shown gender to play a role in college choice. Cho et al. (2008) found that male and female students are influenced in different ways. They found that female students are more likely to stay close to home and have concerns about student-institution fit. In addition, female students also rated campus safety and student-institution fit more important than their male counterparts

Race/ Ethnicity

For the purposes of this study, I used the definitions of racial categories used by Penn State University (2011). These categories include:

- American Indian or Alaskan Native as any person having origins in North America or who maintains a cultural identification though tribal affiliation.

- Asian or Pacific Islander as any person with origins from the Far East, Southeast Asia, the Indian Subcontinent or the Pacific Islands.

- Black as any person having origin from the black racial groups of Africa;

- Hispanic as any person from Mexico, Central or South America;

- White as any person with origins within Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East.

Twenty-one students identified as Black; ten identified as White; and six identified as Hispanic. No students identified as Asian or American Indian. Table 9 depicts the participants' race.

Table 9

Participant's Race/Ethnicity

	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian	Total
Group 1	3	0	2	0	5
Group 2	5	1	2	0	8
Group 3	5	3	1	0	9
Interview	8	6	1	0	15
Total	21	10	7	0	37

The table shows that 54% of the participants reported themselves as Black and 16% reported themselves as Hispanic, while 27% reported themselves as White. Seventy percent of the participants were considered minority students.

Penn State Schuylkill is an ethnically and racially diverse campus. However, the participants of this study were more racially diverse than the population of the campus. Seventy percent of the participants were considered racial minorities compared to 43% of the overall Schuylkill campus population (Penn State University, 2012).

Four participants in this study addressed ways that race influenced their college choice. Four Black students mentioned race or racial concerns in their discussions about college choice. These participants discussed some of the racial stereotypes they assumed they might face on a college campus. In addition, two students voiced concerns about their fear and perception of discrimination or racism on college campuses. One of the urban students shared concerns that the people from rural areas would discriminate against minority students. Katelyn, a Black student from Philadelphia, explained these feelings, "Uh, you wanna be comfortable, cause you don't wanna go nowhere, where everyone's racist and everyone doesn't like you."

In addition to fears about discrimination, students shared stereotypes related to race and college aspiration. Raquel, a Black student from New Jersey, referring to her friend's experience, shared one such stereotype:

> My best friend is Hispanic and her mother, sister, none of them went to college. They
> always have that stereotype, Hispanics don't go, they're just workers—she wanted to
> break that. She did not know how to get involved in the college experience.

In addition, two students perceived that minority students were at a disadvantage because they had less money to go to college. These participants felt that minority students were more likely to be poor and less likely to attend college.

There are several explanations for why other students may not have mentioned race. First, the questions I asked were not directly tied to race. Second, the students may not have identified race as a factor because I, the interviewer, am not considered a racial minority. My race, White, may have limited their willingness to discuss race and they may not have been comfortable discussing this with me.

Geography

Thirty-six participants grew up in the United States. One student was raised in Liberia and moved to the U.S. during elementary school. Two other students were born outside of the U.S., one in the Dominican Republic and one in Haiti, but were raised in the U.S. The participants were primarily from Pennsylvania. Seventeen participants had been raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; six were from Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. Five participants were from the state of New York, four were from New Jersey, two were from California, and there was one participant each from Connecticut, Maryland and Washington D.C. Table 10 illustrates students' place of residence.

Table 10

Participant's Home State

	CA	CT	NY	NJ	MD	PA Phila.	PA Sch. Co.	Washington D.C.	Total
Group 1	0	0	1	1	0	3	0	0	5
Group 2	0	1	1	2	1	3	0	0	8
Group 3	1	0	2	0	0	4	1	1	9
Interview	1	0	1	1	0	7	5	0	15
Total	2	1	5	4	1	17	6	1	37

Table 10 shows that 45% of the participants were from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 16% of the participants were from Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, and 14% of the participants were from the state of New York. Penn State Schuylkill students represent geographic diversity. I was surprised that so many of the participants were from Philadelphia specifically. However, this could be explained by the snowball sampling – students recommended other students who they knew who came from similar geographic regions.

Mother's Education

Because all the participants are first-generation college students, their parents did not graduate from college. Table 11 illustrates mothers' level of education. Nineteen participants' mothers had a high school diploma as their highest level of education; 13 students' mothers had attended some college, but dropped out before earning a degree; three students were unsure of their mother's education and two students' mothers did not graduate from high school.

Table 11

Participant's Mother's Education

	Did not Graduate HS	High School Graduate	Some college	Unsure	Total
Group 1	0	2	1	2	5
Group 2	1	4	3	0	8
Group 3	0	6	2	1	9
Interview	1	7	7		15
Total	2	19	13	3	37

The table shows 51% of the mothers graduated from high school, 35% attended some college, 5% did not graduate from high school and 8% did not know their mother's education

Father's Education

There were 22 participants whose fathers graduated from high school; seven students were unsure; four did not graduate from high school; and four had attended some college. Table 12 summarizes fathers' education levels.

Table 12

Participant's Father's Education

	Did not Graduate HS	High School Graduate	Some college	Unsure	Total
Group 1	0	2	1	2	5
Group 2	0	4	1	1	8
Group 3	0	6	2	1	9
Interview	4	10	0	1	15
Total	4	22	4	7	37

This table shows 59% of the fathers graduated from high school, 11% of the fathers attended some college, 11% of the participants' fathers did not graduate from college and 19% of the fathers were unsure of their father's education.

Household Income

Because the U.S. government uses household income in determining the poverty limits and I was seeking working class students, the students were asked to provide their household income. The U.S. government defines household income as any income from any person over the age of 18 within a household. Nine students reported a household income less than $18,000 per year; ten student's household income was between $18,001 and $49,999; four student's household income was between $50,000 and $74,999; six student's household income was between $75,000 and $99,999; two student's household income was more than $100,000 per year; and six were unsure of their household income. According to the Department of Health and Human Services (2009), an American family of four making less than $22,050, is considered below the poverty line. Nine of the students defined their household income as less than $18,000,

which qualified their families as below the federally determined poverty line. In Table 13, I illustrate students' household income and show that those living in homes where income is less than $18,000 per year are categorized as poor. The participants with a household income between $18,001-$49,999 per year are categorized as working class. Participants with a household income between $50,000-99,999 are categorized as middle class for the purposes of this study. The participants with a household income of more than $100,000 per year are categorized as upper class. The categories were determined using research and data about class and income in the U.S. (Barratt, 2011; U.S. Census, 2010)

Table 13

Participant's Household Income

	<$18,000	$18,001-$49,999	$50,000-$74,999	$75,000-$99,999	$100,000 or more	No answer	Total
Group 1	1	1	2	0	1	0	5
Group 2	1	3	0	3	1	0	8
Group 3	2	1	0	2	0	4	9
Interview	5	5	2	1	0	2	15
Total	9	10	4	6	2	6	37

Half of the participants are considered low income, which fits the profile of first-generation college students (Holland, 2010; King, 2009; McDonough, 1997). Only two participants had a household income of $100,000 or more. Six students did not know how or could not estimate their household income so they chose not to answer.

The next section of this chapter examines how students articulate their college choice. I used the stages identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1999) predisposition, search, and choice, to

organize the findings. To review, Figure 3 illustrates the factors influencing a student's college

choice. During predisposition, the responses from the students indicate the desire for a better life,

other people, the student's neighborhood and the student's high school experience are factors.

During the search phase, the guidance counselor has potential to influence students, whereas,

limited college visits and limited knowledge about college choice can create obstacles for

students. During the choice phase, the institutional factors of size, location and fitting in become

an influence, while limited knowledge about applications, and financial aid and the high cost of

attending college are potential barriers to the student's college choice process.

Factors influencing college choice

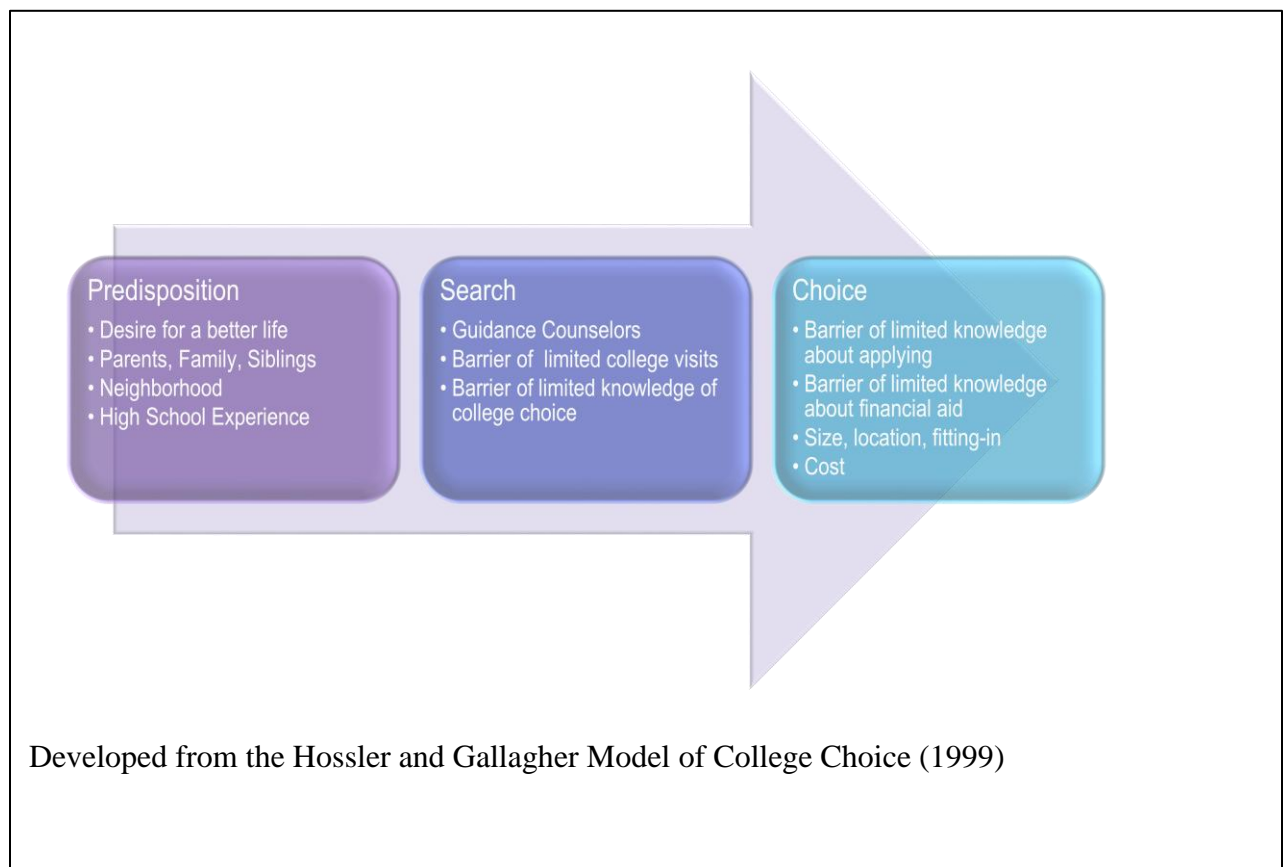Developed from the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (1999)

Figure 3

Factors that influence college choice

This figure shows that various factors influenced the participants during the three stages of college choice defined by Hossler and Gallagher. The figure then adds to current college choice literature because the model not only uses the linear stages, but also provides factors that impact students at each stage. Organized by the three stages, predisposition, search and choice, student responses are discussed in detail in the next section.

Predisposition to attend college

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) explain that predisposition, or aspiration, is the first stage in the college choice model. They explain that if a student does not have the desire to go to college, then it is unlikely that he or she will follow through on the search or choice stages.

Four themes emerged from the data collected in focus groups and interviews that pertained directly to the predisposition phase. These include:

1. Most participants could identify a specific memory leading to an aspiration or desire to attend college.
2. The participants were influenced by parents, other family members and siblings.
3. The participants were influenced by the neighborhoods in which they grew up.
4. The participant's high school experience (grades, scores, curriculum) influenced their college choice.

Memories of wanting to go to college.

Nineteen participants were able to share a moment or memory when they decided that they would be attending college. While these students decided to 'go to college' at various points in their education, five related college attendance with the careers they aspired to when they were in elementary school; two students did not realize an aspiration to go to college until high school.

Six participants were unsure about when they first aspired to attend college. Table 14 illustrates participants' first memory of wanting to attend college.

Table 14

Interview Participants' Memory of Wanting to Attend College

	Elementary School	Junior High	High School	Unsure	Total
Interview	12	5	2	6	25
Total	12	5	2	6	25

A majority of the students felt that they wanted to attend college since elementary school, contradicting some research that shows first-generation college students often aspire to attend college later in life (McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990; Saenz et al., 2007). However, the students who aspired to attend college during elementary school expected to do so because their career aspirations required college. These students wanted to be doctors or lawyers and knew these professions required a college education. As a child, Farrah, a Black student, knew being doctor meant she needed to go to college. She said, "Uh, I always wanted to be a pediatrician so I needed— I had to get an education in order to be what I wanted to be, so I was determined."

Yet for other participants, the desire to go to college happened during junior high school or high school. For these students the idea of going to college 'hit them' or they described 'stumbling upon' going to college. Vivian, a Hispanic student, explained that attending college occurred to her later in high school. She said, "Um, it was in the soccer field, uh, ex-boyfriend and his mother were talkin about college, college, college and it just hit me. I was like wait, I'm gonna need to go to college. This is about junior year, goin into junior year, senior year."

Two of the 25 participants interviewed did not aspire to go to college until the end of their high school career. Karl, a Black student, said, "All I wanted was my GED." Cody, a White

student, added, "I dunno [laughing]. I really did not honestly want to go to college at all." Even though these students aspired to go to college much later than other participants, they still managed to navigate the college choice process.

For all of the participants, predisposition was an important component to their college choice. It was the first step in establishing a new pattern in their families as they would be the first to attend college. Although, according to Hossler and Gallagher's model, predisposition is necessary for attending college, seven students shared concerns that even though they aspired to go to college, their dream might not become a reality. Aspiration alone was not enough. Laura explained, "Um, I can say I always wanted to go but I never knew I —I would actually end up here." Like many students, Laura was concerned that other factors, like socioeconomic status or cost of college, may inhibit their ability to attend college.

Socioeconomic status.

According to researchers (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al, 1999; McDonough, 1997; London, 1992; Paulsen, 1990), socioeconomic status is an important component in the predisposition phase because family background, parent's education and occupation, and income affect the college choice process. First, as high school students, the participants knew that because of their socioeconomic status, they would have difficulty affording college. Next, the participants perceived the process to be very easy for students whose parents went to college. Finally, participants were motivated to go to college because their parents did not go to college.

Difficulty affording college.

First-generation college students are likely to have a lower socioeconomic status than those who are not first-generation college students. Socioeconomic status can influence a student's educational expectations and experiences. For examples, fifteen participants in the study

talked about getting better jobs and earning more money than their parents and even mentioned that their parents did not go to college.

When discussing their aspirations, participants knew that because of their socioeconomic status, or class, they would face challenges affording college. Raquel, a Black student from New Jersey, discussed how her mother's low income affects their lifestyle:

> Um, like my mom, she didn't go to college. She's like paycheck to paycheck to pay the bills and to send out food and care packages to me [laughs] and, um, my friend's mom who can't afford to pay for her tuition because she decided, ya know, I'll just be a worker all my life and it gets hard and when the economy is like this, there's less money in your pocket and less stuff you can benefit your child.

Raquel explains that her mom lives paycheck to paycheck, which seems to make her lifestyle more difficult. Another student, Destiny, a Black female student, explained how she realized during high school that some students of lower socioeconomic status were unable to afford the high cost of attending college. She said, "I think different areas, um, depends on your um background, your family's income, some people can't afford. Some students wanna go to college, but can't afford it." Participants perceived their wealth, income and occupation to be very important to their potential happiness.

Perceptions about students whose parents attended college.

While the students perceived their families' insecure economic status could inhibit their opportunity to attend college, they viewed other students with parents with college educations as having an easier time navigating the college choice process. Vivian, a Hispanic student, said, "The kids of people who have gone to college already are at an advantage. Um, uh, people of upper class, um, it's kind of expected of them or it's just get accepted, their name, the last name is

what gets 'em in." Vivian had many assumptions about the ease with which upper class students were admitted to college.

Participants assumed that wealthier students do not have to follow the same process, and are 'automatically' admitted to college. Vivian summarized the perceptions of the group:

> Um, the process is so much easier for them, children of parents who attended college. They just gotta fill out a name and they're in, as opposed to someone, I gotta find out so what college is, how much it's gonna cost me, transcript here, application here, letter of recommendation as opposed to — I would like to think a lotta their parents do that for them. They just gotta sign and that's about it.

The students believed that those whose parents went to college did not need to complete the rigorous application process but they would be admitted because of who their parents were.

Socioeconomic status as motivation.

Expressing concern about their own socioeconomic background and comparing their opportunities to middle and upper class students, the participants understood that class is a factor in college admissions. About half of the participants were either part of the working class or the poor class. Only two students reported a household income higher than $100,000. Because many of the participants struggle with finances and their parents did not graduate from college, socioeconomic status influenced their college choice.

Many of the participants associated a college education with increased earnings. They believed that the college degree was the most important factor that would contribute to their mobility. For example, Laura, a Black student, shared how she reconciled the decision to attend college:

I'm like how does that sound like — I'm like so you wanna work at McDonald's whereas

workin at a 500 Fortune company like you tell me like you wanna make $15,000 a year or

you wanna make $55,000 a year?

As Laura illustrated, participants believed that a college education is related to their future income

potential. Similarly, Cody, a White student, added, "Because on account of the economy and

everything. If you don't have an education you're gonna get a $8.00 an hour job." The students

believed that a college degree would result in their upward economic mobility.

The role of parents.

Not only did students mention parental education and income as factors contributing to

college choice, many participants also shared their parents motivated them and had high

educational expectations. A few participants, however, said that their parents were disapproving

and fearful as well as parents who limited their involvement, which in turn influenced their

college choice decisions.

Supportive parents.

Twenty of 25 interview participants felt their parents were supportive of their decision to

attend college. For example, Sharon, a Black student, explained succinctly what her parents have

done for her. She said, "They pushed me to keep moving forward." James, a Black student, also

said it was his mother's persistence that has gotten him where his is today. Finally, Evan, a Black

student, explained that his parents were so positive because he was the first person in his family to

go college. He said, "They – their attitude was to go for it because I was the first person to

actually go to college."

Twenty students mentioned their parents were happy about their child's decision to go to

college. Sharon shared a very empowering comment about how proud her parents are of her

decision. Sharon said, "They always told me that I was very smart and intelligent and that anything I wanted to do, I could do. Um, they do treat me differently, but in a better way, a good way. They just always, just tell me how they're so proud of me, ya know, and for me to keep pushin." Sharon shared the sentiment of many of the participants that their parents were very encouraging in their pursuing a degree.

Expectations of parents.

Some students were fueled by their parents' pride, support, and praise. Ten participants said they were going to college because their parents expected them to attend college. Many of these students said that it was understood that they would eventually enroll in a college or university.

Generally, participants believed that students go to college for one of two reasons—self-motivation or persistent parents. Vivian explained, "It's either self-motivation or you got a parent who just won't leave you alone." The students seemed to perceive that many students attend college because it is what their parents want. Farrah explained this perception, "I know a lot of people that want to go to school because that's what their parents — want. So, a lot of people go just to please their parents — to get their parents off their backs." Farrah explained that many students were going to college to make their parents proud; others were going to college to appease their parents. For participants in this study, most of their parents wanted their students to go to college- sometimes, more than the students—and these students were influenced by their parents' expectations.

Several students shared expectations that their parents had for them. Carmen, a Hispanic student from Philadelphia, said, "Yeah. Like you know when you go to college – everyone says it, like. It was like not an option, like of course I was gonna go to college." James, a Black student

from Philadephia, said, "She [his mother] told me to go to college. That, that's the way it be."

Cody, a White student from rural Pennsylvania, added that because he is a first-generation college

student, his parents expected him to go to college. He said, "Uh, they basically said I'm going

whether I like it or not 'cause they didn't go and they know how it is." Like Cody, Katelyn, a

Black student from Philadelphia, explained, "she (her mother) said yeah, you goin to college

[laughs]." Austin, a White student from a small town in Pennsylvania, added that his parents also

explained the importance of a college degree. Austin said:

> Well my parents, they pretty much know that in today's world you really need that college
>
> education in order to get — to be comfortable living. It's really — I always quoted Obama
>
> when he — I — I listened to him one time and he said that it's like a pre-required step in
>
> order for success to get further education.

Austin explained that his parents believe that a college education is the key to a comfortable

living. These students' experiences reiterate the value that parents place on earning a college

degree to have the opportunity for greater wealth and income.

In my own decision-making process many years ago, my parents, who did not attend

college, were supportive of my decision, but also would have been satisfied if I had not attended

college. They did not pressure me to attend college. The participants' parents may have felt the

need to push their children toward higher education because of their concern that their child

would be kept out of the upper or middle class because the student would not have the credentials

(the degree) to attain a certain status. Families often encourage education as a means to gain status

because of credentialism (Brown, 2001; Kingston, Hubbarb, Lapp, Schroeder & Wilson, 2003;

Meyer, 2001). This concern about meeting the standard or credentials for certain jobs is addressed

through the concept of credentialism, where lower class parents and students are pressured into

seeking more education as a basis for gaining status (Meyer, 2001).

Parent's indifference toward college.

Although rare, four students' parents did not expect their children to attend college—or care if they went. These participants shared that their parents did not actually think their child would follow through so they did not encourage attendance. Laura, a Black student from Philadelphia, said although people close to her were supportive, her mother chose not to say much about Laura's decision to attend college. Laura was embarrassed by her mother's opinion. She added:

> I don't — like I know I shouldn't say this. Like most people like outside of my family like family friends, they were excited about me goin to college. Oh you're goin to college? You're the first one back here goin to college, dah, dah, dah. But my mom was more of like relaxed about it, like she didn't press the issue. She didn't hardly speak on it.

Because most participants' parents were extremely supportive, Laura was in the minority in terms of her parent's lack of support. She later said that her mother did not support her because she doubted her ability to finish her degree.

Two students said their parents were indifferent to their decision. Those students felt that their parents would be happy regardless of whether they went to college. Sam, a White student from a suburban area, said that as long as he tried the best he could, he would have his parents' support. He said, "Um, my parents would have been happy either way. So. Whatever I did, they just always told me to be the best at what I am, you know. If you clean, like what I refer, no name janitor. Or either head of a corporation, just do the best you can." Sam's family felt that he could make a living doing whatever made him happy. His parents were satisfied as long as he did his best.

Nikki, a White student from rural Pennsylvania, explained the she lived in the same town her whole life and her mother never graduated from high school. Nikki felt that because of her mother's lack of education attainment, her mother did not push her at all, "Um. So if I — if I decided I wanted to have a kid at age of 16, which I was like whoa, you know, what are you doing, ah, she'd be okay with it. So she'd be the last person to say I want you to go to college. I want you to do better. She'd be okay with any decision I made." As a result of Nikki's mom not graduating from high school, Nikki believed her mom had much lower expectations for her future than Nikki would have liked.

Motivated by parent's class.

In some situations, the parents were an influence because of the challenging road they had traveled. The students shared they wanted to do better than their parents had done, but the students often apologized, not wanting to appear rude or ungrateful. The students said things like, "they did the best they could," or "they tried to provide everything we needed." The students saw their parents' struggles and wanted their lives and careers to be different. Keisha explained:

> I had to do something, cause where I came from. Was not the, like, the best. Even like, like for what like parents went through, they made like a really good life for us. They gave us so many opportunities, now I'm here at like Penn State, can you imagine from where I was born?

Keisha, a Black student, expressed her appreciation and even surprise that she was in college given her background. She felt very lucky because her parents were immigrants and struggled to establish jobs and a stable home life. Laura also shared how her family influenced her:

> Like, come from a family you barely graduate from high school, so I wanted to kinda change that perspective. So before I could get to high school, I had to have my mind set

that I wanted to go to college.

Laura felt that growing up in a family that struggled to graduate from high school, she needed to do something different. She believed getting her education would allow her to change her future. Anisha, a Black student, discussed how having parents who did not go to college can affect how you think of yourself. She explained:

> But I just like- I just think being able to say that your parents did something, like makes you feel better as a person and makes you feel like you—like you can do something!

She explained that if an individual's parents are successful, the child feels like he or she can be successful. Carmen, a Hispanic student, also reiterates how she wanted more from her life including more opportunities for jobs and higher income. She added:

> I didn't grow up badly. I'm not saying like, you know. My parents, but it's just like I just want better, like better than what my parents have. I want better than this, you know. I think it does motivate me. Like be – like be – I just wanna, you know be in a better environment, and I don't know. Do better for my family.

These students shared how appreciative they were to their parents, but they knew that they wanted their lives to be different than their parents. The students wanted more wealth, more job stability, and more options when looking for jobs. In addition, to family members, siblings influenced the participants during the predisposition phase of college choice.

The role of the siblings.

Students reported three ways in which their siblings influenced the college choice process. First, those students with older siblings attending college drew upon their experience for information navigating the choice process. Second, students whose older siblings did not attend college wanted to learn from their siblings' mistakes and make seemingly better choices about

their futures. Finally, student participants wanted to positively model the college choice process for their younger siblings. Seven students mentioned how older siblings helped them understand or prepare for college. Kim, a Hispanic student from New Jersey, felt her older sister gave her advice about preparation. Kim said, "My sister was getting ready to go to college. And, she gave me like the heads up of how to start early." Austin shared Kim's experience and added a comment about his sister, "She (sister) kinda helped me through it."

Some participants believed their siblings did not make the best life decisions related to jobs, career, education and crime, and because sibling decision-making often resulted in negative consequences, student participants wanted to choose what they saw as the right path. These participants wanted to make better decisions and seek better opportunities than their siblings did. Keisha discussed how her brother did not care about education and he dropped out of high school. She said, "It was just like okay. My brother, like he dropped out of high school, got his GED so it was like he really didn't care." Like Keisha, Laura discussed how her brother's decisions made her parents think she was going to end up the same way. She felt she had to prove something to them and not only go to college but succeed. Her comments reflect those thoughts:

> By the time he got to high school, he fell victim to the streets so it's like my mom and dad
> just gave up hope so when I said oh I wanna go to college, they were like, oh yeah
> whatever, you're just gonna do the same thing he did. So it was basically me proving to
> them that I was capable of doin what I said I was gonna do.

These participants watched their siblings fall into drugs, crime or low-paying jobs. They witnessed the consequences of their siblings' decisions and consistently shared they wanted to be different than their siblings to have the opportunity for better income and jobs.

For example, Allison's brother wanted a different life for her. She explained, "My brother said

that college is important. That I don't – that I shouldn't make the same mistakes he did." Even though Allison's brother made mistakes in his own life, he did not want his sister to repeat those mistakes. The students have watched their siblings drop out, not do well academically, and even become involved in crime. The participants consistently reiterated this is not what they want for their lives.

Fifteen participants felt a responsibility to their siblings to go to college to set an example. They explained that they could empower their siblings to seek educational attainment as a means for social mobility James, a Black student, seemed proud when he shared that his sister always jokes about going to the same school as him, her older brother. He said "Uh she, yeah she still be asking, asking me about college, like she be messing with me, saying I'm gonna come to your school."

Fifteen students believed that being the first in the family was a lot of pressure and that it will be easier for the younger siblings to navigate the process because of their help. Anisha felt it will be a bit easier for her sister because she will not be the first. She said she put a lot of pressure on herself because she was the first person in her family to go to college. Anisha said:

> But I think it takes that little bit of the edge off knowing that she's not doing it by herself.
> Like she won't be the first person. Like when I was the first person it was – I was terrified,
> but I knew I had to do it.

Alexandria, a Black student, said that her little brother always wants to help with her homework. She thinks that seeing the opportunity that she has to go to college has been a great resource for him. Participants explained that their younger siblings were more comfortable and more prepared for going to college because they have helped pave the way for them. The influence of siblings was important to the participants. The students felt a sense of responsibility to their siblings to do

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things differently, to make their path easier, or to be someone the siblings could respect and admire.

The role of other family members.

Students' relationships with other members of their families also seemed to influence their decisions to attend college. Other family members provided information, support, and awareness of resources to navigate the college choice process. Fifteen of 25 interview participants mentioned the involvement of extended family. Allison, a White student from rural Pennsylvania, said her family wanted her to go to college because it was important for someone in their family to attend college. She said, "They wanted me to go because they wanted to have at least one kid in the family graduate with a college degree." Allison's sentiments were common among the participants. These participants felt that their families, including cousins and aunts and uncles, were a resource for understanding the college choice process.

Although many family members provided support, some students had family members that doubted their abilities to succeed. Four students faced family members who lacked confidence in their ability to graduate or finish their degree. In these cases, because the student was the first one from the family, there was a great deal of doubt that a college degree would be attained. One student, Nikki, shared a common sentiment "Um, I think, ah, when I first got accepted, they were excited. That's okay. Well I mean she got accepted, that doesn't mean she's going to survive." Students shared that getting accepted did not mean family members were entirely supportive. The family members doubted the students' ability to do the work it would take to earn credits and eventually graduate. Because family members had seen others in the family not complete college, they had a difficult time seeing why this student would be different from them. First-generation college students often report being discouraged by family members,

perhaps because they see the college student as different from themselves and other family members (Engle, 2007).

For the participants who had discouraging family members, there seemed to be some level of skepticism among their family members. One student, Tamara, a Black student, shared this perception, "my family expected lower; they said you got into Penn State? We expected community college from you." Another student, Trent, a White student, said "some of my family members said it's great (getting accepted to college) but you won't ever make it."

Five participants said that people in their lives told them they would drop out before graduating. These students faced disapproving family that did not understand why the students would want to attend college. They shared that family members said they felt that 'college was a waste a time.' For example, Sharon, a Black student, said, "there are people doubting me, and saying oh you're not gonna finish — or you're not gonna — you're gonna drop out after two years." Perhaps family members were discouraging because they did not think college was worth the cost. They added that a college education was not the investment that some people perceive it to be.

Student's neighborhoods.

Eighteen of the students in this study shared that a college education was rare in the neighborhoods in which they grew up. One student, Vivian, a Hispanic student, shared her experience, "Not only am I the only one in my family to go to college, but I can honestly say I'm the only one in my neighborhood within a five block radius that ever went to college." Consistently, the students shared that very few other people in their neighborhoods were going to college. Evan said, "Not many people went to college." They felt their decision to attend college was a rarity in their neighborhoods. Austin explained his experience, "[Laughs] It's a really small

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town and I don't think many people really go to college from my town. I — my sister and I are probably the only ones that I really know of. Other people don't go to college, they just graduate high school."

The participants' experiences within their neighborhoods reflect the findings of other studies about first-generation college students. The neighborhood can limit predisposition of educational attainment (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Quillian, 2003; Sewell & Armer, 1966). For example, Garner and Raudenbush (1991, p. 252) found that 'certain neighborhoods are associated with some personality characteristics that predispose individuals to respond differently to education.' In addition, students from low-income neighborhoods are more likely to face dropping out of high school, teenage pregnancy, lower academic achievement, greater health problems and a sense of hopelessness than students from wealthier neighborhoods (Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Kling, Liebman, & Katz, 2007; Quillian, 2003).

Some participants grew up in neighborhoods where a college degree was not viewed as necessary. Instead, as Sam, a Hispanic student said, they could find work if they chose to stay home and not attend college. He said, "Um, I think my particular neighborhood was, um, if you go to college, fine, that's great. But if you don't, you know that's fine. That's great. We've got work for you to do here [Laughs]."

While there were not many students who lived in neighborhoods where residents had high rates of college attendance, the participants did find support from neighbors in realizing their college aspirations. One student, Nikki, shared her neighbors' excitement:

We're really close with our neighbors because we've been living there my whole life, right? Ah, so they were — they're really excited. They were really happy that, you know, I was really moving up.

Nikki shared that her neighbors thought her college attendance would allow her to be socially and economically mobile. Crystal, a White student, too said that her neighbors congratulated her because they believe a college education leads to a better job and higher wages, "Um, the few, the neighbors that we live around, they were all, you know, they were like yeah, good job, you know, you need to go, you need to do that because you don't want to be working in Burger King the rest of your life." The participants felt that neighbors were very excited for them to be going to college because it hopefully result in increased economic status. The neighborhoods in which participants lived also seemed to inspire them to use college as a means of leaving their place of residence.

Getting away from a bad neighborhood.

Participants discussed "getting away" or "getting out" of the neighborhoods in which they were raised. Some students felt their neighborhoods were perceived negatively with high rates of crime and violence. Fifteen of 25 participants shared that moving to a different neighborhood or getting away from their neighborhood was in their best interest. The students discussed not wanting to 'end up' dead, dealing drugs, in jail, having babies, or 'just sitting around doing nothing.' Evan illustrated the desire to move out of the neighborhood, "They (his neighbors) was happy for me cause they – like, they did not wanna see me end up dead or in jail or selling drugs or anything like that." Evan explained that his neighbors wanted him to move from his neighborhood because there was a high crime rate. Like Evan, James explained, "my neighborhood, it was, it was gonna lead to nothing." In addition to the possible dangerous behaviors in which students could participate, the students knew that their neighborhoods did not provide them with great opportunities for jobs, wealth, and even safety.

Four participants shared deep personal tragedies or fear of going home because of violence, murder or random shootings that occurred in their neighborhoods. These students grew up in very

dangerous, poor neighborhoods where violence was common. Sharita, a Black student, said she decided to go to college after her brother had been murdered. Laura added that she was literally afraid to go home because her cousin had recently been killed in a shooting in her neighborhood. Other students shared witnessing gun violence in their neighborhoods. Because they feared for their lives and their futures, the crimes in their neighborhoods influenced the participants to look for ways to get out or get away.

The students seemed to take pride in their current college attendance, to such an extent that they were judgmental of those in their neighborhoods who did not pursue a college education. They seemed to feel different than the people from their neighborhoods. They shared strong opinions about their neighbors' lack of motivation to make their lives better and commented on their own choices to get out of their neighborhoods to do something better with their lives. As Sharon said:

> Yeah, um, the difference from me was because I wasn't gonna stay at home. I know that I wanted to do something with my life and getting out and going to school is the way and they just didn't care. They just let their — their life just go by. They didn't have any type of drive or motivation.

Sharon did not think the people in her neighborhood were motivated. Laura felt similar to Sharon in that she felt different than those from her neighborhood. She explained:

> Did they want me to go? I mean, I could say that people saw potential in me, like they saw that I wasn't gonna be like the rest of 'em. So like people were encouraging me, not even — not to go to college, but to get away.

Other participants shared their families understood the students' need to leave their neighborhoods for education or for career opportunities. Amanda, a Hispanic student, said that

her family knew she needed to leave because she needed to go where there were more opportunities for jobs. She said, "Yeah. Well my family's with it, they said it's the best thing I can do is to get out of Philadelphia. Go somewhere where it's jobs." The students felt strongly about getting out of their neighborhoods because they perceived their neighborhood to lack opportunities for good-paying jobs, financial stability, and for some, safety.

High School Experience.

The high schools students attended were in various geographic areas including small rural, suburban, college preparatory, and large urban high schools. Seven students from Schuylkill County attended small rural high schools with fewer than 1,000 students. Four students attended large suburban schools. Seven students attended college preparatory charter high schools. Nineteen students attended large urban high schools. Table 15 illustrates the types of high schools students attended.

Table 15

Participant's High School Experience

	Small rural high school	Suburban high school	Large urban high school	College preparatory high school	Total
Group 1	0	1	3	1	5
Group 2	0	3	2	3	8
Group 3	2	0	6	1	9
Interview	5	0	8	2	15
Total	7	4	19	7	37

Table 15 shows that 51% of the participants graduated from a large urban high school, 19% of the participants attended a small rural high school and 19% of the participants attended a college preparatory high school.

Although students attended different types of schools, many shared the same perception that college was not expected or "pushed" as part of the curriculum. Fifteen students believed they were not encouraged to go to college by teachers in their schools who the students believed viewed earning a high school diploma as the highest level of schooling necessary. Ivan, a Black student, also shared that at his high school, the diploma seemed to be the end of the road for most students because as he believed, many students lacked aspiration. Ivan said, "Yeah. Many people who went to my high school just went to get a high school degree and — but, okay this is the end of it." For Ivan, going to college was difficult because motivation for college attendance was not encouraged at his school nor were many of his peers aspiring to college.

Lack of academic rigor in high school.

Fifteen participants thought that high school was 'easy' and with that, they did not try very hard academically. As the participants approached their senior year in high school, they realized that their lower academic achievement would affect their future college choice process. College choice research (McDonough, 1997; Hossler et al., 1999; King, 2009; Kern, 2000) shows achieving higher grades results in higher rates of predisposition to college choice. In addition, lower academic achievement in high school is related to a higher drop out rate and limited educational aspirations which is related to the potential to attend college (Bond, 1981; Epps, 1995).

The students shared the ease with which they navigated the high school experience. They commented that high school was easy, although that did not necessarily mean they were A

students. Many participants were satisfied with average work and average grades, or Bs and Cs. The students explained that they passed their classes with minimum effort and poor study habits. They shared stories, examples and illustrations that explain how they approached the academic side of high school. One White student, Cody commented, "Yeah. Yeah I kind of took high school as a joke, so—yeah. Yeah, once I got to high school, I just didn't care. [laughter] I didn't care anyway." Cody felt that many students he went to high school with did not take the education seriously. He mentioned high school being a 'joke.' Similarly, Carmen explained how 'easy' high school was for her:

> When I was in high school like, I didn't really care much. Because I was um, I was smart, like I was smart high school because it was easy to me. I could just wake up, you know I could just do, I, oh well I copied some homework from someone. Or just study like a few minutes before a test, everything was easy. And I didn't really study, I didn't really care.

Like Carmen, who did not seem to care about how high school would influence her future, Sharon felt she could manipulate her teachers into giving her better grades. She felt she was a good student and could get As without much academic preparation.

> Oh my God. High school, I had so much fun and it was so easy for me. Uh, it came easy because I knew everybody. I knew all the teachers and I hate to say this, but I could almost delegate my grade that I was like failing of course, which I never really would or anything like that. If I had a B and I wanted a A, all I'd have to do is be persuasive and they would just give me a A anyway. So it came to me like that, it was easy.

The participants believed high school was easy and therefore, they admittedly developed few academic study skills and habits. As a result, the participants also perceived themselves to be less academically prepared than they felt they needed to be.

In addition, to the participants' satisfaction with average grades, five students shared that their parents were satisfied as long as they were passing. This acceptance of average could be a disadvantage for students who later want to attend college but do not have the grades to be admitted.

Lack of academic preparation.

Even though the students felt that high school was easy, or maybe despite the fact they thought high school was easy, they did not perceive their high school experience to be preparing them for college. While in high school, some participants feared the college workload because they perceived a lack of academic preparation from their high school experiences. These students explained that they heard from teachers, other students, and others in their social networks that college would be so hard. As a result, participants were afraid that they would fail or drop out of college because they could not handle the work. One student, Nikki, shared her perceptions about attending college, "I was a little afraid because everyone says, um, oh, life will be you know-- it's so much harder. You're going to have to work harder and people really scare you, ya know?" Nikki felt intimidated by all the things people told her about college-level work. She felt that people were trying to scare her into thinking she would not be able to handle the work.

Many students admitted being afraid of the difficulty of the academic coursework of higher education. Fifteen of 25 students mentioned not feeling academically prepared for college-level work when they were applying to college. Carmen shared the sentiments of participants as she discussed how different and unprepared she felt compared to her college peers who had more academically rigorous curriculum:

And like they're, they're [other students] all talking about oh yeah, we had to write all these papers, and I'm like I didn't have to do anything or like a lot of them had to do a

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senior project and I didn't have to do that.

Carmen explained that she felt academically inferior to her classmates and friends who attended other high schools because she wasn't prepared for writing papers and completing projects. Like Carmen, fifteen participants felt like they knew people who were academically prepared for college. They felt like the students who were more prepared, those that knew they wanted to attend college, were at an advantage. Raquel explains explained, "the people who knew they wanted to do the college thing before they even got into high school, the ones who prepared themselves—they were ahead of the game." Participants felt that those who knew they wanted to attend college and were motivated to achieve good grades had better opportunities to attend college.

Lower high school GPAs.

In addition to the participants' perception that high school was easy and that they were not academically prepared, 15 participants) believed that their high school grades affected, or potentially limited, their opportunities in the college choice process. Six students said they had poor grades and nine said they had good grades, but potentially not good enough to get them into the college of their choice.

While in high school, seven participants with lower or average grades shared that they were concerned about how their academic performance might affect their admission to various universities. Allen, a Black student, shared his feelings of being academically average and how this might influence his options for attending college. Raquel, a Black student, also discussed how grades limited options for other students. She shared, "I heard teachers say to students, 'Oh, it's too late, you can't go to college because your grades are not up there." The participants believed with lower grades, students had limited choices.

As Allen and Raquel illustrated how grades influence college admissions, other participants felt they lacked an understanding of how important grades were early in their academic career. They shared that as they grew older, they learned the importance of academic preparation but because their grades were bad, they felt they had already limited their possibilities. Keisha said, "My grades affected me a lot because then I realized I'm like, there are certain schools I can't get into now. The ones that I really want, I can't get into." Keisha shared that her grades kept her from applying to college because she was certain she would not be admitted with the grades she earned.

Because they had been told by teachers, counselors, friends and family that students needed good grades to go to college, they believed that having poor grades would limit their options for attendance.

Alexandria, a student who transferred from one high school to another high school, felt that her first high school should have told her that her grades would determine if she could be admitted to college. She explained her situation:

> When they (my high school) were telling me that my grades really depended on whether or not I was going to get into college. I did believe em, but I started questioning why my other school never said anything, or never helped prepare me.

Fifteen students said they realized how important grades were, but not until later in the college search process. So although they had aspirations to go to college, their options were limited because they did not meet the admission standards at many universities.

Academic Achievement.

Academic achievement is a key component of college admissions (Cho et al., 2008; Holland, 2010; Hossler et al., 1999). According to Penn State's Admissions (2011) website, high school grades account for 2/3 of the admission's decision. The students perceived their high school achievement, or lack of achievement, to influence their potential options for college choice. Participants perceived those who did well in high school had more options than those who did poorly. The perception that high achieving students have better college choice options came from their knowing other students with good grades who were accepted at more colleges than those with lower grades and from the media, marketing and movie industries which portray academic achievement as a pathway to college.

Another component to how grades influence college attendance is the relationship to the cost of college tuition. Participants perceived high academic achievement to lead to more scholarship opportunities. Scholarships were seen as an avenue to overcome challenges related to affording a college education. One of participants, Nikki, reflected this perspective about the necessity for scholarships. Nikki said, "for those who didn't do well in school, they didn't get good grades and they can't afford it." The participants felt that not qualifying for academic scholarships may have limited their options to afford college. Sharita said, "If I could go back to high school, I would have done my work because I could get—I would have had a better chance at getting my money, as opposed to paying for it myself." Sharita did not qualify for scholarships because she did not have high grades in high school.

Merit-based financial need and scholarships for academic achievement are increasing at colleges and universities. Ehrenberg (2007) found that most private colleges and universities were giving back up to 40% in tuition through grants for merit-based aid. In addition, many states are

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implementing merit-based grant programs. However, these merit-based aid programs typically assist White, middle or upper class students (Ehrenberg, 2007; Nora, 2001) and have not been shown to provide needed help to lower socioeconomic students (Ehrenberg, 2007; Perna & Titus, 2004)

Lower SAT scores.

Several students perceived their high school grades were adequate for college admission, but their test scores limited their opportunities. The participants said they did well in high school or earned average grades, their ACT or the SAT scores limited their options. Amanda said, "See my – my SAT's were really bad, but my grades was good." This seemed to be confusing to many participants—not only did they need good grades, but also good test scores to be admitted to the college of their choice. Austin, a White student from a small rural high school, shared his experience with being rejected after applying to a university because of his scores:

> Well my high school grades, I kept high grades so I knew that I would be able to get into
> college and the only thing were my SAT scores. I guess they weren't high enough for me
> to get into University Park, that's where I really wanted to go, but from what I was told,
> my SAT scores weren't quite high enough, so I didn't get in there.

Austin, like many others, shared that although his grades were high, his test scores were not high enough for admission. He did not really explain specifically what high enough would have been. He just knew he did not get in where he wanted to go. This was common for the participants; they often did not know specifically what they needed to get into college, but felt inadequate because they were told that low SAT scores prevents individuals from getting into college.

College preparatory programs in high school.

Students who participated in college-preparatory programs during high school felt they had more knowledge about college admissions and also expected to attend college. Seven out of 25 interview participants attended a college preparatory high school or program that provided information, mentoring and additional guidance in the college choice process. The college preparatory programs included practical information for the application process, selection, and attending college. Other programs included opportunities to participate in advanced classes and earn college credits. Embedded in these programs was an expectation that participating students would attend college. The programs also provided counselors and teachers that supported that mission. In contrast to other participants who did not have the benefit of college preparatory programs, Sharon, a student from a college preparatory program, was expected to attend college. She shared, "My school, they want everybody to go to college. I think everybody at graduation stood up to say they went to college except for one person."

Those students who participated in these college preparatory programs found great value in them. They explained having a higher-level workload compared to other high schools and higher expectations for 'college-level' work. To illustrate these students' experiences, Destiny, a Black student, commented:

> In high school everyone – like I went to a college prep school. So everyone had to apply to colleges, had to get accepted, had to do huge papers. I had to do college-level work. So um, I mean some people were more excited than others. But everyone had the college – the intent to go to college, so.

Destiny's college preparatory school prepared her by assigning high-level course work and instilling a sense of college aspiration. Illustrating how social capital influences the college choice

process, Amanda discussed how her teacher was involved in her college choice. She said her teacher provided support and encouragement, as well as information, fee waivers, and application recommendations. Amanda said:

> At my high school we had uh, it was called College Bound. So it was like you signed up for it, it was in a room like this. And he (the teacher) um, he asked you what schools you were thinking about. Some, I was like no I don't wanna apply here, I can't do it. He still said go ahead. They um gave us fee waivers for SAT's, like they pushed us to write our letters – – to the schools. We got recommendations, so like that was a big help. And I thought that all schools was doin that, but they're not. So that was a good help for me.

Like Amanda, Sharon, a student at a college preparatory high school in Philadelphia, said that her high school provided a career development class that assisted her with the processes related to college choice. She explained:

> We had a career development class where you filled out college applications and then they gave you fee waivers so you didn't have to pay for them so you could fill out as many as you want.

The students who attended college preparatory high schools had a greater confidence and knowledge of important college application processes and support by teachers, counselors and school administrators to complete the application process and meet the deadlines for the processes. College information was taught in the classroom; therefore, these students were more knowledgeable about application, student aid, and collegiate academic expectations. In addition, they also seemed to feel more prepared academically to complete college-level work. These students had increased opportunities to gain cultural and social capital through the relationships with teachers, counselors and administrators at their schools.

Search

The second stage of the model, search, occurs when students gather materials and examine information about specific colleges. During the search phase, the student establishes a 'choice set,' or a list of potential colleges. This phase includes the influence of the guidance counselor, information and knowledge about college processes, and visiting college campuses. Three themes emerged from the data collected in the interviews and focus groups related to the search phase of college choice. These findings are listed below:

1. The participants were influenced by their guidance counselor.

2. The participants had limited college visits to view the campuses in their choice set.

3. The participants had a lack of knowledge about colleges. This lack of knowledge meant that they could only make assumptions about what college would be like.

These findings are discussed in detail in the following section. The discussion begins with findings related to the role of the guidance counselor, followed by findings related to college visits. This section concludes with a discussion about the lack of knowledge the students had about colleges.

The role of the guidance counselors

The guidance counselor can play an active role for first-generation college students whose parents may not have as much information and knowledge about the college admission process (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). Guidance counselors are important in helping students develop cultural capital to increase their status (McDonough, 1997; Reid & Moore, 2008; Teranishi & Behringer (2008). For these participants, the relationships with their guidance counselors varied; some had positive experiences and some had negative experiences.

Strained relationships with guidance counselor.

Thirteen students shared their dissatisfaction with their guidance counselors. They seemed to think the guidance counselors were not helpful in the college search process. Trent, a White student from San Diego, California said his guidance counselor did not provide much guidance, although he felt bad saying that. Evan, a Black student from Philadelphia, said his guidance counselor just told him to complete the applications. He said, "My guidance counselor really did not have no involvement because, she just gave me the college applications and just told me to go fill them out." Like Evan, Nikki did not rely on her guidance counselor. She only utilized the counseling service when she had to visit to turn in forms.

Five participants even believed that the guidance counselor was responsible for the students not being accepted to the college of their choice. They often felt the guidance counselor was not a supportive advocate for their success. One student in particular had a very negative experience that summed up how many participants felt about their guidance counselor:

In high school, guidance counselors are the worst people. I had my mind set on Altoona campus. I was like that's the school I wanna go to. That's the place I'm going. No one's gonna stop me. My grades are for that school and everything. Go down to the guidance counselor, give her my application early so I can get an early, you know, whatever — I keep bugging her. She's like oh, I got it. I'm gonna send it. I'm gonna send it. Come there like two weeks straight before the deadline, oh, I'm gonna send it. I'm gonna send it. She wind up not sending it until two days after the deadline and they said, I'm sorry, you're not accepted. You can apply for the spring but you can't apply for the fall anymore. So that just broke my heart. Like I was like are you serious? Just because of my guidance counselor because I knew, like I was positive I was getting into that school. But they suck.

I mean after all, I was just like I'm doing everything by myself. Forget you guys, supposed

to help us do, you know, better. (Vivian)

Vivian addressed some anger toward the guidance counselor because she perceived was a lack of

support and complete disregard for her future plans.

Seven participants felt that their guidance counselors showed favoritism to certain students

and did not go out of their way to help others. Kami, a Black student, said that when her guidance

counselor did do her job, she helped the students she had a relationship with, but if the student did

not stay on top of the counselor, the counselor wasn't really involved. She commented:

My guidance counselor, when she wanted to do her job, she did her job and when she did

do her job, she only helped the students that she was, like, had a relationship with already.

But if you — if you weren't on her back, she wasn't on yours. (Kami)

Kami's experience is similar to other students that felt the role of the guidance counselor was

limited. She did not feel the guidance counselor was committed to helping all students, just those

she had established a relationship with previously.

Positive relationships with guidance counselors.

Five students had a much more positive relationship with their guidance counselors. These

participants felt the guidance counselor played an important role in giving them information and

had more positive search processes. Kim, a Black student from New Jersey, shared her

experience:

Personally I think, she helped me a lot. She, I also what I liked about her was that she was

honest. Um, she would be like okay, this is gonna be your safe — like I'd tell her the

schools. Yeah. I would tell her the schools I was thinking of whatever. And she would tell

me she would check, okay, that's gonna be a reach. She goes that's gonna be your safety.

That's gonna be you can't — like you you know? She would tell you straight up. She

didn't make you feel bad about it. She's just like I'm being honest and I don't want you to

be upset. And me sugar coat it and then like yeah and then you get denied and then you're

upset at me.

Kim felt that her guidance counselor was honest with her about her chances of being admitted.

She appreciated the honest relationship she had with the counselor. Similarly, Ansel, a White

student from a suburban area, had a positive experience with his guidance counselor. He felt that

his guidance counselor had an open door and he was welcome to seek advice. Ansel said, "I

would have to say I had a good relationship with my guidance counselor too, 'cause during the

school year, in my four years of high school, I always went to her office.

Four students relied on their guidance counselors to answer questions, provide information

and send transcripts and applications. Others said that their guidance counselor provided not only

information but also support and encouragement. Crystal, a White student from rural

Pennsylvania, shared the sentiment of those participants who had positive relationships, "I was

close with my one guidance counselor in school and stuff. [Laughs] And she, she keeps telling

me, just keep going. It will be over soon. [Laughs]" Crystal's guidance counselor continued to

provide support through the process. Also, Andrew, a White student from rural Pennsylvania,

added that his counselor provided a professional opinion about his future:

The counselors will sit down and talk with you about the classes that you would need for

something ― to get a more professional edge on it. So I talked to my counselors about it.

And I asked them what I should do.

Katelyn, a Black student from Philadelphia, said that her guidance counselor was helpful. She

said "Well my school counselor, you know helped everybody." Similarly, Carmen explained that

the guidance counselors at her school felt it was their job to make sure the students had the

information and resources to apply and select a college to attend. She explained, "Well when I

was in high school I was like in AP Honors classes. So, yeah of course, yeah like it was like, they

told you, and the guidance counselor was like on everyone's back." Like Carmen, Alexandria, a

Black student from Philadelphia, had a positive experience with her guidance counselor. She

added, "My guidance counselor helped me. With a lot of – well mostly everything. Essays and

stuff I did on my own."

Although, the participants in this study had varying experiences with guidance counselors,

it is evident that the guidance counselors influence the students. Some students had tense

relationships; others had very positive relationships. Some students had minimal expectations of

guidance counselors. Because these students did not expect help from their guidance counselor or

the guidance counselor was too busy, they missed out on potentially helpful opportunities for

mentoring and guidance.

Visiting college campuses

For many college students, a campus visit is a typical part of the college choice process.

Seven of the participants in this study did not visit the campus or take a tour beforehand, and for

some, this was because they did not plan to go to that particular campus. One reason students did

not make a campus visit was because their applications were turned in too late to be eligible for

campus housing Carmen, a Hispanic student from an urban area, said that she was told the

Schuylkill campus was the only option with housing. She explained:

> I didn't come – I didn't take the tour here because I applied to, for Altoona. And they didn't
>
> have any more housing. Yeah, that's all, they didn't have any more housing and they told

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me that. They sent me here and they told me this was like the only one with housing.

(Carmen)

Carmen did not visit the campus because she felt it was her only option and it was relatively late in the process. Other students mentioned they did not visit colleges because they applied to other campuses and did not expect to attend this one, or realize visiting college campuses was an option until late in the process. A few students did take the tour and were very surprised to find that the campus was small and located in such a rural area. Their initial reactions were not positive, but once they reviewed the opportunity, they seemed more satisfied with the campus.

Three students who did visit the campus, did so because they thought taking a tour was the next step in the college choice process. These students said that they knew a tour was part of the search process because their guidance counselors, friends and family members encouraged them to visit campuses.

Lack of knowledge about the campus they chose to attend

In addition to limited knowledge about general college processes, twenty students also had limited knowledge about Penn State Schuylkill before accepting their offer of admission. Students did not know where the campus was located, what academic programs were offered or what services were available at the campus. Nikki said she did not know anything about the campus, except how far it was from home. She explained, "Nothing at all. I, um — my dad informed me that it was about 45 minutes from our house. That's all I really knew is how far it was." Trent said, "Oh, I knew nothing really. I did not even know there was a Penn State around here." James said, "Actually I had no information about Penn State Schuylkill. I thought Penn State as in general was one, one big school. I did not actually think about any campus. I never knew about other campuses." This lack of knowledge can have a great influence on whether the students apply or if

they are accepted, whether the institution is a good fit for them. These participants did not realize what they did not know, so they weren't asking questions, following up, or proactively participating in their search process. This is important because they may miss deadlines, miss out on financial opportunities, apply late and have fewer opportunities for scheduling classes they need if they do enroll.

Choice

In the choice phase, students face the final stage of the admissions process including applying for admissions, applying for financial aid, and enrolling at the campus. Four themes emerged about the choice phase through the data collected in the interviews and focus groups. These themes include:

1. Students seemed to have limited knowledge about applying to college. Because of their limited knowledge, the students often applied late in the process, increasing their likelihood of rejection from that institution.

2. Students faced many obstacles while applying for financial aid.

3. The participants were influenced by the size, location and their perception of fitting in on the college campus they chose.

4. Participants were influenced by cost of their education.

The exploration begins with an in-depth discussion about the students' limited knowledge about college applications and financial aid. Then, the findings related to specific characteristics about a college, including size, location, and student-institution fit are discussed. This section concludes with a discussion about the students' perception related to the cost of attending college.

Applying to college

The participants seem to have a limited knowledge about the processes, deadlines and the terminology of the college environment. Nineteen participants had limited or no knowledge about the application process. To be accepted, the students needed to complete the applications for the colleges in which they were interested. Anisha illustrates the common experience of the participants by sharing that she faced a great deal of stress through the application process, not knowing what details she should include, nor readily understand the words used in the college application process. Anisha shared, "It was just so stressful— like, I had to actually look up some of the words — I had to research, like, what is that? Where does this come from?" Anisha had research the definitions of the terms found on the application and the financial aid forms because the documents used words she had never seen before. Anisha's experience seems to provide a window into the confusion and frustration for many participants. Like Anisha, Katelyn added, "I did not even have no information, I just know previous —lot of people were going to — they said it was like the closest campus to Philadelphia." Katelyn did not know much about the campus in which she was applying. It seemed that she only knew what other people told her and that it was somewhat close to her hometown. For many participants, not being able to understand the wording and terms found on the college applications, all characteristics of cultural capital, may have contributed to limitations in their participation in the college choice process, which in turn limited their choices enrolling in college.

Applying to college late in the process

Because the participants may have had limited knowledge about the admission processes, they explained that they often missed deadlines or did not understand the process. This could potentially contribute negatively to the student's satisfaction with the future campus and student-

institution fit, which is discussed later in this chapter. In addition, Cody applied late because he wasn't planning on going to college. He said, "It was kind of a last effort type of thing. Uh, Coach like contacted me— and asked, uh, cause he heard I wasn't going anywhere yet and he asked me about it. And I said I'd come down and check it out. And then, [sigh] here I am." Because six students did not expect to go to college, they felt that their attendance was a last ditch effort. Anisha explained that because she felt discouraged by her guidance counselor, she failed to follow-through and did not get accepted to her first-choice school when she finally did apply. Anisha said:

> I applied late because my guidance counselor was like, not too many kids from this school get into there, if any and I got discouraged. Even though I knew like my grades were – my grades were top notch. I shoulda – by lookin back, I shoulda just went with my own gut, but I let her discourage me, and I waited until the last minute, so I didn't get – I didn't get accepted.

Like others, Anisha did not get accepted at her first-choice school so she had to look at other options. Because it was so late, she had few choices. The participants felt that applying late influenced their admission's decision. They felt that they received rejection letters from colleges because they applied late or missed deadlines.

Rejection from the college

A first-generation college student may aspire to attend college, create a choice-set of possible colleges, complete the applications, and still not be admitted to college. Many participants faced this rejection when applying to schools. These students shared that they applied to many colleges because they received an application fee waiver to do so—and that they did not know much about all of the schools to which they applied. These students did not necessarily

know the admissions standard to be accepted at a particular university. As stated previously, five participants were rejected because they applied late. Seven participants were rejected because their test scores were not high enough.

Participants were denied admission from universities but they did not understand why they had been rejected. Because universities typically do not explain why a student is denied admission, these participants did not know why they were rejected. Nine participants said their grades must not have been high enough. These participants shared the shock and disappointment they felt when they received the rejection notifications. Keisha shared she was surprised by the rejection, "I cannot believe they rejected me. It really hurt me. I felt so rejected. Like, I don't understand. Are my grades not good enough?" Many students could not conceptualize why or how they were not accepted, demonstrating the participants' limited cultural capital. They did not understand all the factors involved in a university's decision for admission. In addition to not understanding why they were not accepted, twenty participants and their families had such limited knowledge of the admission's process, they explained to their parents that individuals had to apply to college and then wait to be accepted. Vivian explained that her parents thought a student decides where they want to go and just goes to school there.

Applying for financial aid

The participants expressed concerns and challenges with the financial aid process. Twenty-one students expected more opportunities for money to go to college. They said that they expected there to be more funding available through scholarships and grants. They also shared an expectation that 'someone should have told them.' When discussing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), the form that all students must complete to be eligible for student loans, grants or scholarships, Katelyn said, "Yeah. That was a little challenging because I did not

even know what student aid was." She explained she did not know where to begin with the financial aid process. She said, "So I had to — I had to figure it out on my own I guess." Laura said, "Honestly, I knew nothing." The experiences of Laura and Katelyn illustrate how many participants were unaware of the deadlines, processes or procedures for applying for financial aid, grants, loans and scholarships. Laura did not have information about the cost of attending college. She said, "The thing that I did not like about the school was that they did not give us sufficient information about scholarships and stuff like that." Like Laura, most students seemed to expect that their school should have taken responsibility to inform them about the college choice process. Destiny explained a common concern:

> I think that, um, like, when you do your FASFA and stuff, like, financial aid, they just consider what — how much a parent's making —'cause all these parents made too much and they don't consider what that money goes to. They don't know how much mortgage is and the rent or what they need and all this other stuff.

Destiny felt the way schools figure out financial aid eligibility lacked fairness. Seven students shared similar feelings expressing their disapproval with the school's limited presentation of information about college choice.

During the interviews, students also discussed challenges, obstacles and concerns involving the cost of financing a college education. Participants shared their experiences being hopeful for scholarships. One student, Nikki, commented, "Because, um, I know for me, it was ─ luckily I had good grades, otherwise I probably would be stuck in a lot of long debt. But I got a lot of scholarships and grants. I got lucky." Nikki knew that many other students did not have scholarships or aid to pay for their college education. Five students described themselves as lucky because they could not comprehend the calculations of student aid or scholarship funding.

Size of the campus

The participants felt that the size of the campus influenced their choices. They shared they thought the size of the campus influenced how they fit in. One student, Laura, shared that she did not like a campus because of its size, "Well 'cause the first school that I visited was U Park and like as soon as stepped off the rug, I said oh no, that's not for me. Like it was just too big. Like ya know what I'm sayin? Like it was too big, too many people." Laura knew that a campus that was large would not meet her needs. Evan added to the discussion by sharing that he was concerned about size, "I felt like I wouldn't even fit in cause that campus is too big, too." Evan and Laura shared the sentiment of the participants by explaining how they felt they would not fit in on a campus that was too big.

Eight students expressed their perceptions about how a smaller size was better for them and they felt more comfortable with a campus of a smaller size. One student, Nikki, commented on this, "I thought it was small, but that's what I liked the most about it, because I am from a small high school." Nikki wanted to attend a small college because she was from a small high school. In addition, Crystal felt that size influenced the reputation a school had for the partying of students. She felt that big schools were synonymous with party schools. She said, "I didn't want to go somewhere too big because everybody parties and then they do really bad." Big or small, students shared that the size of the campus impacted their decision. Thirteen students felt that they would be more comfortable at a smaller campus where they believed they would receive more individualized attention. This also relates to the student-institution fit discussed later.

Participants perceived how size would affect the attention they would be given. In addition to where a campus is located, the idea of the 'right' size was important to participants. One participant, Crystal, reflected the view of the group, "I felt more at home, more at ease. I felt

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like, I wasn't going from 1,200 kids in my high school to 15,000 kids at a college." One explanation for this is that participants wanted to feel comfortable in their surroundings.

Participants mentioned that they believed that at a bigger school, they might feel like a number. 'Feeling like a number' is a common phase to explain the lack of individualized attention by faculty and staff. Cho et al. (2008) found that for racial minorities, location and size were the most important factor in influencing a students' choice. This closely relates to the findings of this study, because 70% (26 out of 37) of the participants were considered minority students.

Location

The location of the college or university can influence college choice. Choosing a location closer to home can allow the students to maintain connections to their friends, families and even workplaces (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). The participants of this study shared many perceptions about the location of Penn State Schuylkill.

Positive perceptions about location.

Participants indicated that they and their parents may have liked the location because it was rural and they felt like they would not get into trouble or be distracted.

Although many participants found benefits to a campus with a rural location, others were concerned about how the rural location would influence them culturally. Three participants were concerned about discrimination and the lack of diversity within the community surrounding the campus. For the local students who grew up in small towns, the location was more attractive because it was close to home. One of the students, Austin, said, "It was local and I could save a lot of money, ya know, commuting back and forth and that's why I chose this campus." These students could live at home, continue to work and spend time with family and friends. They thought maybe there would not be as many opportunities for entertainment and shopping, but

their parents were pleased with the location because, to them, it meant students would not have as many opportunities to get in trouble. The students shared their parents perceived the rural location to be away from the potential for crime.

For the rural students, the location allowed them to stay close to their families and continue working. One student, Nikki, reflected the perspective of the group, by saying, "so I selected the ones that were close." Staying close to home allows students the potential to can save money by commuting.

Challenges related to location.

The students felt that the rural location might be challenging for shopping, culture and entertainment. The students shared that the rural location seemed isolated compared to the cities in which they grew up. They commented that the surrounding area lacked malls, restaurants, movie theaters and places where students of color could buy hair products or ethnic food. One Black student, Sharita, explained, "it was in the middle of nowhere." Some students were concerned about how the rural location would affect their college experience.

Reasons location influences choice.

First-generation college students often choose a campus that is closer to home rather than look for the 'right' fit, which can lead to dissatisfaction or withdrawal (Choy, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Reid & Moore, 2009;). The participants of this study seemed to want to go to college within a reasonable distance to their homes. In addition, some first-generation college students stay close to home so they can continue working (Engle, 2007; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Thirty-five of the participants lived within driving distance of the campus so their families could easily drive to visit or the students could go home for the weekend. The participants seemed to feel safe knowing that they can get home if they needed to. In addition, they indicated that their

families wanted them to be close to home. This finding is closely connected to the student-institution fit.

The location can influence a student's decision because the college campus is often in a different environment than their home. The urban participants wanted to get away, this reasoning led them to look to rural locations where they felt safe. Sharita explained many of the campuses she visited were 'in the middle of nowhere." This perception was in contrast to the urban environments in which the participants were living.

Student-institution fit

To make the decision to enroll at a college, a student must be satisfied with the student-institution fit. Student-institution fit is defined as how well the student fits in with the campus' environment and culture. Fitting in seemed very important for 12 participants. Tim, a White student, was able to sum up why it can be difficult for first-generation college students to choose a college to attend. He said, "Because really I was kind of a fish out of water. Everything was pretty much new to me." Participants felt like college environment was different than anything they had experienced previously.

Sometimes, a student can't really pinpoint what the issue is or why they feel like they would not fit in—they just know they will not. Nikki added that she wanted to be comfortable. She said, "Because I'm not going to go to a school that I'm really uncomfortable." In the case of Alexandria's sister, she just did not feel comfortable and it was having a negative psychological and academic effect on her. Alexandria said her sister's situation impacted her by increasing her concern about fitting in. She said:

Like my sister. She was at community college. And she was staying on campus there. After a semester there she was just like, I can't take it here no more. And she said it wasn't

the students, like she had a lot of friends there, she said the classes were easy. It was just

she didn't like the school.

Alexandria and Nikki reiterated the thoughts of the group. They wanted to be comfortable on the

campus they chose and in their new surroundings. They wanted to be successful and felt that

students needed to find a place that fit their needs.

It is important for all college students to find a connection to their campus, but this can be

especially important for first-generation college students. The participants were very concerned

about fitting in on the campus their ultimately chose. For these participants, the process of finding

the best fit seemed almost to be a process of elimination. In other words, the participants had a

'choice set' or a list of potential colleges. As they researched colleges and universities, although

somewhat limited, they judged whether or not that campus would be a fit. Student-institution fit is

an extremely intuitive process, often not based completely in rational choice or fact (Hossler et

al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). The participants just wanted to 'feel comfortable' where they

chose to attend. The fit between the college and the student has been shown to be a key factor in

enrollment, persistence, and retention (Hossler et al., 199; Paulsen, 1990). In addition, first-

generation college students could be impacted by the differing influences between their home

communities and their campuses, which could affect how they fit within the institution (Cho et

al., 2008; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997).

Cost

Eight participants mentioned finances or cost when discussing the influences in their

college choice. These participants discussed their challenges related to finances. Kami said,

"Everything that like, makes college a little bit more harder to do is like, your parents don't have

the money to put you through college —and then you have to worry about paying rent and food

and the refrigerator; having something for the winter so that you won't be cold going to events, like, it's a lot of stuff that you want to do —and sometimes being, like, financially stricken is hard — and it's, like, stressful." Kami shared the students' fears for affording college by explaining the sentiment of the participants. Interview participants also explained the importance of finances in their decision. Cost was pretty much the biggest factor." Tim expressed the importance of cost in the decision to attend college. He said that cost was the strongest influence in his decision, a sentiment that eight students shared.

The increasing cost of tuition, books, fees and room and board weighed on the students. For these participants, cost influenced their decisions about college choice. In addition, students were limited in their choices because of cost. Four students mentioned wanting to attend highly selective expensive private universities, but when it was time to make a decision, they could not afford the $25,000-$45,000 per year for tuition.

Despite the cost, participants still see the benefits of attending college. Three students noted the importance of viewing college as an investment, despite its high cost. Four of the students explained they accepted the debt because they would pay it off with a higher paying job because of their education. Allison shared this opinion by saying, "Others said it probably would be the best decision of your life. They said yeah, you would be in debt at first, but then the reward was so much bigger." Allison explained that the value of her degree mattered more than the cost. Austin reiterated this thought, "I know I'm in debt, but [laughs] uh, that puts me at an — at an advantage to other people. It's just — college is expensive and it's — it's an investment." He said that he knows he will graduate with debt but that he believes he will be at advantage in the job market. Karl, a Black student, added similar thoughts, "For me, really – I wouldn't really care about cost, because – because as soon as I earn my degree, I'm, you know, I'm just gonna pay it

off." Karl believed that he would pay off his debt off as soon as he graduates because he will have a well-paying job.

Ten participants hoped to earn scholarships or receive financial aid to afford the schools to which they applied and they realized that they needed to look for affordable options. A student, Nikki, shared this sentiment for the group, "I was scared abut the cost, so cost came into play, which made me wonder whether or not I should actually follow through with going to college." Cost becomes a factor in the very late stages of college choice (Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Students consider cost as a potential factor because every participant had a limit to what they could ultimately spend or borrow to finance their education.

Participants shared concerns that their families had about spending a lot of money. They shared that the parents and family members wanted the students to be sure that their motives were educational and not purely social. Vivian shared the perspective of the group by saying her parents said, "it's a lot of money, make sure you are not going just because your boyfriend's going or just because your friends are going. Be sure it's what you want to do." Because the parents and family members had not attended college, they wanted to be sure that the students were attending college for academic aspirations. In addition, some parents were skeptical that the degree was worth the cost.

Summary

This chapter discussed the findings within the three stages of the Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice. During the predisposition phase of the college choice model, most participants could identify a specific memory leading to an aspiration or desire to attend college. The participants were influenced by parents, other family members and siblings and by the neighborhoods in which they grew up. Finally during predisposition, the participant's high school

experience (grades, scores, curriculum) influenced their college choice. During the search phase, the participants were influenced by their guidance counselors. In addition, the participants had limited visits to college campuses. The final theme discussed during the search phase of the college choice model was the participants lacked knowledge about college choice. This chapter concludes with themes found in the third phase, choice. The participants' lack of knowledge about college choice continues to be an influence. During the choice of phase of the college choice model, the participants faced obstacles during the financial aid process. The participants were influenced by the size, location, and their perception of fitting in on campus. Finally, the participants were influenced by the cost of their education.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND SYNTHESIS

Introduction

This research study used qualitative methodology to collect data from in-depth interviews and focus groups of first-generation college students to understand their perceptions about the factors that influenced their college choice. The participants included 37 students attending a small rural campus of a larger research university in Pennsylvania. This chapter focuses on analyzing, interpreting and synthesizing the findings in response to two research questions.

This chapter begins by listing the research questions, followed by a discussion of the interpretation of the findings, categorized by three major themes—aspiration, barriers, and resources. Each theme of this research study connected across cases, stages and categories. In Figure 4, I illustrate a new sociological model for college choice. This model describes aspiration, barriers to college choice and resources used to overcome the barriers located within the three stages of college choice previously identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1999). This chapter discusses this sociological model and its relationship to empirical research and the theoretical framework for this study.

Research Questions

For this research study, there are two research questions.

1. What factors did participants perceive to influence their college choice?
2. To what extent, and in what ways, do students perceive their college choice to be influenced by significant others (e.g., parents, siblings, other family members, guidance counselors, teachers and friends)?

College Choice Sociological Model

Through the process of synthesizing and interpreting findings, a new sociological model emerged. This section describes the new model based on three themes:

1) Aspiration: students desire a higher social class and believe a college education is the means to attain this.

2) Barriers: students face powerful obstacles that inhibit their college choice processes.

3) Resources: students find support to overcome the barriers to navigate the college choice process.
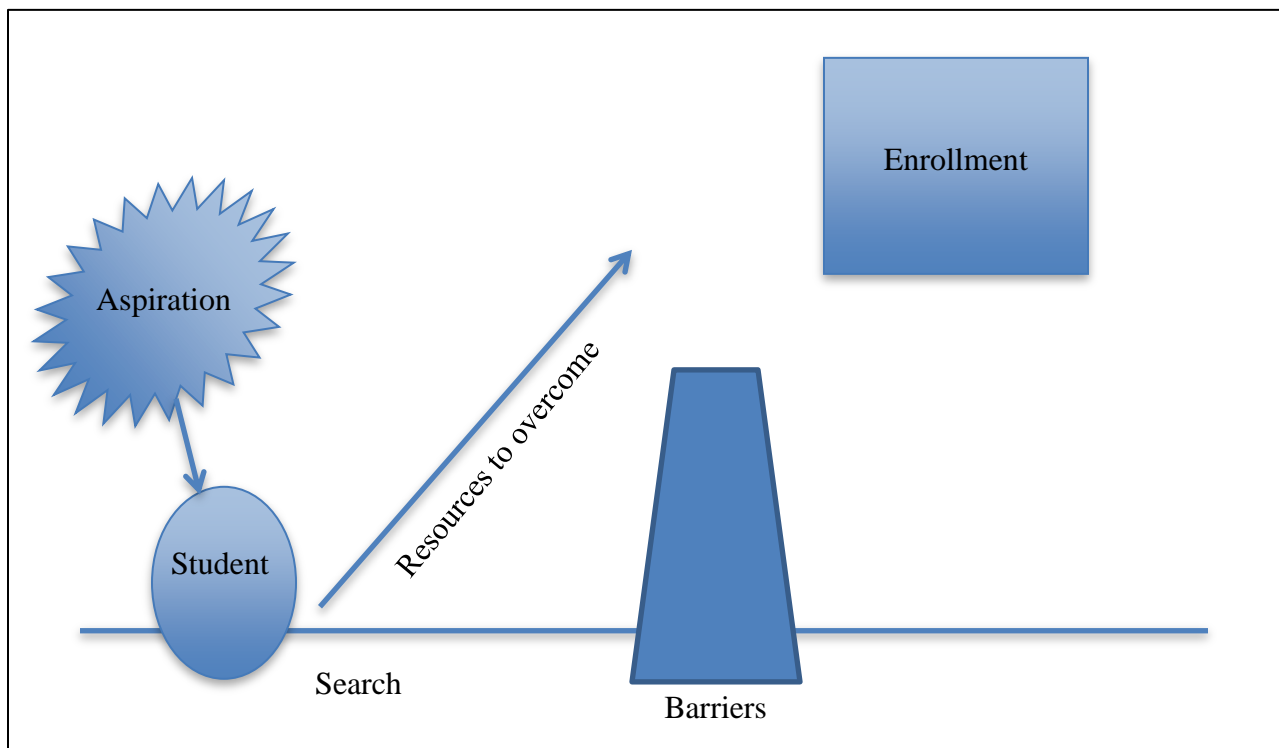

Figure 4

The conceptual model depicts the college choice model.

The model shown in Figure 4 is discussed in relationship to the theoretical framework. The students' aspire to increase their status and attempt to gain status through social mobility by entering the college choice process. As the students develop their aspiration, powerful socio-cultural processes work to reproduce existing class status. To overcome these barriers faced through their own cultural capital and habitus, students activate resources that increase social capital.

This chapter provides a discussion about how the components of the sociological model relate to the empirical research and these theoretical concepts. First, status attainment and social mobility models are discussed within their relationship to the students' desire for a better life, to find better jobs and get away from their neighborhoods. This is followed by a discussion about the barriers students face in their college choice as well as the framework for social reproduction theories including the concepts of cultural capital and habitus. The final section examines the resources used by the students to overcome these barriers through relationships with parents, siblings, other family members and guidance counselors and the relationship to social capital and current empirical research.

Aspiration: influenced by the desire for a better life

Twenty-two participants, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status, mentioned the desire to have a better life. The participants in both the focus groups and the interviews conveyed the same sense of importance in the ideal that a college education would provide a better life. It appeared that most participants believed that a college education was the avenue for social and professional advancement. Conceptually, the desire for a better life plays a role during the predisposition phase of college choice. Many participants of this study seemed to be highly influenced by their lower socioeconomic status, which has been shown to impact their aspiration

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to attend college (Hossler et al., 1999; Kern, 2000; Kinzie et al., 2004; McDonough, 1997; Teranishi & Behringer, 2008). Although students felt impacted by their class, the participants did believe that they could improve their status and wealth by going to college. The participants were aware of not wanting to remain in the status quo. Walt shared the students' perspective by saying, "With your higher education, you could get a job for any type of business. It don't matter if it's Penn State or Oklahoma University, as long as it's a college degree." Another student, Karl, added, "The purpose of a college degree is to live a better life, live in a great environment, have anything you want." Like Walt and Karl, the participants felt that earning a college degree would give them stability, status and wealth. In examining aspiration, two conversations emerged, those about getting better jobs and those about leaving a bad neighborhood.

Better jobs.

It seemed that the students' believed that they would find better jobs and ultimately make more money if they had a college degree than if they only had a high school diploma. They seemed to believe that they would have more choices and potentially more job satisfaction if they could finish college. The students believed in social mobility models, the ideological "American Dream," that anyone from any income level can move to a higher class and become wealthy. Many participants perceived that education was worth the financial cost and the investment of time and resources.

Ten students felt that in this economy, a high school diploma would not be sufficient in providing career opportunities. The students felt to live the lifestyle they wanted, they needed to make money. To make money, they needed a college degree. One student, Amanda, explains this perception, "College gives you better opportunities in life, better job, more income, cause a high school diploma's really nuthin anymore. It's like you have to have your college degree. I feel like

in this day and time, that's the best thing you can do is go to college." The participants shared that a college education would provide more job opportunities and the chance for higher income potential. The participants shared that they felt pressure to earn a college degree because they realized that a high school diploma's value was minimized in this economy.

I believe the students' perception that college is an avenue to increase wealth is related to the influences of society and other people in their lives. This finding is supported by both theory and research. Status attainment and social mobility theories show that people can improve their lifestyle by increasing their education and their wealth. A college education can be an important asset to improve one's status (Collins, 1994; Engle, 2007; McDonough, 1997; Reid & Moore, 2009). An individual's education level influences his social class (Collins, 1994). A college education is integral to earning wealth in American society (Engle, 2007). Other studies about first-generation college students (Bui, 2002) and underrepresented students (Holland, 2010) have shown that students who attend college have the potential to find a higher-paying job upon graduation. Aspiration is shown in the desire for a better job, as well as the desire to leave a bad neighborhood. The next section describes my synthesis of the findings about a student's neighborhood.

Getting out of a bad neighborhood.

In addition to providing the opportunity for better jobs, participants also believed that education would allow them to leave bad neighborhoods. Both participants from rural and urban homes desired this change. The rural students wanted to move to an area with more jobs and opportunities for advancement. One participant, Nikki, reflected this sentiment, "If I'd stayed at home, I'd probably be working at Dunkin' Donuts." The participants believed that their hometowns provided only minimum-wage paying job opportunities.

The urban students wanted to leave behind the crime and violence found in their hometowns. Most participants did not want to be associated with the unemployment, drugs and alcohol and general lack of motivation perceived in their neighborhoods. One student, Katelyn, shared, "you know, some people still be getting shot and everything and I just don't wanna be around that."

Status Attainment.

A college education can increase status attainment (Ceja, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999; Kern, 2009). Status attainment models state students' options have been limited since they were born, (Blau & Duncan, 1978; Collins, 1994; Hossler et al., 1999). These models illustrate ways socioeconomic status can influence individuals to attain higher levels of status.

The college degree seems to symbolize overcoming a momentous hurdle that would improve the students' lives. The participants wanted more job satisfaction and stability than their parents had. The idea of living 'paycheck to paycheck' did not seem appealing. A major reason for the participants' desire to earn a college degree is that their parents did not have one. The participants wanted a degree because they did not want to struggle financially. Most participants witnessed their parents' challenges and seemed to want life to be more stable, enjoyable and satisfying. They believed that a college degree would provide that stability and opportunity. They perceived a college education would provide them with a path to wealth, satisfaction and contentment. It appeared that students learned that a college degree was important in achieving their desire for wealth very early on in their lives. Most of the participants desired to attend college before graduating from high school because they believed that college was the way to live a better life. Research supports this perception. Collins (1994) found that investing in education provides opportunities for better jobs and Lin (1999) found that education influences occupational

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status and earnings. In addition, the media and the school system seemed to contribute to the students' understanding of a better life through education.

The participants seem to want to change their status so that they did not feel inferior to those who graduated from college. The participants valued the cultural capital, specifically the language and education of the upper and middle class. One student, Carmen, shared this perspective, "Not everyone uses better grammar, but I think the people who go to college are more prestigious or something. I think they carry themselves better than people who did not go to college. Education really plays a role." Her comments represent the idea that the students understand that certain mannerisms and actions carry more value in our society.

Social mobility.

To achieve higher status the students needed social mobility. The concept of social mobility provides insight about how first-generation college students may advance to a different social group through education. London (1992) found that education allows students to 'move up' to a higher social class. In addition, Sewell and Hauser (1972) found that education has a direct impact on status, which these participants seemed to understand through personal experience or media portrayals of education. Students have seen through the media and societal references that people with college degrees have more opportunities for job growth and increased salaries.

Aspiration is important, but aspiration alone does not allow first-generation college students to navigate the process or overcome all of the barriers in status attainment or social mobility. It is a complicated process involving many relationships and experiences that lead the student through the college choice process. Moving status groups can be very difficult for students because it is difficult for an individual to overcome the effects of where he or she came from. For example, Sawhill and McLanahan (2006) assert that it takes five generations for a

family to change their economic status. They explain that 'rags to riches' stories from one generation to the next are very rare. This challenge is something that these participants will face in their experiences.

Summary of aspiration

A major theme of this research is that the desire for a better life truly influences the participants' college choice. The participants see going to college as having many internal and external benefits. Many of the students mentioned a desire for something better, to better themselves, or to have a better life. "Being better," a word we use every day, yet rarely define, was influential in developing the aspiration to go to college. The participants added that going to college can give them better jobs, a better lifestyle, and better homes. One participant, Sharon, said "we are the ones that go to school, we better ourselves." Kim added, "A college education makes you live better in the real world." The students believed that college is an investment that will provide a better life.

Barriers to the college choice process

Despite the students' aspiration, they often faced barriers during their college choice process throughout the stages identified in the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice. This section describes several barriers to college choice including a student's status as first-generation, their high school grades, discouragement from other people, and the student's limited knowledge about college choice.

First-generation college student status as a barrier.

For the participants, being a first-generation college student was a barrier in itself. First-generation college students face disadvantages in access, attendance and persistence in college choice (Bui, 2002; Choy et al., 2000; Engle, 2007; Reid & Moore, 2009). The participants felt the

need to explain that despite their upbringing, they wanted to have a better life. One participant, Nikki, reflected this view by saying, "Just because our parents did not succeed doesn't mean we aren't going to try. Because we are determined, especially with the economy, we're going to make a difference." Participants felt that their parents' lack of education was reflective of their parents' lack of success.

In addition, their parents' lack of information and awareness can limit the students' options. Parents' work schedules may limit their time to help with homework and encourage co-curricular involvement within the school, behaviors that may develop college preparation and knowledge (Ceja, 2006; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). An explanation to this is that parents with hectic schedules or little information may not know how to encourage things that have been shown to be important in college admissions like advance placement courses, timely applications, and rigorous academic courses including math and sciences (Hossler et al., 1999; Kern, 2000; King, 2009; McDonough, 1997). This can result in their students being at a disadvantage in the college choice process.

The participants perceived the children of people who graduated from college to be at an advantage. One participant, Vivian, reflected, "The children of people who went to college already, the people of the upper class, it's kind of expected of them, or they just get accepted, their name, the last name gets' em in." In addition to being first-generation college students, the participants also faced challenges related to their high school grades.

Although first-generation college students are mistaken in their assumption that children of college-educated parents do not go through the same admission process, it is the case that those students are more likely to be immersed in a social environment that provides substantial sources of guidance and encouragement for the college-bound including better schools, parents who stress

the importance of grades, and neighborhoods where a college-education is the norm (Cho et al., 2008; McDonough, 1997). Several qualitative studies have illustrated the college awareness that the children of college graduates have (Barrett, 2011, McDonough, 1997). These studies describe the student's habitus—their parents are college graduates, all of their aunts and uncles went to college, and the students expected to attend college. Their parents often took them to college campuses for cultural events or sporting events and they have a natural comfortability with the collegiate environment. In addition, middle and upper class parents expect to mediate if their child experiences any problems at school, where working class parents are not comfortable getting involved (Flora & Flora, 2008; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Flora and Flora (2008, p. 62) discuss 'concerted cultivation' attributed to Annette Lareau where middle class parents feel empowered to impact their children's future through activities. This is compared to the working class parents who do not believe it is necessary to provide these experiences; they support "accomplishment of natural growth" (Flora & Flora, 2008; p. 63). The next section provides further discussion about first-generation college students' experiences specifically related to how their high school grades have become a barrier to their college choice.

High school grades as a barrier.

Low high school grades were perceived to be a barrier for these participants. Participants with low grade point averages realized that high school achievement was important only when they discovered that there were some schools in which they would not qualify for the admissions standards. One student, Carmen, reflected this view, "I never wanted to do more. I never wanted to go the extra mile—I just did enough to get by." Many of the participants reflected that they were satisfied with mediocre grades, just getting by, in high school. At that time, they failed to realize how this would affect their choices. Holland (2010) found that students did not realize the

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importance of academic achievement in a rigorous course load to improve their admission options.

In addition, many participants had been influenced by other's opinions of their limitations or what they might be qualified to do. One participant, Raquel, shared, "My father said you're not gonna get accepted into this school, so I considered not applying." The participants seemed to feel discouraged if others told them they would not get accepted. This often led to waiting to apply which increased the likelihood of rejection.

Although high school grades impacted these students in their college choice process, the most challenging barrier seem to be the participants' lack of knowledge about college choice which is discussed in the next section.

Limited knowledge about college choice as a barrier.

Participants perceived a limited knowledge about the admission processes and how to go about navigating those processes. One student, Destiny, explained, "students who aren't educated about exactly what college is—or what they should be looking for—or, um, how to apply—they are at a disadvantage." College choice knowledge is low among low-income and minority students (Engle, 2007; Holland, 2010; Saenz et al., 2007). The participants shared that they had never seen nor knew how to complete the paperwork expected of a college applicant. One student, Anisha, explained, "I had to Google samples of stuff and then I just prayed, God, please let this be right." Anisha's experience was common among the participants who did not know how to proceed through the stages of college choice. Because the participants perceived their knowledge level to be minimal, they needed to rely on their family, parents, counselors and teachers to help them understand and receive information to apply for admission and student aid, which will be discussed in the section about resources used to overcome the barriers they faced.

Because the participants lacked knowledge about college choice, they often waited until the deadlines had approached or passed. One student, Amanda, shared the view of the group, "a lot of people waited til the last minute, but they thought 'the deadlines are over, I can't go to schools, I'm not gonna go." Waiting until the deadlines had passed made the process more difficult for the participants and limited their options for college attendance. In addition, the likelihood of receiving scholarships or student aid is reduced as well as the availability for housing and other resources aimed at helping at-risk students. Participants were also discouraged if they received a rejection notification from a college or university to which they applied. Another student, Amanda explained, "I got discouraged at first, because I didn't get accepted to one of the schools I applied to so I was just like maybe I should just go to community college. I didn't get accepted into this school—whose gonna take me now?" Participants had limited knowledge of how the admission's processes worked.

Discouragement from others.

Another barrier to college choice is discouragement from other family members, friends and guidance counselors. Because their friends and family did not understand the college choice process, participants felt they needed to prove that they could be successful in the college environment. In addition, some participants voiced concerns that their guidance counselors discouraged their college choice.

Family members.

First-generation college students often report being discouraged by family members (Engle, 2007). In addition, family members show disapproval because by going to college an individual is potentially unlike the other family members (Engle, 2007). For these participants, there seemed to be some level of perceived skepticism within the family unit. One student,

Tamara, shared this perception, "my family expected lower; they said, "you got into Penn State? We expected community college from you." Another student, Trent, said "some of my family members said it is great (getting accepted to college) but you won't ever make it." Family member's skepticism may be caused by the fact that no one else in the family had ever gone to college which may have made it very difficult for these families to understand how the student was able to change, or for students to prove otherwise.

Guidance counselors.

Students from urban high schools felt that guidance counselors did not provide the amount of support participants expected, which became a barrier in their college choice process. Guidance counselors could potentially play a valuable role in influencing first-generation college students, however they often attempt to lessen this role (Holland, 2010; Rosenbaum et al., 1996). Counselors do not want to discourage students, destroy self-esteem or anger the parents (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). In addition, the participants of this study felt that the guidance counselors did not seem to have enough time or resources to help all the students. The participants also felt that the guidance counselors were preoccupied with other tasks and responsibilities. The students needing the most guidance were least likely to receive it (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987).

Friends.

After applying and being accepted to go to college, many of the students faced challenges in their relationships with childhood or high school friends. Many students mentioned having friends who were jealous or thought that the students thought they were better than everyone else since they applied to college. College choice literature shows this to be a difficult obstacle for first-generation students. Some participants shared perceptions that their friends felt inferior or

jealous of their education. These participants said that their friends thought they changed and the students felt like they were the same. One student said:

> When I came home they felt as though I was superior to them, but it's like my attitude never changed, I guess they saw that I wasn't like, ya know, doin the same things they were doin. I know deep down inside, I'm still the same. I'm the same as they are. I came from where they came from. I grew up where they grew up, ya know? The only difference is I took it a step further. (Laura)

Laura explained that her friends thought she suddenly thought she was better than they were because she was going to college. Her thoughts portray not only the jealousy of friends but also the difficulty first-generation student face leaving behind their old neighborhoods for their education. Laura continued to feel like she was the same person from the same neighborhood but she said she felt motivated to have a better life.

Other participants shared how their friends questioned why they were going to college. Students shared stories about how their friends questioned their motivation and their motives for going to college. Amanda commented, "They said, why did you—why do you wanna go there? Why can't you go to community?" Students felt that their old friends did not understand their new lives. The lack of support from family, friends and counselors became a barrier for these participants. The next section discusses social reproduction theory and how its concepts explain the barriers first-generation college students face.

Social Reproduction.

Social reproduction theories, developed by Bourdieu, suggest that powerful socio-cultural forces are at work to reproduce current class structures (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2004; Tzanakis, 2011). Through social reproduction theory, Bourdieu addressed the relationship

between class, family and education (Tzanakis, 2011). Bourdieu argued that families provide their children with different types of capital, which create inequalities in education and occupation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2004; Tzanakis, 2011). Dominant classes use educational practices to maintain their position of dominance using schools and teachers to aid the creation of inequality (Deer, 2003; Tzanakis, 2011). Through social reproduction writings, Bourdieu theorized that the concepts of habitus and cultural capital reinforced these educational inequalities. The following section discusses these concepts.

Habitus.

The students' habitus limited them from knowing college-going behaviors and processes, which can work to reproduce the existing class structure of the students. Habitus is the dispositions, perceptions, and mental attitudes embodied in them from their childhood experiences (Reay, 2004; Smith, 2007). In addition, within their social circles, there were few individuals that were attending, planning to attend or graduating from college. Although the participants felt that a college education was a path to advancement, earning a degree was rare where they came from. One student, Bob, shared this view during a focus group, " the thing that makes the diamond so valuable is everybody doesn't have it." Bob, a Black student, was explaining that one of the reasons a college education was so important was because it was special—and not everyone accomplished it. The participants were already stepping outside of the habitus of their neighborhoods by planning to attend college.

Cultural capital.

Cultural capital seemed to limit the first-generation college students' college choice options, which can be seen as a barrier that also worked to reproduce existing class structures. Although the students had found limited value in their cultural capital, they hoped to increase

their cultural capital through their educational experiences. The participants seemed to want to acquire the cultural capital of the upper and middle class by referencing status symbols of aspiration including comments about more expensive cars, clothing, homes, and travel. I believe that increased cultural capital will be a result of their educational attainment, not only an influence or barrier to beginning their education.

The participants felt because their parents had not gone to college, their parents weren't viewed as successful in society and it was more difficult for the participants to be seen as credible college students. This relates to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and habitus. Without using the discourse and terminology of 'capital', the students knew that the cultural capital of their families was not as valuable as the upper or middle class cultural capital. They seem to realize that they were at a disadvantage because they did not have as much or know as much about college. These deficiencies make it difficult for students to pursue their educational desires.

As discussed in the section about wanting a better life, the participants did not want to be discounted because their parents did not graduate from college. The participants had the cultural capital of the working class, which often did not transfer value in the same ways as the cultural capital of the upper and middle class (Flora & Flora, 2008, McDonough, 1999; Smith 2007). Not wanting to be discounted for their class seems to show the students recognized their limited cultural capital and they wanted to acquire the capital associated with the middle or upper class.

Summary of barriers

Students face significant barriers through their college choice process. These barriers work to reproduce existing class status. The barriers discussed include their status as first-generation college student, lower high school grades, limited knowledge about college choice processes and discouragement from other family members, friends and guidance counselors. To overcome the

barriers developed by the students' habitus and cultural capital, the students need to activate resources to help them. These resources were activated in the form of social capital, or student's networks and relationships.

Resources for first-generation students

Despite the obstacles and barriers facing these students, they managed to enroll in college, which shows us that there are resources to support students who aspire to attend college. This discusses how these relationships were used to activate the resources needed to overcome the barriers they faced in the college choice process. The participants shared their perceptions about how other people, including parents, siblings, and other family members, helped them navigate their college process in very meaningful ways. In addition, students who participated in college preparatory programs at their high schools were able to activate resources to help navigate their college choice process.

The influence of parents.

Parents had a very profound influence on the college choice experiences and decisions of these participants. Parents often have the greatest influence in the student's college choice (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). Many of the participants' parents encouraged their students to attend college, which relates to the finding of the desire for a better life, discussed earlier. Parental support is a very important factor in college choice (Paulsen, 1990; Hossler et al., 1999; Ceja, 2006). One possible explanation for the significance of the parents' influence is that parent's may play the most important role in a child's life and development.

The participants also found their parents reinforcing the idea of bettering themselves. To illustrate this, Katelyn explained that her parents wanted her to go to college because they (the parents) missed out on many opportunities. In addition, Raquel said "My mother said to me, 'this

is what I'm losing and want you to live better." Students shared that their parents felt that a college education was a key to better job opportunities. Through a better job, the student perceived they could make more money, have more things and enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. Parents encourage education because of their struggles and the idea that they want their children to attain and accomplish more than they did (King, 2009). The participants perceived their parents wanted them to go to college because then they could be anything they wanted to be.

In addition, participants perceived their parents to have a desire for them to achieve more. One student, Raquel, shared the perspective of the group by saying "I believe that my parents wanted a better life for us. They said 'you don't wanna live like us. You don't wanna sometimes be struggling about wondering when you're gonna pay the next bill."

The influence of siblings.

Whether the participants were the oldest or the youngest sibling in their family, they perceived that their experiences with their siblings were an influence in their decision to attend college. This is supported by research. Blau and Duncan (1978) found that the eldest brother's education attainment influences the educational attainment of the other family members.

The participants' siblings were highly influential in the college choice process. In many instances, participants were motivated by a desire to help the younger sibling or seek advice or help from an older sibling. Students who had older siblings often sought their advice and seemed to trust what the siblings shared. One student, Austin, shared, "my sister kinda helped; if my mom was confused, then we went to my sister and she really helped out." Participants felt that their siblings' experiences could provide information for them.

Participants also wanted again to be better for their younger sibling, beginning a new cycle within the family. One student, Anisha, explained, "I'm older, she's younger; so I feel like her

knowing that I went to school and that I was able to do it, I think it takes like a little bit of worry off." Another student, Trent, said "I want my younger brother to look at me as a good man. Actually, to tell you the truth, that's probably the main reason I went to college is I want my brother to go to college too, and succeed."

In some cases, siblings motivated participants because they had made mistakes. The participants did not want to end up like the older brother or sister. They watched them make poor decisions and end up with regrets about their jobs, careers and education.

The influence of other family.

Family members are also influential in the process of college choice (Engle, 2007; McDonough, 1997). Participants received support from other family members. One student, Katelyn, shared the reflections of the group, "my older cousin, her mom didn't go to college either, so she was just tellin me, try my best and you know do all what I gotta do." Another student, Alexandria, shared, "my grandmother would always tell me that my future is up to me. She said the best thing for me to do was to go to college." These family members encouraged the participants to attend college.

The influence of college preparatory program counselors.

The schools with college preparatory programs had specific counselors and teachers to provide college counseling which had a very significant impact on the students. These participants were much more prepared, confident and aware about the college choice process. The schools that offered these programs were smaller, provided individualized instruction and taught students to value higher education. In addition, these programs expected behaviors that are closely related to college choice like completing college visits, receiving application assistance, and attending college fairs. These programs assist in developing social capital, including student's

networks, and their cultural capital, including their awareness about college choice, for these potential first-generation college students because the students who participated were more comfortable, more aware and more knowledgeable about college choice processes and application procedures.

As discussed previously in the section about barriers, college preparatory programs were often typical opportunities for upper and middle class students whose parents had attended college (Flora & Flora, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Studies have shown that students whose parents are college graduates are more aware of how to apply to college and what steps to take to ensure the appropriate rigorous coursework and academic achievement to be admitted (Barratt, 2011; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997, Smith, 2007).

Social capital.

The participants in this study perceived relationships with others to be important because the students needed people to help navigate the college choice process. College admissions is a very complicated process and the students needed the help of parents, other family members, counselors, and siblings to be sounding boards, resources, and provide information where the students lacked knowledge. This finding is in support of social capital theory. Social capital is defined by Lin (1999) as 'resources assessed in social networks.' Social capital provides opportunities that result from an individual's relationships. For example, participants had to rely on others to help provide information and navigate the process. Without these networks or with limited networks, these participants could be at a grave disadvantage. Someone in the students' relationship network needed to provide guidance, help and information about college admission, enrollment and student aid for these participants to overcome barriers in the college choice process. Social capital can be very important to first-generation college students. Hossler et al.

(1999) explain that social capital is 'currency' to assist in decision-making. They add it also provides a way for students to utilize resources not necessarily related to their parent's status.

A first-generation college student needs strong and well-developed social ties to gain access to higher education. One challenge continues to be that the other people in the lives of a first-generation college student may only have had limited knowledge themselves or limited time and resources to help. Holland (2010) argues that first-generation college students have a more difficult time maximizing their social capital for value in the marketplace, which seems to limit their options and experiences related to college choice. Despite the complexity of utilizing the resources within their social networks, the participants relied on the ties they developed.

For this study, the relationships with parents, family members, counselors and friends were very important to the participants because they needed to maximize their relationships to gain the most knowledge within their networks. Although sometimes limited, these relationships with others provided support, encouragement, and helped develop aspiration. They provided information, resources, and access to the processes and the discourse related to higher education.

Despite the students' aspiration and academic achievement, there were continuing barriers for college choice. They were unaware of deadlines and how to apply to college. One of the few ways to overcome this lack of knowledge was seek support and assistance from other people in their network of relationships. This social capital became very important to the students' potential college choice. Each of the participants in this study shared a special relationship with someone willing to help, a sibling, a parent, a guidance counselor or another family member.

Summary of resources

Despite aspiring to attend college and increase their status, the students needed to activate resources to overcome the barriers in their college choice processes. The students sought to utilize

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their social networks, or their relationships with others, including parents, siblings, other family members and counselors in college preparatory programs to find information and seek advice and direction to navigate the college choice process.

Chapter Summary

Regardless of race, gender, and status, the participants desired to have a better life, make more money and find a job they will enjoy which may have led to their desire to earn a college education. The desire for a better life seemed to lead the participants to aspire to attend college. Although the students did aspire, one stage in the college choice model, this did not guarantee attendance or enrollment. As the student progresses through the process, it is necessary to look at the student's academic achievement, a potential opportunity or barrier, and their relationship networks. Depending on their academic achievement, they may be considered for more difficult coursework, college preparatory programs, or support and mentoring from teachers and counselors. These opportunities provide these students with an advantage in the college choice process. Lower academic achievement provides students with fewer options.

Through the data collection and analysis, interpretation and synthesis that occurred writing Chapter 4 and 5, the conceptual model was further developed. The original conceptual model, found in Figure 2, oversimplified the college choice process by focusing solely on three concepts: social, cultural capital and habitus. The original conceptual model showed the student filtering through the college choice process being influenced separately by their habitus, their cultural capital, and their social capital. Through this study, I found these concepts to be closely connected and intertwined. Although these three concepts are integral to understanding a first-generation college student's college choice, there are other concepts and social constructs that influence students' choice as well. The updated model, found in Figure 4, illustrates a student's desire to

attend college through aspiration, overcome various barriers to admission, develop and maintain various relationships to be used as resources and finally, choose the 'right' college to attend.

In summary, this study has shown that college choice is a very complicated process with many factors that influence a student's path. The study has given support to the Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice (1999). In addition, it has shown that aspiration is a stage of the model, not the only component of the model. Despite aspiration, a student faces many barriers to admission. These barriers come in the form of socio-cultural processes at work to reproduce existing class status. To overcome these barriers, students must utilize resources in the form of social capital, which must be maximized throughout the college choice process to allow the student to navigate through the various stages.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore first-generation college students'

perceptions about the influences affecting their college choice process. While Chapter 4 provides

a detailed discussion of the findings and Chapter 5 interprets those findings, this chapter discusses

the conclusions and recommendations based on those findings. In addition, the chapter discusses

the assumptions from Chapter 1 and those assumptions reflected in the researcher's field notes.

This chapter concludes with a final reflection about this study.

There are four conclusions based on the findings and interpretations.

1.   Participants' socioeconomic status, neighborhoods and academic achievement
        (or lack thereof) limit their options for a college education.

2.   Despite the barriers, participants still had a desire to attend college. Although
        the students aspired to attend college, the aspiration alone was not enough to
        navigate the process.

3.   The participants needed other people, family, counselors and parents, to
        encourage, support and advise them about information, deadlines, forms and
        requirements for college applications.

4.   Participants needed to choose the college that best fit them. To choose the best
        fit, participants needed to examine institutional factors including location, size,
        and cost.

Conclusions

Socioeconomic status, neighborhoods and academic achievement.

The participants faced substantial challenges related to their socioeconomic status, their neighborhoods and their academic achievement. The participants' socioeconomic status limited their options because most participants considered themselves working class, poor, or middle class. They had limited financial and social resources to utilize to attend college. In addition, many participants had average test scores and grades, which limited their options for scholarships and acceptance at colleges and universities. Participants were not in the top of their class academically or financially so they were often overlooked or ignored by guidance counselors. Finally, the participants' options were limited by the neighborhoods in which they grew up. The neighborhoods were mostly poor, urban or rural, and lacking in job opportunities. The participants' habitus was that of working class people who did not typically seek higher education. The participants lived in neighborhoods where they weren't taught to value or expect education. Their habitus could be considered a limitation, yet the participants wanted to achieve more. The participants wanted more from their lives, so they aspired to attend college.

Aspiration.

Despite, or potentially because of, the obstacles the participants faced, they aspired to go to college. The obstacles the students faced may have motivated them to advance their education. Because of their aspiration, the students started on a path to seek information about college. Most participants wanted to attend college at a young age. This desire to attend college is very important; without it, many students do not put themselves on a path to attend college. The students' aspiration itself was overcoming an obstacle, because most people in their

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neighborhoods and families were not attending college. Because of their aspiration, the participants knew they wanted to go to college, but still did not know how to get there.

Influences of other people.

Although aspiration is a key component in the college choice process, aspiration alone is not enough to influence these students to attend college. The desire to attend is necessary and important, but it takes more effort and commitment to see the process through until enrollment. Because the participants had limited information themselves, they sought help, advice and encouragement from other people in their lives. This is still a challenge because even the other people the participants utilized sometimes did not have the time or resources themselves to assist in the college choice process. It seemed though, that every participant had at least one person that they relied on for information, support and encouragement.

Student-Institution fit.

Aspiring to attend college, seeking information from others, and being encouraged by others, led the students to the final stage of decision-making—choice. The actual choice can be considered one of the most difficult tasks because students need to account for all the factors about the institution such as size, location, and how they feel on that particular campus. Students need to answer the question, what is the best fit for me? College choice is a very individual decision based on what means the most to the student.

The participants had to make the decision about what college to attend based on the best fit in a price range the student could afford. The students examined factors like location, size, and how they felt on campus before deciding what college to attend. Finally, the participants had to find a way to finance their education. Many hoped for scholarships and grants in the form of student aid; others borrowed funds through loans to achieve their college choice plans.

No matter how big or small, close or far, expensive or affordable, if the participant did not feel that they would be comfortable in the new surrounding, they perceived that they would not attend. With all the barriers facing these participants, feeling comfortable on campus was very important. It would have been easy for these students to say they just can't do it—and few people would have questioned them. Going to college was not part of their communities, their culture or their habitus.

Summary of conclusions.

This study found four conclusions related to the influences of college choice for first-generation college students. In summary, these conclusions have been discussed in-depth in this chapter. In the early stages of their choice process, the students were influenced by their individual factors. These factors can limit their options. Despite their limitations or barriers, the participants desired to have a better life an aspired to attend college. This process was influenced by the participants' relationships with others. As the participants reflected on their choice process, the student-institution fit became very important in the likelihood to enroll. These conclusions address the three stages of college choice and the various influences found through analysis and interpretations of the data collected in this study.

Revisiting Assumptions

Prior to beginning the analysis, I wrote several assumptions that I believed about first-generation students and college choice. First, I believed that parents would not be as supportive as parents who have graduated from college because they do not have as much experience or knowledge about the process. Although parents who did not attend college seem to have less knowledge, they do not seem to be less supportive than any other parents. I found that parents provided a great deal of support and encouragement to the participants. I almost found that these

participants felt that more was 'on the line' and that they needed to succeed. It seemed more profound and more apart of changing their families' history. Almost all the participants mentioned making their parents or families proud.

Next, I believed that college choice was based on many factors, and that it was not based solely on cost. This assumption held true through the study. College choice is very complicated and does not seem to be just an economic decision. Many factors, including student-institution fit, location, size, high school academic achievement, influence the college choice of these participants. In the end, the affordability and the cost impact the decision, but do not dictate the decision. Students seem to choose a college based more on intuition, than on money.

I believed that other people would be an influence on these students. This also held true through the data analysis. The participants were strongly influenced by other people, including parents, family members, siblings and guidance counselors. Some participants had very positive support networks where information was provided and help given. Other participants felt discouraged and doubted by other people in their lives. Regardless of whether the other people were positive or negative, they still played a role in the influence of the participants.

Finally, I believed that the students would value a college education and think that it is important to their future. Every student shared the importance that their education was playing in their lives. I expected the students to value education, but I did not realize to what extent and what meaning the students placed on attending college. Their education symbolized a transition to a new way of life for these participants. Because of the high percentage of first-generation college students that do not persist, I did not expect the students to be so sure of their plans, to be so committed to graduating. I did not expect students to put such power in earning their degree

Researcher reflections

After several years of conducting, analyzing and interpreting this research, I found that it has many personal and professional implications. Understanding first-generation college students has become increasingly important in higher education, especially at the campus in which I work. I am consistently involved in meetings, committees, and task forces that discuss issues related to the situation of first-generation college students. I have been able to provide insight and understanding into the challenges we are facing because of my experiences with this topic.

In addition, I also better understand my own college choice process, as well as the experience of my brothers. Being a first-generation college student, I have a stronger sense of understanding into the thoughts, feelings, and actions we faced going through this process. I have been able to provide insight to my cousins who are now prospective college students. More than providing social or cultural capital in terms of resources or knowledge, but I cam also share where we have come from and where we want to go through this college experience.

How the researcher has changed

In the beginning, I did not realize the severity of the barriers faced by first-generation college students. I knew that they had challenges, but I did not grasp the difficulty they faced in overcoming the obstacles to attend college. I have become much more observant about how social and cultural capital interact and transform my life experiences. I am continually witnessing examples of high and low levels of capital and the attempts for others to use for attempted gain in economic capital or status.

In addition, through the dissertation process, I faced challenges in learning to write scholarly qualitative research. Through the process, I transformed my writing style from a journalistic style to the academic standard. The process took many revisions and edits, but I

learned that the process of building a dissertation happens one sentence at a time. The journey was challenging for me. In the beginning, I felt the need to report every detail and want to tell each student's story as I learned in my undergraduate journalism coursework. Through the analysis and interpretation, I had to learn how to reduce the data-- something I learned is a challenge for many doctoral students. In addition, I needed to find my scholarly voice. I really struggled to find the confidence to make my assertions and critique the literature of others. Through it all, I have challenged myself to continue reading, writing and learning—a process that has transformed my writing and my experiences.

Recommendations

Recommendations for higher education administration

There are several recommendations for higher education administration. First, institutions should seek partnerships with high schools and community organizations to provide outreach programming to disseminate information about college choice because students would have the information necessary to apply to college. Next, institutions should find ways to breakdown complex processes and simplify applications and financial aid information so that first-generation college students do not get lost in the process. Sometimes, students and families are so overwhelmed by the process that they fail to follow through or believe that they can actually complete the work needed to enroll. Also, institutions should provide bridge programs, programs that help 'bridge' the gap between high school and college for underprepared and typically underrepresented students to gain academic and transition skills to enter college. These types of programs can occur in the summer before enrollment or even during the junior and senior year of high school. University faculty can be very involved in the development and implementation of these programs. Finally, cultivate donors to seek more private funding for scholarships to provide

resources to lower socioeconomic and first-generational families so students have the opportunity to afford and attend college.

Colleges and universities need to provide resources to prepare both students and parents for the college admissions process early in their academic careers. The administration should provide workshops and educational opportunities for parents so that the process isn't so intimidating. In addition, students should be able to use technology to answer questions and complete paperwork including applications, financial forms, scholarship applications and personal essays. Colleges and universities could partner with community libraries to provide informational workshops, posters and book-talks. Because they can offer internet access for those without access at home, libraries could be a valuable partner in providing information to prospective college students. The partnership between libraries and universities could also reach middle school and elementary school students as they develop college aspirations.

Recommendations for high schools

Despite challenges with funding and state mandated testing and curriculum guides, high schools have a great opportunity to provide information to students. High schools can learn from the successes at college preparatory programs at high schools. I recommend for school districts to develop programs that allow students to be aware of college at an early age. Specifically, students should visit college campuses beginning in 8th grade. In addition, improving cooperation, communication and collaboration between high schools and local colleges could be very beneficial to students. I also recommend counselors be hired or assigned to help students understand financial aid forms, applications and essay procedures.

Also, high schools could promote parent information about college choice through technology such as electronic newsletters and social media. In addition, high schools should

sponsor financial aid information nights and college fairs. Counselors should also be a resource for parents.

It is also important for high school administrators, counselors and teachers to send consistent messages early in a student's academic career. For example, the school community needs to reinforce the behaviors that promote college choice like earning good grades, taking difficult math courses, and studying for the SATs.

Recommendations for policymakers

Policymakers need to find ways to increase funding for college preparatory programs that could teach prospective students early on about the importance of higher education and how to navigate the processes. In addition, the policymakers should provide resources for high schools to add guidance counseling positions whose primary role is providing information and counseling for academic and career advancement. Policymakers could require schools to display, disseminate and promote college-going behaviors and information. Schools could mandate college fairs, information gathering and submitting applications. Similar to the first-year experience courses at many colleges and universities, policymakers could mandate college preparatory skills courses to ease the transition to college life. Unfortunately, the current budget makes implementing many of these recommendations difficult.

Recommendations for students and parents

To understand college choice processes, students need to seek help from teachers, counselors and family friends. When they develop the aspiration to attend college, students need to tell others about the desire to attain a college degree. To prepare for college admissions and college coursework, students need to take challenging course loads and realize the importance of academic excellence. In addition, parents need to encourage career exploration and college

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aspiration at an early age. Parents need to support students in excelling academically. Parents and students also need to discuss and consider savings accounts and college financing plans.

To help future students, first-generation college students need to be ambassadors at their high schools providing information to underclassmen about how to navigate the college choice process. The peer-to peer approach could have great potential in maximizing social capital for the high school students whose parents did not attend college. In addition, students can influence the culture in their schools and their neighborhoods to accept and develop college-going behaviors.

Recommendations for future research

Future research should be conducted about the specific ways in which students successfully navigate the college choice process. In what often seemed like insurmountable barriers, the students haphazardly navigated a very complicated process. I often found myself thinking, 'how did they actually do this?' This research could examine the specific behaviors that occur during the choice phase of college choice or how the choice set is formed during the search phase.

In addition, I would encourage researchers to explore the knowledge that students have and where they get it. This could provide information about how to improve the communication between universities and prospective students. Colleges and universities attempt to give information but it often seems like students are not getting it. I'd like to study ways that colleges disseminate information. I'd like to study the specific challenges faced by first-generation college students through communication with higher education institutions and high school administration.

It would also be interesting to interview other peers that did not aspire to go to college or others that may have aspired but did not filter through the college choice process. It would be

interesting to examine how neighborhoods and high schools influence the lack of aspiration. I'd like to better understand what made these participants different than their classmates, family members and their neighbors.

Chapter Summary

This study was an exploration of the influences that affect first-generation college students in their college choice processes. The participants overcame many obstacles to enroll in a college degree program. The purpose of this study was not only to explore the influences of these students but also provide the participants with an opportunity to share their story. They faced much of their lives as marginalized people in the afterthoughts of programs and processes. This study allowed them to share their aspirations, their hope for a better future, beginning with their educational journey.

The study's participants faced great obstacles, financial challenges, and tragedies, but a willingness to persist was apparent. These students are attempting to change the life course of themselves and their families. There is a great sense of accomplishment for the participants by just getting accepted and attending college; I hope for them and their families that they persist to their college graduation.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Focus Group Questions

Opening
Please introduce yourself, sharing where you from and what you are planning to major in.

Introduction
What kind of college student goes to college? Did you fit that description? Did you expect to go to college?
Who do you know that went to college?
In your own life, what kinds of things made you want to go to college?
What other options did you consider?
When you started college, how committed were you to graduating?

Transition
What does a college degree prepare students for?
What is the purpose of a college degree?
Why do people go to college?
What influences a person's decision to go to college? What influences their decision to go to a specific college?
What influenced your decision to go to Penn State Schuylkill?

Key Questions:

Aspiration:
What things were said to you about going to college? Choosing a major?
What should you expect from going to college?
How much involvement did your parents, guidance counselor/community/friends have in your decision to go to college in general? Or in selecting a particular college?

Application:
Describe your experience applying to college. What things did you need to know to complete the applications for college?
What things did you feel prepared for? What things did you feel unprepared for?
Who helped you apply to college?
What services did your school provide to help you in your college applications?

Attending Penn State Schuylkill:
What did your parents/guidance counselors/community/friends say about your decision to attend Penn State Schuylkill?
How important was feeling comfortable on campus in your decision to attend?
Did you visit campuses? Penn State Schuylkill? How did you feel on campus?

Ending
What advice do you have for a student making decisions about college?
What do you know now that you wish you knew when you were applying?

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Introductory
1. Please share your name, hometown, and major.

Concept: Habitus
2. What is your first memory of wanting to go to college? How old were you?
3. Who did you talk to about going to college? What did they tell you?
4. What was your family's attitude about a college education? Your peers? Your schools?
5. Compare your high school experiences with your college experiences. How was it similar? How was it different?
6. How does it feel to be a student here now? Do you feel like you fit in on campus?
7. Additional probing questions may be asked based on focus group responses.

Concept: Cultural Capital
8. How did your high school grades influence where you decided to go to college?
9. What resources did you need/use to apply to college? Who provided them? Where did you find them?
10. Did you feel that any other students had an advantage in the process? A disadvantage?
11. What information did you have about Penn State Schuylkill before you accepted your offer of admission?
12. Additional probing questions may be asked based on focus group responses.

Concept: Social Capital
13. How did the people in your family/peer group/school/neighborhood react to your decision to attend college?
14. Who was the greatest influence on where you applied? Least influence? Who had the greatest influence in where you actually attended? Least influence?
15. In what ways has your decision to attend college affected the way people in your family/school/community/friends treat you?
16. Additional probing questions may be asked based on focus group responses.

Closing
17. What is your overall feeling or assessment of Penn State Schuylkill? Do you like it here? Why? What do you like? What don't you like?
18. When you tell someone you attend Penn State Schuylkill what is their reaction?

Appendix C

Demographic Survey

Age _____

Hometown _____

Gender

☐ Male
☐ Female

High School G.P.A. _____/ 4.0

PSU G.P.A. _____/ 4.0

Highest verbal SAT score _____/ 800

Highest math SAT score _____/ 800

Mother's highest level of education

☐ High School diploma
☐ Some college/business trade school
☐ Associate's degree
☐ Bachelor's degree
☐ Unsure

Father's highest level of education

☐ High School diploma
☐ Some college/business trade school
☐ Associate's degree
☐ Bachelor's degree
☐ Unsure

Please provide your best estimate of your family's approximate yearly household income:

☐ Under $18,000
☐ $18,001-49,999
☐ $50,000-74,999

☐ $75,000-99,999
☐ $100,000 or more

Please indicate your race/ethnicity

☐ Black
☐ White
☐ Hispanic
☐ Asian
☐ No answer

List any colleges that you were not accepted to:

_____

_____

_____

List any colleges that you applied and were not accepted to:

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D

Research and Interview Question Matrix

	Research Questions	
Focus Group and Interview Questions	What factors did participants perceive to influence their college choice?	To what extent, do students perceive their college choice influenced by significant others?
1.	How did your high school grades influence where you decided to go to college?	How did you approach the topic with significant others?
2.	How did money affect where you went to college?	What were their initial reactions? What did they think about Penn State Schuylkill?
3.	How did your parents' education affect your knowledge about going to college?	How were your parents involved in your decision?
4.	What are three things that influenced you to attend Penn State Schuylkill? Probing questions will be asked based on what influences are discussed.	How did your high school guidance counselor advise you in regard to college choice? Attending Penn State Schuylkill?

5.	In what ways, did your hometown/neighborhood respond to your decision to attend college?	What did your friends think of your decision?
6.	What other options did you consider?	How did you feel when you visited campus? How did you feel when you arrived for classes?
7.	What was the primary reason you decided to attend college?	Now that you've spent some time here on campus, how accurate was your perception?
8.	What do you wish you knew before-- that you know now-- that would have aided you in the college choice process?	What information did you have about Penn State Schuylkill before you accepted your offer of admission?

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form for Focus Groups

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Influences that Affect First-generation College Students' College Choice:
A qualitative inquiry of student perceptions

Principal Investigator: Tiffany Cresswell-Yeager
Penn State Lehigh Valley
2809 Saucon Valley Road
Center Valley, PA 18034
610-285-5021
tjc8@psu.edu

Advisor: Valerie Gunter, Ph.D
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to better understand how you made the decision to attend college as a student whose parents did not attend college.

2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to answer questions in a focus group format. About 6 students will join the focus group. Focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. All names and identifiable information will be removed from transcripts.

3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort. In case of any issue or concerns, please contact Counseling Services at 570-385-6127.

4. **Benefits:** The benefits to you include an opportunity to share your experiences, adding to the body of knowledge about students' college choice. This study will provide Penn State Schuylkill's Office of Enrollment Services with valuable information about students' perceptions of the campus and the influences that affected their choice to attend the campus. The study could provide information that helps to positively contribute to improving retention on campus.

5. **Duration/Time:**
The focus group will last about 60 minutes.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at the home of the principal investigator in a locked file. The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review

Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and will have no bearing on your academic standing or services you receive from the University. Your response will be considered only in combination with those from other participants. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcripts and data analysis.

You may choose not to answer certain questions. The information obtained in the study may be published in scientific journals or presented at professional meetings and conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. If you speak about the contents of the focus group outside the group, it is expected that you will not reveal to other people what individual participants said.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Tiffany Cresswell-Yeager at (570) 640-0268 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the research team.

8. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____   _____

Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____

Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Informed Consent for Interviews

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Influences that Affect First-generation College Students' College
Choice:

                                    A qualitative inquiry of student perceptions

Principal Investigator: Tiffany Cresswell-Yeager
                                    Penn State Lehigh Valley
                                    2809 Saucon Valley Road
                                    Center Valley, PA 18034
                                    610-285-5021
                                    tjc8@psu.edu

Advisor: Valerie Gunter, Ph.D
                                    Indiana University of Pennsylvania

9. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to better understand how you made the decision to attend college as a student whose parents did not attend college.

10. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to answer questions during an interview about how you decided to go to college. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. All names and identifiable information will be removed from transcripts.

11. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. Some of the questions are personal and might cause discomfort. In case of any issue or concerns, please contact Counseling Services at 570-385-6127.

12. **Benefits:** The benefits to you include an opportunity to share your experiences, adding to the body of knowledge about students' college choice. This study will provide Penn State Schuylkill's Office of Enrollment Services with valuable information about students' perceptions of the campus and the influences that affected their choice to attend the campus. The study could provide information that helps to positively contribute to improving retention on campus.

13. **Duration/Time:**
The interview will last about 60 minutes.

14. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Your participation in this research is confidential. The data will be stored and secured at the home of the principal investigator in a locked file. The

Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections, the Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protections in the Department of Health and Human Services may review records related to this research study. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and will have no bearing on your academic standing or services you receive from the University. Your response will be considered <u>only in combination</u> with those from other participants. Pseudonyms will be used in the transcripts and data analysis.

You may choose not to answer certain questions. The information obtained in the study may be published in scientific journals or presented at professional meetings and conferences, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

15. **Right to Ask Questions:** Please contact Tiffany Cresswell-Yeager at (570) 640-0268 with questions, complaints or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel this study has harmed you. If you have any questions, concerns, problems about your rights as a research participant or would like to offer input, please contact The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections (ORP) at (814) 865-1775. The ORP cannot answer questions about research procedures. Questions about research procedures can be answered by the research team.

16. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____
Person Obtaining Consent   Date

Appendix G

Information Flyer to Recruit Participants

Attention Students!

What influenced you to attend Penn State Schuylkill?

Contact Tiffany Cresswell-Yeager, tjc8@psu.edu for more information.

Would you like to share your opinion and experiences?

If your answer is YES---

Did your parents go to college?

If your answer is NO---

Contact Tiffany Cresswell-Yeager, tjc8@psu.edu for more information.

❖ Participate in a focus group about the influences in first-generation college students' college choice, sharing your experiences and opinions.

❖ Only 60 minutes of your time.

❖ Free Pizza.

❖ Assist in a student research study.

This study is being conducted by a staff member at Penn State Lehigh Valley pursuing a doctoral degree at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP).

Appendix H

Overview of Findings

Findings	College Choice Stage	Emergent Themes
Participants identified a memory of aspiration	Predisposition	Previous research (Hossler et. al, 1999; McDonough, 19997; Paulsen, 1990) showed that first-generation college students aspired later in life; most participants had memories of wanting to go to college early in their schooling. Despite early aspiration, the students still faced significant barriers. This finding does support Hossler and Gallagher's Model of College Choice (1999) that aspiration is the necessary first step.
Participants were influenced by parents, other family and siblings	Predisposition	Previous research (Ceja, et al, 2004; Hossler et al., 1999) showed that parents and families encouraged college choice but this study pushed forward the idea that encouragement and support is paramount in overcoming barriers.
Participants were influenced by neighborhoods	Predisposition	Previous research has not focused on the student's neighborhood. I found college-going behaviors to be very rare which made the students' experiences more challenging. I connected these findings to Bourdieu's concept of habitus.
Participants' high school experiences influenced college choice	Predisposition	Previous research looked at quantitative studies involving many variables. I found the high school experience to be very important in the development of the student's social and cultural capital.
Participants were influenced by guidance counselor	Search	Research (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987) about the role of the guidance counselor is limited. I found many students blamed the guidance counselor for their lack of

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		knowledge about college choice.
Participants had limited college visits	Search	Research shows that most middle and upper class students begin visiting colleges during high school. I found the participants did not complete visits as part of their college choice processes, which inhibited their knowledge of colleges.
Participants lacked knowledge about college	Search	Research (Holland, 2010; King, 2009) shows that first-generation college students lack information, but I found that they lacked information about important components of college choice such as applications, college life, financial aid and academic success during high school.
Participants had limited knowledge about application processes	Choice	Previous research did not focus on application processes or students understanding of it. I found this to be a noteworthy barrier to college choice.
Participants faced obstacles applying for financial aid	Choice	Some previous research (Hossler et al., 1999) focused on the students' lack of economic capital. This study found students also lack social and cultural capital to complete these processes.
Participants were influenced by size, location, and fit	Choice	Previous research (Paulsen, 1990) focused on specific institutions. In general, I found that these factors do influence students late in the college choice process.
Participants were influenced by cost	Choice	Some previous research focused on the variable of cost. I found that it influenced these students late in the process; after they realized they applied late and their opportunities for financial aid were limited.