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## A Phenomenological Study of the Factors Leading Low Socioeconomic Status Urban Students to Enroll in a University

Luke D. Schultheis

University Nebraska-Lincoln, lukeschultheis@yahoo.com

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE FACTORS LEADING LOW  
SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS URBAN STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN A UNIVERSITY

by

Luke D. Schultheis

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Educational Studies  
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Under the Supervision of Professor Miles T. Bryant

Lincoln, Nebraska

December 2013

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE FACTORS LEADING LOW  
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Luke D. Schultheis, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Adviser: Miles T. Bryant

Low socioeconomic urban students do not attend universities at a rate proportional to other populations. This perpetuates a cycle of recurrence and diminished potential benefits associated with degree attainment. The commonly ascribed Theory of Student Choice (Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989) does not apply to this population.

The purpose of this study was to identify factors which motivated low socioeconomic urban students to enroll in a university. Three interviews, each up to two hours, were conducted with students of this population. The participants identified why they chose to enroll in a university.

The participants were not motivated to attend a university by parents, siblings and peers as traditionally associated with the Theory of Student Choice (Hossler, et al., 1989). Rather, they identified three factors, the first being the desire to avoid what was perceived to be a cumbersome transfer process from community college to university. The second factor was that the term “university” was prestigious and with it, they associated a variety of desirable institutional traits. The third factor was to avoid enrolling at a community

college altogether, which they perceived as being too “easy” and too similar to high school. It was also found that the indirect comments made by high school teachers about community colleges and universities were a factor.

These findings challenge those traditionally associated with motivating students to enroll in a university. Such unconsidered factors included cost-benefit decisions involving tuition and future earnings, the most direct academic route to a career, and the influence of family and peers.

Some factors which may be important in the development of a new model of student choice for this population include short-term decision making based upon one’s structural role within the family; local, rather than national choice of institution; perceived limited choice of institutions, even at the local level; the impact of teachers; and reliance upon faith that short-term decisions will yield favorable results.

Additional study needs to be conducted on low socioeconomic urban students in different geographic regions. This study should be of interest to those who desire to increase baccalaureate degree attainment of low socioeconomic students.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Access to higher education and completion of a baccalaureate degree has been widely acknowledged as the means by which students can secure full-time employment and increase the amount of expected lifetime earnings. In 2009, full time workers aged 16-24 years with a bachelor's degree or higher earned \$33,000 median income compared with \$18,000 for those who had not completed high school (Aud, Kewal Ramani, & Frolich, 2011). Various other benefits often associated with degree attainment include better health, longer life expectancy and exposure to less crime. While more people now hold baccalaureate degrees than in the past, the majority do not. Approximately 28% of those aged 25 years and older hold a bachelor's degree or higher, an increase from almost 25% in 2000 and 20% in 1990 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Those most at risk of not attaining a baccalaureate degree are those who live in poverty. In 2009, 19% of 5-17 year olds lived in families in poverty (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp & Tahan, 2011) and overall, the number of persons living in poverty hovered around 40 million (DeNavas, Carmen, Proctor, & Smith, 2009) which was especially pronounced in urban centers (DeNavas et al., 2009; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Knight, Norton, Bentley & Dixon, 2004; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Wilson, 1987). Among many young people in particular, the poverty rate between the years 2000 and 2009 increased from 14 to 20% (Aud et al., 2011).

Despite the large number of people who live in poverty, only a small percentage participates in higher education. In 2003-4, only 25.4% of all first time students who entered post secondary education were dependent students whose parent's combined income was in the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) quintile (Ho & Wei, 2011). In 2009, about 24% of 18-24 year olds with a high school diploma were living in poverty compared with 14% who had a bachelor's degree or higher. In examining the data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLs:09) that consisted of nearly 21,000 students, only 78% of the high school sophomores in the lowest SES quartile in 2002 had earned a high school diploma, which was 7 points lower than the next highest quartile and nearly 20 points lower than the highest quartile. Just over half (52.3%) ever attended a postsecondary institution compared with nearly 90% of those in the highest quartile (Aud et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, the economic and educational aspirations of parents living in poverty for their children are not as far reaching as those who are more economically advantaged. Data from the HSLs:09 revealed that parents of ninth graders who had less than a high school education held the lowest educational expectations for their children, with only 15% expected to earn a bachelor's degree compared with 22% for those who had completed high school, and up to more than 40% for those who themselves had earned a four year degree (Lo Gerfo, Christopher, & Flanagan, 2011). The level of parental expectation seemed to parallel actual student achievement. In 2004, 29% of high school seniors in the lowest SES quartile planned to work full-time immediately following their high school graduation instead of pursuing higher education compared

with 7% of those in the highest SES quartile (Ingels & Dalton, 2008). Only half as many of those from the lowest SES quartile planned on attending a four-year school than did those of the highest quartile.

Those who grow up in poor urban settings more often remain in those settings throughout their life, extending their exposure to the social ills often present in poor urban areas such as unemployment, poor public schools, single parent families, and high crime. It is likely that their children will also be confined to this cycle (Anyon, 1997; Bourdieu & Passron, 1977; Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004; Louie, 2005; Massey & Denton, 1993; Ogbu, 1978; Portes, 2000; Swartz, 1997).

Clark County, the region in which the participants of this study resided, is located in southern Nevada and is the most populated region in the state. The state had 2,700,551 residents as recorded in the 2010 U.S. Census. The total population of Clark County, Nev., was 1,954,260 of which nearly 20% of the children aged 5-17 years (69,072) lived in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The population is concentrated within three cities that are adjacent in a valley surrounded by mountains and desert. The cities of North Las Vegas, Las Vegas, and Henderson are each governed independently yet share many similar characteristics. The children of the cities, as well as those of some more distant rural areas are enrolled in the Clark County School District, the fifth largest district in the nation.

In December 2011, unemployment in Clark County was 13.1% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). It has been widely reported that such statistics are representative only of those who are actively seeking employment and that there is up to an additional 10-15%

of the population who are unemployed yet who have stopped seeking employment (Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation, 2010). This puts the figure more closely at 25-30% unemployment. Southern Nevada's economy is primarily dependent upon the taxes generated through gaming and collected by the casinos. Tourist volume has decreased significantly, leading to lower hotel occupancy which has resulted in great job loss. Between 2007 and 2009, the two largest industries – hospitality and construction, reduced employment by approximately 38,000 jobs (Schwer, 2009).

The region has roughly 16,000 vacant housing units and has ranked at the top of the foreclosure market for nearly two years. It has been estimated that nearly 85% of homeowners in the area owe more on their mortgage than their homes are worth – a term referred to as being “upside down.” It has become common practice for owners to short-sell their homes or to simply walk away from them only to purchase a new home at a price comparable to those sold in the early 2000s. This has increased the level of transiency in the area which is noted to negatively affect one's education as one transfers multiple times between schools (Ream, 2003).

High school students often work to assist generating income to contribute to household mortgages. This can be a distraction which takes away from time which could be spent studying or participating in extracurricular activities. It is also probably an emotional stress which may decrease their focus upon academic pursuits. Those who graduate from high school may be faced with a difficult decision regarding financing postsecondary education. What can they do once they graduate from college? If the

employment market is so dire, is it a good decision to borrow money to pay for tuition only to be faced with repaying the debt and potentially not being able to find work?

There is extensive research on factors that steer low SES youth away from enrolling in a university setting. Two factors which have great impact upon one's pursuit of higher education are academic preparation and motivation (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Horn, 1998; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2000). A student's predisposition to attend college is usually developed by the ninth grade. This predisposition may have developed through conversations with parents, peers, siblings, friends and others with whom they come into contact regularly. It may have been grounded in discussions about the potential career path of the student and how higher education leads to such a career. However, much of the academic foundation which will lead one to qualify for entry into higher education has already been laid prior to this time. A student who wants to go to college, yet is on a path of low academic rigor and preparation, will not likely enter college. The student needs both a good educational base as well as encouragement to pursue a pathway to higher education.

A good educational base is dependent upon several factors, one of the most important being a good school staffed with good teachers. The quality of school one attends as well as the level of motivation to attend college are determined by one's parents (Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 2005; Price, 2002). Families who live in poor urban settings are more likely to have their children attend local public schools which are inferior to those in more affluent areas (Reynolds & Walberg, 1992). These parents are also less likely to encourage their children to attend college because they lack the social



capital that would help guide and support such a choice (Coleman, 1988). Students in these families may become constrained to the same cycle. Their parents did not attend college and they are therefore less able to properly prepare their children for entrance into higher education (Anyon, 1997; Bourdieu, 1986; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Wilson, 1987).

While the research on why low SES students do not earn four year degrees is extensive, there is much less research on what factors steer low SES urban students to enroll in a university setting. Ascertaining what factors motivate these students to enroll in a university may provide insights into situations or policies that could be widely replicated and thus stimulate more low SES youth to pursue higher education. It is incumbent therefore to explore the type and pattern of factors that motivate such students to pursue a university education. The potential to increase numbers of baccalaureate degree holders from this group may reverse what appears to be a recurring cycle of urban poverty.

This study contributes to the research on college choice by identifying factors, through interviews, that have motivated low SES urban youth from Clark County, Nevada to enroll full time at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Through interviews, data was systematically collected and identified which provided an understanding of the experience of what motivated the participants to enroll into a university. The phenomenological approach, begun by Edmund Husserl in the 1890s, is the most appropriate approach because of the exploratory nature of the research. The insights provided by the participants expose factors that affected them as individuals.

This focus upon individuals complements the studies that have focused upon factors affecting low SES youth as a group.

At the end of first school month when the census was taken of students in all grades within the 332 public schools, there were 315,750 students of which 139,448 were in secondary school for the 2008-2009 academic year (Nevada Department of Education, 2009). Enrollment and graduation rates by ethnicity are represented in Table 2. Note the high number of Latino students who are enrolled but the low rate of graduation. Blacks also have a similarly low rate of graduation although smaller overall enrollment. The Latino enrollments will continue to grow as Mexican immigration in the year 2000, the last year it was measured, comprised 48.6% of all new residents (Center for Business and Economic Research, 2008). Additional issues of concern are that 27.6% of all students had limited English proficiency (Nevada Department of Education, 2010) with 44.3% receiving free or reduced lunch. Per pupil expenditures were \$4,783 for instruction, \$739 for instruction support, \$1,438 for operations, and \$586 for leadership totaling \$7,546 per student funded 5% federally, 28% state, 67% locally compared with \$9,683 nationally (Nevada Dept. of Education, 2009). Additionally, there is a 32.5% transiency rate.

Table 1

*Nevada School Enrollment and High School Graduation*

	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Asian/Pacific Islander	Latino	Black	White
School District Enrollment in 2009-10	2,460	29,552	126,685	45,786	111,267
Graduation rate in 2008-09	44.7%	80.4%	54.9%	54.7%	73.4%

Nevada has consistently been ranked as the state with the highest number of high school drop-outs. Nevada KIDS COUNT (Center for Business and Economic Research, 2008) conducted six focus groups with 63 high school students to ascertain reasons for dropping out of high school. The four most given reasons were—not having good direction; negative peer influence; poor schools and teachers; and unstable families. Additionally, in one all-Latino group, the sentiment included *racism by teachers*. In 2006, only 28% of the state residents who were aged 18-24 years were enrolled in post-secondary education (Nevada Department of Education, 2009). The public schools of the Clark County School District (CCSD) reported a 46.3% graduation rate in 2009 with high school drop-outs having grown from 11.5% in the period between 2000-2007, ranking the Las Vegas area fourth in the nation, leaving a total of less than 25% of residents with a college education (2009). Twenty-one point eight percent (21.8%) of the population is foreign born compared with the national average of 12.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009a, 2009b). The number of grandparents living with and responsible for grandchildren is 15,850. 203,127 are 25 years or older and have not completed high school representing 17% of the population within that age category.

Up until the economic recession, it was common for young people to forego higher education and to acquire entry level jobs at the casinos such as parking cars which would allow them to earn wages commonly said to be in excess of \$80,000 per year. The reliance of the casino and construction industry upon young able-bodied labor was so high that only slightly more than half of the residents of the state hold high school diplomas. As the recession impacted tourism and subsequently led to enormous job loss,

there is no longer a real employment market for undereducated persons. There is also a very limited job market for college graduates as industries which rely upon graduates exist in very low numbers. Despite the dismal job market, UNLV admits nearly 80% of those who apply as freshmen each year. Admission criteria is based solely upon academic qualifications. The institution's enrollment, while not completely reflective of the ethnic composition of Clark County of which 75% of the students are residents, is very diverse with 45% self-reporting as racial or ethnic minorities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study is to identify and examine the factors that led to the decision of low SES Clark County high school students to enroll full time at UNLV by obtaining data from semi-structured interviews. A purposively chosen cohort of 12 freshmen students will be interviewed during their first year of matriculation at UNLV. The participants will all be low SES Latino freshmen who enrolled the year following their high school graduation in Clark County. Interviewing 12 students will allow the researcher to identify dominant themes that may not be evident with smaller numbers of participants. However, if no dominant themes become evident, the group of participants may be expanded. The interviews will consist of specific open-ended questions. Responses will be met with additional questions that probe more deeply to better identify the nature of the factors that affected the students.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding question of this study was: What motivated low SES urban students to enroll at a local university?

The sub questions that guide this investigation are:

1. Did the participants indicate their parents were an influence and if so, what was the nature of the influence?
2. Were siblings important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
3. Were peers important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
4. Were high school guidance/college counselors or teachers important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
5. Were higher education representatives, counselors or marketing materials important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
6. Was cost a factor in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
7. How did perceptions about the local community college and four-year college affect, if at all, the decision to attend the university?
8. What perceived benefits of attending the university, if any, were associated with the decision to attend the university?

## Definition of Terms

*Carnegie Classification (University)* is an institutional classification coding structure developed by the Andrew W. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

The 2000 Carnegie Classification categorizes selected institutions as:

- Doctoral/Research Universities—Extensive
- Doctoral/Research Universities-Intensive
- Master's Colleges and Universities I
- Master's Colleges and Universities II
- Baccalaureate Colleges—Liberal Arts
- Baccalaureate Colleges—General
- Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges
- Associate's Colleges
- Specialized Institutions:
- Theological seminaries and other specialized faith-related institutions
- Medical schools and medical centers
- Other separate health profession schools
- Schools of engineering and technology
- Schools of business and management
- Schools of art, music, and design
- Schools of law
- Teachers colleges
- Other specialized institutions
- Tribal Colleges and Universities (NCES, 2010)

*Choice* is categorized into four types of reasoning an individual experiences when determining which college to attend. They include econometric, consumer, sociological and combined. The choice process entails three steps that consist of predisposition, search and choice (Hossler et al., 1989).

*Financial Aid* refers to Federal Work Study, grants, loans to students (government and/or private), assistantships, scholarships, fellowships, tuition waivers, tuition discounts, veteran's benefits, employer aid (tuition reimbursement) and other monies

(other than from relatives/friends) provided to students to meet expenses. This excludes loans to parents (NCES, 2010).

*Freshman* is a first time undergraduate student (NCES, 2010).

*Full time student* is an undergraduate who is enrolled for 12 or more semester credits, or 12 or more quarter credits, or 24 or more contact hours a week each term (NCES, 2010).

*Guidance/college counselors* are secondary school staff whose primary responsibility is to counsel students upon enrolling in higher education.

*Habitus* refers to the internalization of a process that creates a system of cultural perpetuation resulting in stagnancy in the movement between culture and classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

*Predisposition* is the students' decision or aspiration to pursue higher education following graduation from their secondary studies. (Hossler et al., 1989).

*Search* is the activity of ascertaining information from higher education institutions when progressing from the predisposition phase to the choice phase (Hossler et al., 1989).

*Social capital* is an activity in the community that creates networks related to civic engagement, politics, church, education and other groups (Portes, 2000).

*Socioeconomic status (SES)* A measure of an individual or family's relative economic and social ranking with income, education and occupation considered as factors (NCES, 2010). The definition does place emphasis more heavily upon different factors at different times. For this study, income level is the dominant factor.

*Undergraduate* is a student enrolled in a 4- or 5-year bachelor's degree program, an associate's degree program, or a vocational or technical program below the baccalaureate (NECS, 2010).

*University of Nevada-Las Vegas (UNLV)* is a doctoral/research university – intensive.

*Zone schools* are the high schools which serve students who reside in the immediate area or zone around the school as designated by the school district.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study uses the Hossler et al. (1989) theory of choice as the theoretical foundation. Hossler and colleagues presented a theoretical framework within which high school students would develop their decision to pursue higher education. This three stage choice process begins with the predisposition phase. During this time, most often just prior to or during ninth grade, students are exposed to forces that either encourage or discourage them from considering future enrollment into higher education. These factors may include interactions with parents, peers, siblings, friends and others with whom they come into contact regularly. If a predisposition not to attend college develops, it is nearly impossible to change this during the high school years. However, one predisposed to attend college will likely make decisions throughout high school that provide better positioning for entry into higher education. These may include enrollment in a more rigorous high school course load, taking standardized tests and discussing enrollment in college with those who influence them or are role models to them.



Once a student is in eleventh or twelfth grade, the next stage, the search, usually begins. This involves searching for colleges that satisfy the interests of the student. Some aspects that may be attractive include academics, career preparation, extracurricular activities, the location of the institution, and its facilities. Often, issues such as financial aid do not play a significant role during the initial student search. However, the final stage, choice, is when factors previously thought to be of importance to the student may evolve. The student and those who share in the decision as to which institution to attend – often the parent(s), weigh the costs and benefits associated with each institution under consideration. This stage takes place in one's senior year of high school.

The Hossler et al. (1989) theory of choice is not without its detractors. Wilson (1987) and Anyon (1997) have noted that the pressures of society more greatly exert influence than that which is exerted by individuals. For example, when one lives in an economically depressed area, it is likely that the social problems present in the area will affect the individual. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of habitus, in which one is destined to remain within the same social class, suggests that this replication is due to control by the ruling class. The ruling class in effect establishes systems, including a stratified system of higher education that favors themselves and their children. This benefits the upper class, neglecting and hurting the lower class.

St. John, Paulson, and Carter (2005) suggest that low SES students are unable to exercise the cost-benefit decisions included in the choice stage as described by Hossler et al. (1989) because their families have not experienced higher education and are therefore unprepared to understand the financial costs and eventual benefits associated

with participation in higher education. Those who do not possess the social capital derived from participation in higher education are at a disadvantage in that they cannot contextualize the process of preparing to go to college and exercise the choice process by appropriately weighing factors.

Behrman, Kletzer, McPherson, and Schapiro (1998) asserted that choice is determined by a person's characteristics, which are party to expectations of future opportunities. High school GPA, career aspirations and college choice are intertwined preventing a purely econometric decision to choose enrolling in college based upon perceived cost and benefit. The development and timing of one's interest in career and college needs to be measured against when GPAs began to improve or choices were made to take more rigorous high school coursework. These events happen concurrently – school grades improve as aspirations develop and vice versa. Karen (2002) notes that predictors of who attends more selective institutions include grades, number of colleges applied to and test scores. There may be positive motivators influencing individuals that support their secondary school studies, which leads them to take tougher coursework, thereby achieving better grades and higher test scores and applying to more institutions.

However, the stages of the Hossler et al. (1989) Theory of Choice are the most widely accepted rationale for choosing postsecondary institutions and therefore shall be used as the context by which this study is conducted. Nuances specific to the participants will be explored. It will be important to remain free of bias to the theory and to collect data according to the stage process as presented in the choice theory.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations of the study include:

1. The study is confined to Clark County, Nevada students who matriculated at UNLV as freshmen. UNLV is the only research institution in the region and therefore the student's choice may have been restricted. It will not be easy to replicate this study in other areas.
2. This study only takes into consideration the influences as recollected and reported by the students. There may be other factors of which they are unaware or do not remember.
3. This study is only taking one cohort into consideration. The views of multiple cohorts over an extended period of time may delineate other factors that play a role in the decision making process.
4. The data derived from the interviews may be imprecise as the participants will have already moved past the decision making process and into matriculation.

**Limitations**

Limitations of the study include:

1. The purposively chosen sample may not be reflective of the proportion of the population of Clark County that the sample represents.
2. The researcher may misinterpret some of the data provided through the interviews and subsequently, develop a theory that is not accurate.
3. The researcher is an employee at UNLV and therefore may introduce bias to the participants.

**Significance of the Study**

This study will identify factors that have led the participants to enroll in UNLV. Identifying such factors could lead to policy development or other formal initiatives that are designed to replicate those factors among like populations. Such replication may lead to an increased number of students enrolling in universities. The benefits of completion of higher education are well known. In 2009, full time workers aged 16-24 years with a bachelor's degree or higher earned \$33,000 median income compared with \$18,000 for those who had not completed high school (Aud et al., 2011). Income aside, baccalaureate credentialed persons are widely believed to have a better state of health, to have a longer life expectancy and to live in safer communities. One who has a four year degree also has more employment options than one who does not. This presents degree holders with the opportunity to work more normal hours and to move to areas that have better schools for their children. The self-replicating access to improved education benefits the children and will likely benefit future generations as well. Participation in higher education has therefore become widely recognized as an agent of positive social change.

Much has been studied in regard to the factors that negatively affect enrollment in higher education. Many studies are based upon sociological theories which attribute behavior of groups of people to various social impacts. However, these theories do not address the behaviors of individuals as they are broad generalizations that cannot address the personal circumstances of individuals. It is therefore incumbent to examine the positive influences upon individual youth from these backgrounds who have enrolled in a university setting.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

Higher education, especially baccalaureate degree attainment or higher, is seen as a key to one's success insofar as occupational choice, income and livelihood are associated. This review is organized according to, college choice<sup>1</sup>, low SES characteristics as related to the choice process, and traits of the local Clark County, Nevada population and student behavior.

#### **Choice Model**

The Hossler et al. (1989) model of student choice presents the choice process in four models and three stages or phases. The first model is based upon econometrics and assumes that the student enrolls in college to enjoy the perceived benefits associated with having the baccalaureate credential and that those benefits outweigh the time and financial costs associated with having earned the degree. Such benefits would include greater employment options, full time employment and benefits which are often associated with it including medical insurance and a retirement plan, as well as an increased level of compensation. The consumer model is also based upon the perception of cost and benefit yet relies more heavily upon minimizing the costs associated with attending college and taking into consideration parental and peer expectations as part of the emotional cost. Supportive parents and peers would minimize the emotional drain or cost of having to convince otherwise non-supporters that the pursuit of college is worthy. The sociological choice model is related to status attainment and one's desire to satisfy the expectations of others including parents, peers and school counselors. The student

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of the low SES and college choice review were published elsewhere (Schultheis, 2008).

subscribes to fulfilling the desires of those who are in close contact and relationships.

Finally, the combination model exerts itself when varying degrees of two or more of the other models are evident.

The first phase within any of the models is the development of predisposition. The predisposition phase refers to the time when the student develops aspirations to enroll in higher education. This is followed by the search phase during which time the student looks to identify suitable colleges to which he may apply. The final phase is choice, at which time the student selects an institution to attend.

**Predisposition.** Hossler and Stage (1992) worked to develop a thorough analysis of the predisposition phase as they noted the majority of research at that time was focused upon the final choice phase, specifically by Jackson (1986), Manski and Wise (1983) and Tierney (1980). However, Hossler and Stage (1992) acknowledged that the work of others was not current and that once a student reached the choice phase, there was a significant void in having understood how the student actually reached this stage. Their work on predisposition led to the creation of a theoretical model that was based upon socioeconomic variables and demographic characteristics that intertwined with parental and peer expectations as well as academic ability resulting in predisposition. Hossler and Stage determined that predisposition occurs just prior to one entering the ninth grade. In examining the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), Kao and Tienda (1998) conducted a logistic regression with the dependent variable being whether or not one aspired to graduate from a four year college. Their findings supported Hossler and Stage (1992), finding that aspirations had developed significantly by the ninth grade.

They remeasured aspirations at the tenth and twelfth grade levels, and found only marginal increases since those which had developed at ninth grade.

### **Low SES**

**Income.** Socioeconomic status is said to be the greatest determinant in talent loss (Plank & Jordan, 2001). In other words, those who do not enjoy the benefits of higher education, civic support and safety, as well as networks of people who support their endeavors will most likely not be able to expand their knowledge and social capital in a way which benefits them and others. To contextualize the income level of low SES persons, one can refer to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) which has defined low income students as those whose family income was below 125% of the federally established poverty level for those of their family size (Choy, 2001). The definition of low SES ranges from an income in 2010 of \$13,924 for a family size of one to \$52,695 for a family of nine or more. Low income students composed more than a quarter (26.4%) of the overall college enrollment in the United States in 1995-1996 (Choy, 2001). In 2010, 20% of children aged 5-17 years (69,072) whom lived in Clark County, Nev. were living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Low socioeconomic status is especially pronounced in urban areas. The results of a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) study by Lippman, Burns, and MacArthur (1996) indicated that the urban poverty rate was 30% compared with 20% nationwide with the very lowest SES quartile concentrated at 32.6% in urban areas. The high concentration of poor students in urban areas indicates that, due to the low college going rate of this cohort, there will be low percentages of these persons attending higher

education. Since attendance in postsecondary education correlates to increased life time earnings, it is likely that these areas remain poor unless a greater percentage attend college.

**Future outcomes influence.** There is debate as to whether all students exhibit a rational cost-benefit decision when considering enrolling in higher education. Students who are in the lower end of the economic stratum may not recognize the benefits generally associated with having completed college. If their parents do not have a college education and associated benefits, then it is unlikely that the student could rationalize how an investment in higher education could lead to specific life improvements with which they may currently not be at all familiar. It should be noted that employers who find increasingly larger numbers of applicants to vacant positions due to increased rates in unemployment may raise criteria to include a baccalaureate degree which may be used to reduce the applicant pool as opposed to fill positions which require the skills and abilities gained through such an education. Beattie (2002) conducted research using High School and Beyond (National Center for Education Statistics, 1986) data to determine differences in such decision making amongst students with differences in socioeconomic status, race and sex. She found that young men of low-SES origin in some cases faced only a 44% probability of enrolling in college compared with a 70% probability of those from high-SES families. Additionally, those in what she called low return states, or states that provided lower benefits post-graduation to students such as lower salaries and fewer job opportunities, were least likely to enroll in higher education. An additional factor negatively affecting young men from low SES backgrounds was related to tuition levels



and rates of discount. They were found to be more averse to enrolling until tuition was discounted at levels of \$1,000 or greater, at which time they increased their likelihood of attending by 5% (St. John et al., 2005). This perception of a large amount of tuition discounting may not actually address the true rates of tuition. In other words, a \$1,000 discount on very high tuition may end up costing a student more than an undiscounted, but lower rate of tuition. The decision to enroll based upon a high perceived rate of discount without recognition of the true cost, likely resulting in greater loan indebtedness does not appear to be a rational exercise in future outcomes decision making.

Beattie (2002) studied data on the NCES cohort originally consisting of 11,615 students who were sophomores in 1980. She conducted a logistic regression on enrollment in postsecondary school of those who graduated from high school to determine whether or not future earnings influenced the students to enroll in college. She found that in states with higher median incomes, the rate of students entering college was higher (63%) than those from states with lower median income levels (56%). She found a correlation to SES in that those from high SES backgrounds were significantly more likely, regardless of race, to enroll in college than those from lower SES backgrounds.

**Social capital.** Coleman (1988) identified social capital as a pragmatic concept of network derived resources facilitating student achievement. Social capital is generated by interaction with friends who provide insights and access to resources which lead to the development of one's know-how in negotiating systems. Those who hold greater wealth would likely have greater access to resources and a more developed knowledge of how to navigate systems – in this instance that of choosing, applying to and financing enrollment at

an institution of higher education. Prior studies (Dika & Singh, 2002; Goddard, 2003) indicated that those who hold greater wealth have access to better schools, parents are more connected to the schools, they are often active in the parent-teacher association, and families may be better prepared to plan for higher education. Social capital can be accumulated by both the parent as well as the student.

A study of 25,000 eighth graders through the NELS:88 data was conducted to determine if there were differences in parental social capital between different SES classes (Ream & Palardy, 2008). The researchers measured the amount of time parents visited schools, how often they helped their children plan courses or directed study, if they were active in the parent teacher association and whether they were involved in school policy formation. They found that whenever parents were engaged in such activities, student success was improved. However, they also found that such activity was unrelated to which socioeconomic class they family belonged. One activity which particularly improved student success was the relationship the student had with the teacher. As relationships were more formalized and interaction increased, students performed better.

Their study is important because students who perform well academically will have a greater likelihood of being accepted to a university. While all universities do not exercise selective criteria in their admissions process they are generally more competitive to enter than a community college. This study also highlights the benefit of having parents who are actively engaged in the student's education and the importance of a relationship with a teacher.

A study examining the social capital of Mexican immigrant high school students focused primarily upon their transience between schools as a factor reducing their formalized interaction with school personnel (Ream, 2003). Such diminished relationships were thought to reduce the students' access to college going activities. The expectation was that those students who generated less social capital would perform more poorly in school. Again, this would likely reduce their admissibility into a university setting. The study also utilized the NELS:88 data set and examined student achievement in reading and mathematics when they were enrolled in 12<sup>th</sup> grade as well as the follow-up survey issued at that time. The researchers followed up with interviews of 16 middle-to-low-income students, their parents or guardians as well as school personnel to learn about relationship development and social integration in relation to transiency.

They found that the Mexican-American students fell below their white counterparts in math and reading scores and were more transient. However, they also found that the participants expressed a greater level of student and parent-teacher academic based engagement than their white counterparts which suggested that they had established a slight advantage in acquiring social capital. They noted that such interactions were most pronounced when parents introduced themselves to the new teachers, which allowed the teachers to gain some familiarity with the students. In situations in which the student simply appeared at a new school with no express parental engagement, teachers noted that they would generally not exert additional effort at engaging those students since they felt that they would soon be moving to another school again. The researchers suggested that the social capital which was gained did not lead to

improved academic performance and called such an exchange *counterfeit social capital*.

A different study conducted upon the academic motivation of 154 Latino boys and 156 Latina girls (Alfaro, Umana-Taylor, & Bamaca, 2006) indicated that the impact of teachers transcended other factors including parents which differently impacted boys and girls.

In an effort to learn about the formation of educational ideology within the family, Kiyama (2010) conducted a mixed method study consisting of interviews and case studies. The initial participants consisted of low SES Mexican-American students and families who spoke English and were participating in the Parent Outreach Program which was a college discussion forum. She then followed up with case studies of six first generation college families three years after the initial interviews. Her findings suggest that the family developed its own set of capital based upon finding solutions to everyday issues. While they did interact with other similar families in the program, they did not develop an educational ideology which Bourdieu would classify as self-reproducing. Instead, these families developed a fund of knowledge which in essence represented the collective solutions to challenges in their lives. In other words, they had developed an evolutionary means to progress, or attempt to progress, out of the low SES group. This ideology included active family participation in the student's education. When parents were engaged and transmitting positive educational values to their children, the children transmitted knowledge in return to their parents.

In some instances, families networked with other relatives who had college-going experience and became familiar with the different types of postsecondary education

institutions. In another instance, a student performed well in high school, was accepted into both a community college and a university yet expressed a total lack of understanding of what a university was, and therefore chose to attend the two-year institution. All of the parents in the study expressed that their children would participate in higher education yet all were not clear as to what options existed.

Kiyama's (2010) study highlights the development of social capital through interaction with other families at a school sponsored series of college forums. However, it also indicates that those families developed a widely different understanding of types of postsecondary institutions. The funds of knowledge which were developed by the families may have led to the predisposition of the students to participate in higher education. Each family seemed to have independently and differently drawn focus, support and expectations relative to higher education.

A study by Bohon, Johnson and Gorman (2006) was conducted to learn about the differences in aspiration and expectation between various Spanish speaking populations. They examined data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health which consisted of a sample size of 16,545 Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban adolescents in grades 7-12 from 80 communities. They found that the most poor students were Mexican whose parents were also recipients of low levels of education. They noted that the low levels of aspiration and expectation were a result of immigration, not of culture and that in general there is a strong expectation of postsecondary study among Mexicans of latter generations, which was also found by Wojtkiewicz and Donato (1995) who studied educational attainment of students born outside of the country and of those born in the

United States to foreign born parents. They suggested that increasing adult education in relation to the college-going process may help stimulate aspiration and expectation of higher education for their children. However, there was no differentiation among types of institution.

Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna (2009) used multiple descriptive case studies of 15 high schools and found that 11<sup>th</sup> graders had developed more awareness of financial aid than 9<sup>th</sup> graders but that they still had a very rudimentary understanding. The students had heard of the Pell Grant and expected that their parents' taxes would be used to calculate aid but were unaware of how they would apply for financial aid as well as what tuition costs were across local institutions of higher education. The students at low income serving schools did not tend to have a clear understanding of academic paths required for specific careers while those in high income serving schools understood the role of graduate programs to enter certain careers. Of particular interest, was their finding that students in low income households viewed the college going process as well as applying for financial aid as their own responsibility, not that of their parents.

In a study by Jimenez and Salas-Velasco (2000) of Latino students registered in their first postsecondary semester of study, they found that students from families with experience in higher education were more likely to follow a path to a university degree. They deduced that these families had greater financing available to them, which made it easier for the students to consider paying for these studies. Such students would also have higher levels of social capital which could be exploited to assist with employment opportunities once they earned degrees. Conversely, students who came from less

wealthy families chose to undertake studies that would take less time and subsequently cost less money. Such studies could be certificate programs, training courses outside of a degree program as well as community college degrees.

Valadez (2008) conducted a case study on 12 immigrant Mexican high school students, following them through their college decision making process up through the point of high school graduation. He found that the students based their decisions mostly upon the basis of their family values and culture. Their way of life included living with multiple generations of family in the same home and it was felt that they should only consider attending college close to home. This would allow them to continue to provide assistance with chores and responsibilities including earning income. It was expressed by the participants that their families all strongly encouraged them to attend college, and that college access was one of the main reasons for having moved to the United States. Valdez noted that keeping the college-aged students in the house and studying locally while fully participating in the chores of maintaining the household contributed to reproduction of their social class. Since the students contextualized their futures as remaining with their families within the same household, they may not have considered attending a university which could have led them to career opportunities away from the region of their home.

### **Family Influence**

**Parental education.** Parents exert significant influence over their children's educational pathway (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Horn, 1998; Perna, 2000). Parents who are from a higher SES have more cultural capital and are better able to provide a positive

influence for their children. They have likely participated in higher education, have developed social networks which assign value to higher education and enjoy some of the benefits associated with those who complete higher education including higher paying jobs, better health care and a more stable lifestyle. These parents convey those benefits to their children which thereby encourages them to pursue higher education. Conversely, parents from low SES backgrounds are less likely to enjoy the same benefits and are less likely to have participated in higher education. Therefore, they do not convey to their children the benefits associated with higher education at as high a proportion.

It has been found that there are some general themes of information which are shared between parents and children who will become predisposed to enroll in higher education. Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with teachers and counselors and held focus groups with parents from 15 high schools to determine how parents could promote college opportunity to students. They found positive influence was generated through parental discussion with children about occupational and educational aspirations, discussing the financing of education and visiting college campuses.

Parents who are in the low SES category are often limited in their ability to provide such resources due to a lack of knowledge of college-going behavior, the inability to attend activities related to preparing for college due to a lack of time associated with work schedule as well as lacking knowledge of specifics related to college. To compensate for this, they often rely more greatly upon the assistance of high schools to provide those resources to their children (Choy, 2001; Furstenberg, Cook,



Eccles, Elder & Sameroff, 1999; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008).

Plank and Jordan (2001) examined college-going behaviors as associated with SES. In examining NELS:88 data, they found that there was a general absence of postsecondary information available to low SES students especially from parents and school personnel. This is especially troubling for families which are relying upon schools to provide college-going resources to their students. Their study found that students who came from families with low social capital and who attended what they considered weak schools—or those with low academic achievement levels in poor geographic areas, were least likely to pursue postsecondary education. Students who attended weak schools but came from strong families were more likely to attend higher education. Families which were better able to communicate the process and benefits associated with attending college produced more college students.

**Family structure.** Parents also affect students' academic achievement which is another factor that contributes toward enrollment in higher education. Lippman et al. (1996) found that the number of parents in a household was related to a child's success in school. "All other things being equal, with only one parent in the household, that parent is likely to have less time to spend with the child than parents in two-parent households. Also, in one parent households, household income is generally lower than it is in two-parent households, which may produce more economic stress in the household and, in turn, affect a student's school performance" (Lippman et al., 1996). Rosigno (1998) also found a correlation between single parent homes and a student's reading level. He found

that reading test scores of students in single-parent or step-parent governed families were depressed by 0.6 points on average, compared with scores of students who lived with both natural parents. The concept is that if there is less parental supervision and involvement in studies at home, it is likely that students will be less prone to complete studies at the house. Additionally, these parents may find themselves less able to attend any activities at the student's school be it support at an event or a discussion with a teacher.

While the presence of two parents has been shown to be beneficial, it does not appear that the term "parents" must be defined according to the traditional nuclear family in order for the student to benefit. McCreary and Dancy (2004) provided insights into the fictive family phenomenon evident in many black households they studied. They interviewed 20 mothers and 20 adult family members trying to ascertain whom were considered to be family members. While all participants noted at least one blood relative as being a member of the family, 70% provided names of others including best friends. Only three named the father of the child as a family member. The reasons they provided for categorizing individuals as family were having a strong emotional attachment; having helped each other in tangible ways; and having endured a long-term relationship. Despite the study having not considering parental education or SES, it was evident that some level of social capital had been established and that the positive influence upon students to consider attending college may not lie wholly with blood family, but with others as well.

When parents aren't supervising students at home, the students may become distracted and exert less time and energy into learning activities such as homework. Nearly half (43%) of the low SES cohort studied by Lippman et al. (1996) watched three or more hours of television per day, compared with 26% in schools with lower poverty concentrations. The urban poor, those most likely to live with one parent, reported doing six and a half hours of homework per week compared with eight hours for other groups.

In addition to performing less homework, urban low-SES youth were more likely to hold a job (18%) than those who lived in the suburbs (14%) or in rural areas (12%), thus making the youth more tired, delinquent, and alienated from school. This could lead to other problems including higher levels of student behavioral problems such as possession and use of weapons, high absenteeism from school, and high teen pregnancy (Lippman et al., 1996). Those students who may have recently emigrated from a non-English speaking country may have additional challenges which reflect the inability of their parents to assist with English homework, to understand school policies, to communicate with teachers and to assist with the college search process.

### **Quality of Family and Peer Involvement**

Establishing what quality interactions look like between students and their parents is equally as important as establishing the frequency of such interactions. Perna and Titus (2005) suggested that quantitative studies examining parental engagement have been limited in their ability to measure the amount of influence upon the student. Often, parental involvement has been measured by a single indicator such as the number of discussions held between the parent and student in regard to attending college rather than

examining the frequency or quality of such discussions. Paulsen and St. John (2002) also noted that studies too often take into consideration only the parental influence and they fail to recognize the influence of the entire family. Perna and Titus (2005) conducted a study based upon the second (1992) and third (1994) follow-ups to the NELS:88 that focused upon the 9,810 students who enrolled in college during their scheduled time in 1992.

Their focus, through using a multinomial extension of hierarchical linear modeling, was to determine the relationship of social networks, family involvement and the likelihood of college enrollment. They found that parental involvement was related to college enrollment with an odds-ratio of enrollment to not enrolling of 1.164 when the parents discussed education related topics with the students. Additionally, students' peers exerted great influence as the odds ratio to attend a four-year institution of higher education was 1.536 when peers related their plans to attend such institutions. It was found that ethnic minority schools had lower rates of four-year college enrollment as well as lower levels of high school social networks. Such schools, dominant in poor urban areas, lacked the positive peer and family influence present in more affluent schools.

One such qualitative study which sought to examine the type and amount of positive influence provided by family to students was conducted by Herndon and Hirt (2004). Their study did not focus upon high school students who were developing a predisposition to attend college, but upon twenty graduating black college seniors. Despite variances in geographic settings and parental education background as well as family structure, one dominant theme consistently emerged from the interviews with the

students and parents. The theme was that the families had consistently encouraged the students, when in high school, to perform well in their studies. This support was made evident through supportive conversation, financial assistance, as well as moral and social support. These supportive activities were grounded in the values of the household and were paramount in the lives of the students.

In order to maintain strength in delivering positive influence, parents as well as students would be well served to participate in positive social networks because such interactions will build social capital. The higher the social capital, the greater the importance of education and thus an increase in the likelihood of the student pursuing higher education. Low SES urban minority families generally do not have a high level of social capital nor the ability and opportunity to support their children in activities such as cultural enhancement excursions, trips to the library, purchasing books, and participating in school activities which support academic development and pursuit of higher education (Knight, Norton, Bentley, & Dixon, 2004). Additionally, first generation students are at a further disadvantage in that their parents do not have college-going knowledge, which detracts from the information they can share with their child as well as the capital they can contribute to their networks. In essence, it is unlikely that they will develop networks of college educated persons (Karen, 2002; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). This lack of social capital hinders the rational thought process in deciding to attend college. Since there is a lack of knowledge in regard to the benefits associated with degree attainment, less effort is made to investigate how one accesses college and

prepares for it academically, financially and socially (Bourdieu, 1986; Pascarella et al., 2004).

**Teachers.** Another significant factor which affects the likelihood of students attending college is the school. There are concentrations of low SES students in urban areas. Urban high school class enrollments are larger than those in rural areas (1,313 vs. 577), and fewer than half of the ninth graders entering large city systems graduate in four years (Anyon, 1997; Lippman et al., 1996). Teachers and counselors have a significant impact, not only on the quality of schooling but on the students' decisions to pursue postsecondary education. The lower the SES quartile, the greater the reliance upon these school staff to provide resources for students to pursue postsecondary education. Rosigno (1998) argued that the importance of family as a positive influence is not a stand-alone factor. Rather, it is one that is intertwined with school mechanisms such as teacher expectations, academic track placement, and availability of resources as well as the demographics of the student body. Schools which are in low SES areas and are therefore populated primarily with low SES and minority students suffer from a reduction of resources as well as decreased teacher expectations (Riordan, 1997). These negative influences affect the pattern of academic achievement and enrollment in postsecondary education. Rosigno's (1998) examination of the NELS data indicated higher teacher expectations in white schools (.535) than black (.410), and a greater percentage of poor students identified by lunch programs in black (22.808) than white (15.920). Combined, these and other factors indicate that poor minority schools are laden with circumstances that negatively affect the decision of minority students to pursue college. Students

predisposed not to enroll in college may be less likely to focus upon their studies, to pursue rigorous course loads and to be less engaged at school since there is a decreased benefit associated with the cost of attending school.

One issue is that it is difficult to attract faculty and staff to poor urban schools due to the belief they are dangerous and challenging. Teacher shortages can lead to more highly populated classrooms, reliance upon substitute teachers for regular instruction and a lack of a stable teacher corps. Nearly a quarter (24%) of urban high school administrators throughout the nation reported significant difficulties in hiring teachers, compared with 16% in non-urban districts. To populate such schools with additional teachers, many teacher education programs offer tuition assistance/forgiveness to graduates who will serve in urban high schools. The faculty and staff at these schools often work at lower pay scales than teachers in non-urban settings. Since poor urban schools are less desirable to work in than other schools, often the better teachers will avoid working in them if at all possible. Subsequently, but not surprisingly, students from the lowest SES quintile had an overwhelmingly greater proportion – nearly one third of math and science teachers with only 1-3 years experience when compared with students in higher quintiles and their math teachers were also less likely to hold regular teaching certificates—75% compared with up to 81% for higher SES groups (Lo Gerfo et al., 2011). Teachers in poor areas also exhibit greater levels of absenteeism which sets a poor example for students and interrupts continuity of instruction and community (Lippman et al., 1996).

**Curriculum and instruction.** Instruction in poor urban schools is too often at a low level, relying on unchallenging and rote material (Anyon, 1997). This is unfortunate as a rigorous high school curriculum helps mitigate the disadvantage of first-generation status, a status highly represented in poor urban schools (Adelman, 1999; Choy, 2001). Only 33% of students from families with annual incomes below \$30,000 have college-level reading skills (ACT, 2000). Performance in mathematics is also poor. Students who take less advanced math in high school reduce their chance of entering four-year colleges, and since there is less advanced math offered in urban high schools, low-income students are at a disadvantage (Gandara & Moreno, 2002).

Rosigno (1998) identified a decrease in the average level of mathematic achievement of 0.06 points with each one point increase in the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch (Rosigno, 1998). No more than 20% of high poverty students reported completing rigorous high school curricula. On every outcome measured, those high school students in areas of high poverty consistently performed at the lowest academic levels (Lippman et al., 1996). Part of the problem may lie with teacher apathy and the belief, true or not, that students in these schools are less prepared and therefore, teachers provide less challenge in their instruction. More than a fifth (22.7%) of the students in the lowest SES quintile was viewed by their teachers as being unprepared for math compared with less than 10% of those in the highest quintile. Additionally, students were 10% less likely to be prepared in science than their more economically well-off peers (Lo Gerfo et al., 2011).



**Extracurricular activity.** In high school, students who participate in school-sponsored sports activities (and academic clubs) appear to have better grades, spend more time focusing upon their homework assignments and hold higher aspirations for attending postsecondary education (Lippman et al., 1996). Approximately 56% of students in low-poverty high schools are involved in sports-related activities, compared with 44% of students in high-poverty schools (Nora, 2002). The students who do not form bonds with others decrease their social capital, don't benefit from working in a team environment, are not exposed to the general model for competition in which participants practice regularly to make improvements and they do not get the opportunity to learn leadership as well as follower skills since they are absent from the groups altogether.

**Transiency.** Transient students may be at significant risk of developing a negative predisposition to participate in higher education. Ream's (2003) mixed methods approach examining the impact of mobility on school social capital outlined a high rate of mobility correlated with poor school relations. In the study on NELS:88 data, 53% of Mexican-origin youth had changed schools by the eighth grade and 30% had changed between ninth and twelfth grades. Through conducting interviews with 32 youth, he found that the transiency had greatly impaired teacher-student relations. He learned that several youth had been told that their teachers would not invest time with them since they knew the students were only there temporarily. These students and others in similar situations are likely facing a number of negative factors diminishing their predisposition to participate in higher education. As new residents to an area, both as new immigrants as well as new neighbors, social capital needs to be developed from anew. They need to

meet other families and identify other resources which will support them in their endeavors. Furthermore, relationships with peers at school need to be established and it may take time and effort to determine which students can be developed as supportive friends. Staff and faculty, a group highly relied upon by the urban poor, who are unwilling to be supportive of students will likely hinder positive focus and the pursuit of higher education.

**Parent and school influence combined.** Family discussions about higher education do not occur regularly at an early stage for those in weak families and schools. Weak schools are defined as those with a majority of free or reduced lunch recipients and weak families as those led by a single parent, most often the mother (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Higher Education Discussions and Activities by Family and School Strength*

	Weak School & Weak Family	Weak School & Strong Family
Discussion in	12 <sup>th</sup> grade	10 <sup>th</sup> & 12 <sup>th</sup> grade
Parent – school communication	25 <sup>th</sup> percentile	50 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Guidance & help from the school	25 <sup>th</sup> percentile	25 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Visited at least one college	No	Yes

Source: Plank and Jordan (2001, p. 969).

The problem does not rest solely upon schools and teachers. Many parents, especially of Latino background and recently immigrated, do not understand how American secondary schools operate and they feel like outsiders who are unable to garner

support for their children. Carreon, Drake, and Barton (2005) conducted ethnographic research to learn of the experiences of three Latino immigrant families which included an examination of the experience of the children in school as well as the parents' experience with the schools. Two of the three families expressed that school was seen to be a distant institution that did not provide resources or support for the children. However, inside the classroom, the children expressed the ability they had to connect with peers and their teachers. The third family expressed that their school seemed to be a powerful institution that had a formalized structure which allowed families who were active within that structure to benefit. This family was struggling with developing a way to become involved at the school and felt like they were unwelcome outsiders.

A lack of parental engagement as measured in the HSLS:09 cohort was noted to be at a high of nearly 60% (57.5%) for those in the lowest SES quintile compared with a quarter of those parents in the highest quintile (Lo Gerfo et al., 2011). Families which do not have the ability to become involved at school or at home with students are not fostering a positive disposition for the children to pursue higher education. When this is compounded by an unwillingness of a school to support the student and engage the family, students are further alienated from the idea of attending college.

**Peers.** Students who attend a school which they feel is unwelcoming and unsupportive may perform less than optimally. Students in the lowest SES quintile demonstrated higher levels of tardiness, absence, class cutting, drop-out and general apathy than their peers in the higher quintiles according to administrator sin the HSLS:09

study (Lo Gerfo et al., 2011). In some instances, the rates at the low quintile tripled those in the highest.

**College-going programs.** There are also programs which primarily exist in schools that serve low income students. The Educational Policy Institute's National Survey of College Outreach Programs is collecting information on programs designed to improve college access for traditionally underrepresented students. In the last survey, there were over 1,100 programs responding and currently there are over 400 programs which have already completed the survey. Programs such as GEAR-UP, Upward Bound and many programs unique to specific colleges are grant funded and provide resources to high school students to assist them with college preparation, search and access. These programs are meant to supplement the efforts that are being provided by teachers and counselors in high schools where students rely more upon schools than upon their families for information related to postsecondary education. In Clark County, Nevada, Talent Search and Upward Bound programs serve students from nine high schools that enroll predominantly poor minority students. In 2010, three-quarters of the Upward Bound students (150), 63% (1,260) of the Educational Talent Search students enrolled in postsecondary education following high school graduation (Center for Academic Enrichment and Outreach, 2011). Over two-thirds of the participation the program were low income and first generation college attendees. There is debate as to whether such programs improve college-going rates for students. In the aforementioned programs, students must apply for and participate in the programs. These students may have otherwise already become predisposed to attend college and participation in these

programs may not have increased the likelihood of them pursuing postsecondary education.

Bergin, Cooks, and Bergin (2007) conducted a study upon the effects of a program named EXCEL, which was a college-going program for children. The EXCEL program which enrolled approximately 50 students per year also enlisted parental participation, assisted students through high school and college years and awarded scholarships to sponsoring colleges. It was found that the percentage of students who enrolled in postsecondary education was not likely increased due to the program. Rather, the effect was upon which institutions the students would attend (Bergin, Cooks, & Bergin, 2007). Often, college-going programs are associated with an institution of higher education and a large number of students may be encouraged to enroll in that college as opposed to one for example which may be out of state and unfamiliar to the program staff.

Pfeil's (2009) study on ten low income students participating in a dual enrollment program in Nebraska called Access College Early (ACE) yielded six themes. The students participated in the program because it would save them money in future tuition expenses and allow them to move ahead in their college studies; they were encouraged by their peers and family; participation made them feel that pursuing fulltime higher education was a reality; the ability to earn the credits without paying for them – they were subsidized by the state, was necessary; teachers had a significant impact on them participating; and they had strong personal drive. Seven of the students eventually did enroll in college following their high school graduation although all ten had expressed

firm convictions that they would enroll. The participants' families were generally headed by a single parent which was their mother and she had in most situations not attended college. These students had all heard about the dual enrollment program from a teacher. Without the teacher's intervention, none of the students would have participated. There was no indication as to why the teachers chose these specific students, but the effects of participation appeared to have further motivated them to pursue postsecondary studies.

**Counseling.** Students in low SES populations rely more greatly upon guidance and college counselors at the high schools since their parents tend to have less college-going knowledge. However, the schools in low SES urban centers tend to be larger, thus increasing the number of students for whom a counselor is responsible. Counselors who were participants in the HSLS:09 study identified that their focus of school counseling programs in the lowest SES quintile was focused much more upon helping students improve their achievement in high school (42.9% compared with 28% in the highest quintile) and much less focused upon helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary educational plans (40.6%) than those in the highest quintile (57.9%) (Lo Gerfo et al., 2011).

Steppes (2011) conducted a phenomenological study involving 12 African American low to middle SES males seeking to determine the factors which led to their enrollment in higher education. Each student also each participated in a college-going program at their school and forged at least one important relationship with either a teacher or a coach. Four of the participants lived with both of their natural parents, many of the parents did not have a college education yet parental influence was found to be one

of the most impactful motivators for the men to attend college. Together, the students and their parents had identified careers early on in their studies, which would require them to earn baccalaureate degrees. While the parents without college backgrounds were less able to provide guidance for their sons in regard to the college-going process, they actively and regularly reviewed grades with the students. Overall, throughout the interviews, they noted that they were also motivated by successful peers in the classroom who were treated well by the teachers, and thus, they strived to perform the same way.

A study of 44 students as they progressed from tenth grade through twelfth grade in New Jersey (Temple, 2009) highlighted the importance of school counselors in the college going process. The students who were all low SES, attending an urban school and who primarily lived in single parent households overwhelmingly expressed in a written response in tenth grade that they would be attending college. They tied participation in higher education to careers which primarily consisted of law and medicine. Although many of the students listed dual careers and displayed a general misunderstanding of the length of time and appropriate course of study to enter into specific careers, they were intent on enrolling in college. In eleventh grade they expressed in focus groups that their parent(s) and older siblings were supportive of their desire to attend college. Many of the students were left to act as the head of house since the single parent needed to work extensive hours. These students noted that while neither they nor other family members generally understood the college going process, including financial aid, that if they attended college, they would be able to later contribute earnings from their career to the family.

School administrators and counselors were interviewed regarding the likelihood of these students actually enrolling in college. They agreed that while the students had developed a strong predisposition to attend, most would not. The students were not academically prepared to enter programs of rigor in college – the valedictorian had earned scores of 400 on the math and reading sections of the SAT respectively. They also felt that the lack of college going knowledge hindered the students from applying in a timely manner and in securing any financial aid. The students in the focus groups expressed their strong reliance upon the counselors to help them apply for admission and for financial aid, yet few had more than one interaction per year with the counselor and they felt that it was the responsibility of the counselor to reach out to them. The counselors countered that they expected students to be more proactive in arranging meetings and that it was nearly impossible to help them complete FAFSAs due to the students' parents being fearful of or resistant to providing any useful financial documentation. Parents and students expected a high level of service to provide admission and financial aid assistance for the students yet it was not occurring. Through twelfth grade though, the students continued to believe that they would enroll in college and that they had the support of their peers and families.



### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methodology**

This chapter describes the research approach used in this exploratory study. The intent was to collect adequate information from the participants that would lead to a greater understanding of what experiences led them to enroll in the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. This section also outlines the research methodology and how it reflects the tradition of inquiry, describes the sample from which data was be collected, describes the data collection process and procedures, and outlines ethical considerations.

#### **Qualitative Tradition**

Qualitative research allows researchers to interact with the study participants enabling them to learn more details reflective of the experience being examined (Creswell, 1998). Such studies may yield descriptive and individualized data that would not be collected through a quantitative study in which the focus is upon statistical results in the form of numbers. Qualitative studies can reveal how all of the parts work to form a whole as opposed to studying one part of the problem. Through inductive research, abstractions, concepts, hypotheses or theories are built rather than tested (Merriam, 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for data collection who examine multiple realities as related to the participants in their studies and Merriam (1998) noted that the key issue of qualitative research is that it is concerned with the perspective of the participants, not of the researcher. Since truth for the participant evolves over time and through situation, only qualitative study can understand the participants and their context. Such studies are

concerned with the values and experience of the subjects not only their behavior, and are explained through rich descriptions (Merriam, 1998).

There can be multiple approaches used when conducting a qualitative study. In this study, phenomenology was used to provide insights into the experiences of participants in relation to their decision to enroll in the university. The focus of phenomenology is to study the essence or structure of an experience. A researcher uses phenomenology to understand and describe the experiences that individuals have lived as well as the nature of those experiences. It was important in this study to identify what experiences the participants had in common as they decided to enroll in the university and what those experiences meant. The phenomenological approach satisfies what Creswell (1998) noted as exploring the experience of the individual and providing a comprehensive description of the experience. In order to accomplish this, one must first approach the research with the goal of understanding the experiences of the participants while not introducing one's personal bias into the interpretation of the experiences; write lines of inquiry that probe the experiences of the participants; collect data from the participants that outlines their experience; analyze the data through grouping common themes together into clusters that outline the experience; and writing narrative that allows the reader to better understand the essence that singularly unites the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 1998).

This study relied upon interviews with participants who had experienced the phenomenon of interest, which was deciding to enroll at UNLV as opposed to the local four year college, the community college or foregoing higher education altogether. The

analysis focused upon topics that have generally been thought to be shared across students as part of the student choice process based upon the Hossler, et. al. (1989) choice model. The study also examined threads of commonality between the participants which were not included in the choice model. The results have been provided in a narrative format so that the richness of the data could be expressed, most clearly articulating the experience of the participants.

### **Sample**

Purposeful sampling in which participants are deliberately chosen due to their possession of a variable was used in this study. It is essential in a phenomenology to use purposeful sampling to ensure that all participants had the experience that was being studied (Creswell, 1998). The focus of the study was upon urban dwelling first generation low socio-economic Latino students. Only students who had identified themselves as such on the financial aid forms used by UNLV were invited to participate. The participants were all residents of Clark County, Nevada, where UNLV is located. Limiting the study to participants from this region helped control for experiences that may have been generated by factors from outside of the area. Additionally, participants all identified themselves as being from families in which the parents did not attend college. Each of the students was eligible to receive the Pell award due to their family's limited means of providing financial support. Finally, the students were high school graduates from the year 2011. These variables were evident through the financial aid applications for the entering freshmen class of 2011. Some of the students may have had to provide income verification due to the nature of UNLV's expansive participation in the

verification program, which further ensured that they were classified correctly in the financial aid system.

The goal of the study was to interview 12 students. Creswell (1998) noted that interviews of up to 10 participants are ideal. Interviews conducted through the phenomenological approach were long – up to two hours, in order to deeply explore the experiences as related by the participants. The participants participated in up to three interviews.

In order for students to learn of the study, they were sent e-mails generated from the researcher's personal e-mail account. The e-mails outlined the purpose of the study and expressed the importance of the research. Specifically, students were informed that the identification of themes generated through this study could lead to policy development which could assist youth who experienced similar traits to consider enrolling in a university.

Those who expressed interest in participating in the study were provided with an informed consent document that explained the purpose, scope and details of the study. They were assured of privacy and the ability to exclude themselves from continuing in the study at any time.

### **Data Collection**

The most appropriate form of data collection for this study was to conduct multiple interviews with each participant. Creswell (1998) outlined additional forms of qualitative inquiry that included analyzing documents, conducting observations and using audiovisual equipment. The ability of the researcher to probe more deeply into the

experiences of the participants through interviews provided a richer and clearer description of the experiences when compared with the other approaches. The structure of the interviews encouraged story telling by the participants. Interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. Handwriting notes during an interview is difficult and there is the potential to miss recording important information when using this technique. The researcher wrote down significant factors as noted by the participants through the interviews to complement the data captured in the recordings. These notes acted as signifiers that there was a topic of interest that needed to be focused upon when the data was analyzed.

The interviews were semi-structured in that there was an initial list of open-ended questions which allowed the participants to tell their stories about what motivated them to enroll in a university. The researcher examined the responses and followed-up with additional interviews and more probing questions to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences.

**Processes and procedures.** The data collection process began in April 2012 with the researcher sending an e-mail invitation to students who qualified to be part of the study. Those who replied by e-mail expressing interest were then called by telephone. During the phone call, the students were provided with an overview of the purpose of the study and how the study would be conducted. The students who maintained interest in participating were screened again to ensure that they met the criteria to participate. It was possible that some of them had completed the financial aid application incorrectly, so the verbal screening permitted selection of participants more accurately. Several potential

participants were disqualified due to inaccurate reporting. The participants were then told that they would receive a \$25.00 cash gift for completing the interviews.

The participants were then provided with a series of times and a potential location for the interviews. The in-person interviews took place in the Lied Library on the UNLV campus. There were private study rooms which were reserved for the interviews in the library that prevented disrupting others in the building while also providing a feeling of security for the participants through meeting in a familiar public space. Dexter (1970) noted that interviews have three variables which affect the quality and outcome of the interview. These are the personality of the interviewer, the attitudes and orientation of the interviewee and the definition of the situation. It was important that the participants felt comfortable with the interviewer. Providing the participants with the focus of the study and reiterating it when reviewing the consent process helped provide the scope and tone, putting the interviewees at ease and establishing a level of comfort with the interviewer. Establishment of a comfort level helped enable the conversation to become more rich, and likely provided more detail, both essential in a phenomenological study.

The interviews were scheduled outside of the students' class times so that the participants would not be focused on work for a class they were about to attend and so that it was convenient for them. Some interviews for candidates who could not physically meet took place over the telephone. Participants were reminded about the interviews through phone calls and e-mails.

The interview process began in spring 2012. The initial portion of the interview was designed to identify significant factors the participants experienced as they decided

to enroll in the university. The initial significant factors most often included discussions of the family structure and the students' experiences with family, peers and school during their high school years. The interviews then progressed into more detailed conversations that better explained the significance and nature of those factors in relation to the decision to pursue their studies specifically at the university. Additional interviews were conducted to further explore the factors initially identified in the first set of interviews. Each interview lasted for approximately two hours. This amount of time allowed the participants to present detailed recollections of their experience. Extending the time beyond two hours may have led to participant fatigue.

Pilot questions allowed the researcher to reword the questions in order to best generate a response which addressed the question (Merriam, 1998). It was important that the questions allowed the participants to provide responses which were not overly confined by the scope of the question. The questions also could not be so vague or general that they did not capture the data which was of interest to the researcher.

Probing questions were utilized throughout the interview to follow-up on points already discussed with the participant. Such questions were generally not possible to prepare ahead of time, as they were dependent upon previous responses and an evolution of the interview.

### **Establishing Credibility**

An important aspect of establishing credibility of the study was to generate validity. This study incorporated three measures of verification to prove validity. Member checking was utilized, which entailed the participants examining the transcriptions of

their interviews and ensuring that their expressions were accurately reflected.

Additionally, rich-thick descriptions provided details that were concise and clearly conveyed the experiences of the participants. Throughout the course of the interviews, the participants would inevitably repeat and expand upon certain areas of their experience, further enriching their prior responses. Finally, peer reviews were utilized, which entailed having a research experienced peer ask challenging questions about the research, ensuring that the study was sound (Creswell, 1998).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations related to this study included acquiring approval from the UNLV Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the University of Nebraska, consent of the participants, arrangements to ensure confidentiality, secure storage of the data and modest incentives for the participants who completed their interviews.

The Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships was ensured that only the data within their database which was necessary for the study would be examined. A data query was run by an employee in that office who was provided with the student qualifiers necessary to determine who was eligible to be included in the study. The employee provided the researcher with the names and e-mail addresses of potential participants. The e-mail addresses were used for the initial e-mail request soliciting volunteer participation in the study. Those who responded and expressed an interest in participating were then asked for their phone number which was used to confirm the scope of the study and to establish interview appointments.



Students were presented with the Consent to Participate form and were reminded at that time and immediately prior to the interview that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could opt out at any time. The researcher reviewed each line of the consent form with each participant. The consent forms were then locked in a filing drawer, with the folder unmarked, in the office of the researcher. No information which could be associated with the identities of the participants was kept. The interview transcript notes utilized a pseudonym for each participant. The researcher maintained a confidential code which provided a manner with which to determine which pseudonym belonged to each participant.

On the digital recordings of the interviews, each participant was introduced only by first name. In this study, only pseudonyms were used to represent each participant. Data on the digital recordings was transcribed by a third party transcriptionist who signed a confidentiality agreement. The digital recorder was secured in a locked cabinet and the written transcriptions were saved on a password protected disk which was locked in a separate secure cabinet which could only be accessed by the researcher.

The \$25.00 cash incentive was designed to acknowledge to the participants that their time was important to the study. Awarding a greater amount of money may have influenced others to participate simply to secure the funds or may also have influenced one who began participating but did not want to, to continue participating, strictly for financial reasons. The incentive therefore was nominal enough that it should not have acted to influence behavior, yet substantial enough to have expressed gratitude for their participation.

**Role of the Researcher**

The researcher closely interacted with the participants in this study. Interviews require close attention and deep probing deeply to mine rich-thick descriptions of the factors that affected the participants when they experienced the phenomenon. It was important to eliminate bias early in the study and to prevent it from entering the interview and analysis stages (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

The researcher had worked for many years in urban areas as an admissions officer. However, there had not been any personal contact with students who may have been eligible for the study as the researcher's work duties precluded such interactions. The researcher was also fairly new to Clark County, Nevada having lived there for only three years, so the lack of familiarity with some of the region may have reduced potential bias from forming in regard to students who lived in specific areas of Clark County or attended certain schools in the region.

The researcher did have experience growing up in a low socioeconomic household although both parents had attended college. The researcher was not of Latino origin but had at times lived amongst large groups of Latinos. The researcher also had primarily lived in urban areas. It was unknown if this could have generated bias, so the researcher worked to prevent leading questions during the interview or affirming life situations jointly shared by the researcher and participants.

Three of the participants learned during the interviews, that the researcher was a university official. This may have led them to be less forthright and honest than the researcher desired. The participants may have desired not to upset the researcher in his

role as university official by providing negative perceptions about the university or its staff. Additionally, the participants could have believed that the researcher, as university official, could have acted against them in retribution, thereby affecting their studies or enrollment status.

Finally, the participants self-selected to participate in the study. This may have signified that they viewed the university positively and therefore felt comfortable speaking about their experiences choosing to attend the institution. It is possible that if the researcher chose students to participate, that the data may have been different.

## **Overview**

The research study was conducted in order to ascertain what factors led low SES urban students to individuals to enroll in a university. The 12 research subjects were all of Latino descent, and all but one were of Mexican descent. Each had been the first family member to attend higher education and each was also a first generation family member to have been born in the United States. The subjects were all also low socioeconomic status citizens or permanent residents and attended public high school in an urban setting. Though not a qualification for participation in the research, all of the participants had been high achieving high school students. The homogeneity of these characteristics were thought to provide insights into the decision making process of that group.

Through extensive interviews with each participant, the researcher was able to learn of individual factors and circumstances which led the students to enroll in a university. However, several general themes emerged which were common to all of the

participants. The data has been presented in summary form and specific quotes from the participants complement the observations made by the researcher.

#### **Data—The Participants**

**Marissa.** Marissa had always been an “A” student at her zone high school except for her mathematics studies. Despite her good although not excellent math grades, she was a math tutor for two years and was also a writing club leader and a mentor to freshman students. She always knew she would attend college although she had never really thought of what kind of institution she would attend. She continually changed the focus of her career aspirations throughout high school. She enrolled in the university as a computer science major and quickly changed again to study graphic design. She did not think that her family would tolerate any more changes.

Her mother generated the income for the family and had no experience with higher education. She was also not engaged in Marissa’s high school studies. Due to this, Marissa explained that she would take advantage of her mother’s ignorance on multiple occasions. She highlighted an example in which she enrolled in several electives in senior year, which had her mother understood, she would probably have strongly contested.

Marissa had never specifically discussed college with teachers or counselors. Her experience was not unique. There was simply not an emphasis upon pursuing higher education at the high school. Some of her friends thought about enrolling in higher education yet others did not. Her friends exerted little influence upon her. She did not believe there was much of a difference between institutions of higher education and noted that “I think that at any college you’d probably learn the same thing.”

She decided to attend the university and explained to her parents that it was the only institution in the area which provided her with a course of study in her field. However, she admitted that she knew that they would not know better and that she was dishonest with them. She decided not to enroll in the community college because she thought that it was smaller than the university and a larger school somehow represented a more attractive school. She was aware of the existence of a local four year college but since she did not know where it was located, she did not consider attending. She received recruitment materials from both the four year college and the university but did not spend much time reading them. She never interacted with recruiters from any institution of higher education nor did she perform any research online or through any other medium.

Marissa had neither friends nor family who had participated in higher education and she was left to make decisions by herself. She had progressed through life with a philosophy of taking it day-by-day and had not developed any plans on how she would finance her education at the university.

**Anibal.** Anibal was raised by his grandparents until his grandfather died of cancer. The loss of his grandfather stimulated in him a desire to pursue medical studies. He had an older sister who attended cosmetology school but otherwise, he was the only member of his family to pursue higher education. He reconnected with his parents once he enrolled in the university as a double major in biology and psychology. He had an option to enroll in a religiously affiliated school for no tuition but decided to study at the local university.

Anibal attended a magnet high school which was a long distance from his home. He was enrolled in honors classes and took several AP classes. Since his high school was not near his home, he developed a varied group of friends. Those with whom he took classes lived in different areas and he only saw them at school. He seldom saw those who lived in his neighborhood. Both sets of friends had different plans for their future.

They (school peers) kind of knew where they were going, what they wanted to do, kind of had a path set out for us (themselves). My other friends were kind of different. They were still trying to figure things out. I had a few friends drop out. A lot of them were interested more in vocational training outside of high school. Not many of them wanted to attend college. So I had a variety in high school.

While in high school, he received multiple recruitment e-mails from the university but noted that he never read them. He never specifically discussed higher education with anyone who worked at the school although the teachers would speak about the importance of higher education in general.

Anibal kept busy as a member of the Key Club and Student Council. He was also employed although he did not disclose what type of work he performed. He seemed to think himself to be a follower and did what the group decided. Sometimes the club or council would coordinate a dance or have a meeting. Sometimes they would just chat. Higher education was not a topic that was discussed in either group. When it came time in his senior year to apply to college, he did not apply to an institution which was a faith based institution, a faith to which he subscribed, although this would have cost him nearly nothing. Anibal noted that he “did not have a financial strain and therefore chose to attend the university.” However, he was a recipient of the Pell Grant and needed to

work in high school and provide financial assistance to the household. In his mind, this did not present itself as a financial strain.

**Dana.** Dana was the eldest of five children who lived in a household overseen by her mother. Her father was a truck driver and was seldom at home. She initially wanted to become a psychologist but later decided to focus upon becoming a pediatrician. She knew that pediatricians could earn a high income and therefore she would be able to provide greater financial support to her family. She attended a zone high school yet took honors and AP classes to challenge herself academically. In addition to her studies, she worked for 30 hours per week and participated in a number of clubs.

Dana had a teacher in high school who was an outspoken fan of an out-of-state university football team. The teacher's constant banter about the university sports team influenced her to pursue studies at a university instead of at a community college or a four year college. Dana also had another teacher speak about higher education. However, this one expressed her disdain over the significant amount of debt she incurred by studying at a four year institution. She noted that if she could do it all over again, she would have first attended a community college and then transferred into a university, reducing the expenses associated with tuition differences between the two types of institutions.

Throughout her high school years, she was focused on pursuing higher education yet she had not read any college recruitment materials. She had collected information from Harvard University at the college fair but did not share the information with her family. "My mom, I just didn't share things with her. I felt she might not really

understand what I'm trying to tell her about college. I don't know if she knows too much about what's going on about college, so I didn't really share too much." Once admitted to the university, Dana did not discuss her decision to attend it with any of her teachers, counselors or friends as she felt that they would not approve of her decision. Dana only shared this decision with her family, the context of which was an announcement.

Dana saved much of her earnings from her employment and applied it toward her first year of studies at the university. However, she had no real plans on how she would continue to finance her studies.

I received the Pell . . . that's why I continue saving money. I haven't reapplied for the scholarships but once I see that I'm going to need to, I start applying again. . . So I'm hoping and I'm anticipating that I'm going to keep on getting this coming year. So I may really not have a plan but I'm just going to see how things go.

**Diane.** Diane had wanted to attend college since middle school so that she could "get out of the crazy house." Her father was a cabinet maker who had sent his earnings to support family in Mexico. Her mother had severe schizophrenia and was institutionalized, leaving Diane with the burden of helping to raise her siblings. While she had discussed pursuing higher education with her father, he noted the financial constraints they had and that he could not help support her studies. She was interested in pursuing studies which would lead her to become a lawyer so that she could help people who had family situations similar to her own.

Diane had few friends at the magnet school she attended. She was active in a number of after school groups including a legal organization which doled out punitive sentences to juveniles who had waived their rights to normal proceedings. In high school, she had never interacted with teachers or counselors in discussing which type of



institution she would attend. She remembered one teacher in high school who had university pennants pinned to the walls. This was influence enough, she noted, to pursue studies at a university.

Someone had told her that community college students attended class and went right home afterwards so she never considered enrolling there. Cost played no part in her decision making process. She joined GEAR-UP solely to have her SAT and ACT test taking fees waived. She believed that financial aid would take care of things. This philosophy of things working themselves out had been her standard for quite some time. She recounted an example of how it worked for her when she had been told the day before a deadline of a scholarship opportunity from the local chamber of commerce. She applied that day and soon learned that she had received the award. She did not seem to embrace long term planning as things always seemed to work out. Diana did not have a clear vision as to what her course of studies would be and why she was better off studying at the university.

**Nelita.** Nelita attended a leadership focused magnet high school. She spent a great deal of time during her senior year participating in the same legal program as Diane although it appears they did not know each other. Outside of that, she participated in GEAR UP only to the extent of receiving assistance from a counselor who helped her complete her FAFSA. She had no time for friends at school or in the neighborhood so there was no real peer pressure as to what type of institution to attend. Nelita wanted to become a lawyer to help protect families. She noted that she was the protector at her home, protecting her family from her abusive father.

I am. Well, oh gosh, how can I say this. It is more like, there was just things going on in our life. To tell you the truth, my dad, that we were scared of him . . . it's a big responsibility (as protector) but I just, I couldn't stand losing one of them or life, if I had been there, I would have maybe stopped that from happening or that wouldn't have happened if I were there . . . it's still a big responsibility because I'm, kind of like the second mom. If my mom's working, it's like, OK, I have to pick them up. I have to feed them. I have to make sure they brush their teeth, go to bed, and you know, like clean the house and tell them what to do and get mad at them when they do something wrong. That's how it is.

Her mother cleaned houses and she would often join her to assist with generating income. She had no concept of the differences between the community college, four year college and the university. She did have a cousin in California who was four years her elder and told her that she needed to aim high and not attend the community college. She only applied to the university, and due to her excellent grades, she was accepted and she enrolled.

Nelita expressed concern about a confusing transfer process and knew that if she enrolled at the community college, she would be subjected to that experience. She was not familiar with the degrees she would need to earn to become a lawyer.

**Jose.** Jose wanted to become an aviation engineer, partially influenced he thought, by fellow Boy Scouts who also liked engineering. He was active in the honor society, Mariachi band and he played the viola at school. He lived with his mother and younger sister. His mother continuously stressed the importance of higher education yet did not have much of an understanding of it. Jose once attended a higher education recruitment event at his high school. He noted that the university recruiter was nice, and he therefore decided to pursue his studies at the university. He was unaware of the course of study he would need to pursue to become an engineer. Jose's teachers drove him hard

to achieve excellence in his magnet high school. However, none of them or any school counselors spoke specifically about the differences between types of higher educational institutions.

He did not discuss what type of higher education institution he might consider with his mother but he expressed that he thought she would prefer that he attend a university.

I kind of had it all on my own I guess. People like my mom told me to go to college and she was fine with the idea of a university as long as I was going to a school . . . I feel like she would have been alright with any other school but I don't know if she would have agreed with a community college . . . I think she wanted me to go at least to a state college or university. She wanted a good education for me.

When asked about the differences between a community college, four year college and university, he replied "University would be a good stepping stone to another college if I felt that I was going to change after my first year." He clearly did not grasp the concept of transferring or the notion of starting in a community college and transferring to a four year institution.

Jose helped his family pay the rent and while he knew that the community college cost less, he decided to attend the university. He noted that it sounded more prestigious and he thought that this would better prepare him for his future. He made decisions on a short term, day-to-day basis, and was concerned but not worried about how he would finance his education. Ultimately, the community college was less appealing to him than the university although he never visited the university before attending orientation. After visiting the planetarium at the community college he left with an impression. "It

(Community College) kind of looked like just another kind of high school-like atmosphere.”

**Elian.** Elian’s parents were divorced but lived close to each other. He would alternate visits between their two respective homes daily. His father was a landscaper and a cook, both jobs with which Elian would assist whenever he had time. He enjoyed spending regular time with the extended family of 40, whom all lived in the area. His interest in science was sparked by a teacher although they never had direct conversations about the field. The teacher was a Latina and they often ate lunch together.

Elian’s grandfather had encouraged him to become a doctor so that he could earn a significant income and help support the family. Elian conducted a little research and determined that brain surgeons and plastic surgeons tended to earn high incomes so he initially thought of pursuing one of those career paths.

He spent a lot of time tutoring other students at school and noted that he had no group of peers either at school or in his neighborhood. He attended a magnet school far away from his home and spent considerable time travelling to and from school. Elian initially became interested in the university when he heard about a *U.S. News & World Report* ranking they had earned while watching Spanish language television. He was unsure of what the ranking was, but felt that since it was a university and had some kind of ranking, that it must be a fine institution. He became committed to attending the institution when he heard one of his teachers ridicule the community college. Elian was aware that there was also a four year college in the area but quickly discounted it since it had a small enrollment. He never attended a college fair yet began receiving college

literature in the mail once he had taken the SAT. He recalled looking with fascination at schools in exotic places, especially, he noted, one in Oklahoma. His parents did not look at the materials and the only involvement they had in his school was looking at his grades on his report card and praising him for his high achievements.

Elian thought that the university was larger than the community college and must therefore be a more focused place to study. The very term *university* created a powerful image to him especially when he compared it with the term community college. Additionally, he felt that transferring would be laborious and did not want to be bothered with such a process. He was unaware of the cost differences between institutions and made no note of any other perceived benefits of pursuing studies at the university.

**Martha.** Martha lived with both parents as well as aunts, uncles and younger cousins and brothers. Her father had been in the military and she described that as providing her family with a “government stipend to pay for everything.” She was unable to elaborate, but expressed that their living costs as well as her costs associated with pursuing higher education were *covered* by the government. She wanted to become a teacher so that she could help other people. While in high school one day, one of her teachers spoke at length to the students about the poor compensation and benefits she received as a teacher. This changed Martha’s focus from teaching to the field of nursing. She had heard that nursing paid more than teaching yet she had no idea of any specifics related to the field of nursing. The compassion she was showed by a nurse at one time after she had been bitten by a scorpion and hospitalized did leave an indelible and positive impact upon her.

Martha attended a zone high school and met a university recruiter at school one day, expressing that the university representative was “nice.” That, coupled with the convenient location of the university, only a short bus ride from home, made for a positive impression. She believed that the four year college, which happened to specialize in nursing, was more expensive than the university so she did not even consider applying. She discounted the community college because it was a longer bus ride, making it tougher to get home to care for her sister, and it looked like a high school to her. Martha had never actually visited the community college and could not attribute the origin of those feelings.

Well, I’d say that (at) University alone, you get the college experience because I feel like Community College is more like just high school for people. I think that at University you would get the college experience but like, I don’t know what to say.

She applied for admission in the end of January of her senior year in high school and knew that she would be admitted since she met the minimum high school grade point average required by the university. The university was the only school to which she applied. She was not aware of any potential financial aid or scholarship opportunities associated with applying earlier. Both her application for admission and FAFSA were completed without assistance from anyone.

**Alejandra.** Alejandra was responsible for caring for her older sister who had cerebral palsy. This responsibility included making a daily noontime trip home at which time she would feed and care for her sister. Her mother worked extensive hours and her father would watch her sister when she attended school. She had told her family that she was interested in studying psychology but she noted that they did not understand what

that meant. Her grandfather would send her newspaper clippings in which the word *psychology* appeared, believing them to be of interest to her once she declared the possibility of studying that field. Her parents told her that she should consider becoming a lawyer so that she could earn enough income to take care of her disabled sister.

Alejandra had always been very busy while in high school and participated in numerous student groups and even started her own group which would provide peer tutoring to younger students. She actively complained to the principal about the poor counseling provided at the school, yet, she said, nothing improved. She also participated in a business club and held office in the photography club. Despite her very busy schedule, she did not develop a strong cadre of peers. After club leadership, it was home to care for the family.

Hmmm, (my) circle of friends I had varied a lot. But it was usually just whoever I ended up sitting next to in class, talked to a lot and we became friends or started talking. It was never in a particular group, never just students (peer) counselors or people from clubs that I was in, I was a little from each group.

She had a serious car accident while in high school commuting from activities yet she remained undeterred from maintaining an active schedule.

There's always that pressure hey, you need to go to school, you don't work at McDonald's. That's always something that the peers and teachers did to you. They just really pushed you to go to college in general but they all had different ideas about what they wanted to do. A lot of them wanted to go to military or to just the community college so it was never any focus just as long as we were doing something.

She decided to attend the university because it was a more convenient commute than to the community college and she had no information on the four year college. She chose to pursue psychology and never told her parents about that decision. For Alejandra,

“education is education” so the decision really boiled down to attending an institution which would save her time commuting, allowed her to continue caring for her sister and to take part in other activities awhile also securing employment. She had no understanding of financial aid or how she would finance her education. Her focus was upon accomplishing whatever challenges presented themselves to her each day and not planning too far ahead.

**Nina.** Nina’s biological parents died when she was young so she was raised by her aunt and uncle whom she referred to as mom and dad. Her aunt was a cosmetologist and a great friend to her. She shared a car ride with her aunt in the morning and would speak of her desire to open her own cosmetology business so that they could work together. Her aunt strongly encouraged her to pursue something more professional. Her aunt also performed odd jobs throughout the week and cleaned houses on the weekends – an activity with which Nina would assist. Nina’s uncle was abusive and the family often became homeless. She wanted to pursue a career in law to help families which would experience similar abusive situations. Her uncle was eventually deported after a run-in with the law. Nina expressed that she would never get married as husbands were little more than burdens. Instead, she would live with her aunt and take care of her.

Nina took the SAT in November of her senior year at her zone high school and applied to the university late in her senior year – both with fee waivers from the GEAR-UP program. She did not participate in any other GEAR-UP activities. She worked 35 hours a week and maintained a busy extracurricular schedule. She attended a magnet school for law and had few if any close friendships. She enrolled at the university



because they had a law school and she was unaware that one could attend another type of institution for baccalaureate level studies before enrolling in a law school. Nina contributed to the household finances and was intent upon paying her own way through higher education, whatever the cost. She would simply work harder to achieve whatever it was she needed. This formula had served her well to-date.

**Anastasia.** Anastasia attended a zone high school and was interested in becoming a sports psychologist because she had been an athlete in high school. She made this decision as she was choosing a major on her application for admission to the university. Before then, she had changed her mind every week. She lived with her mother, as well as with an older brother and two sisters—one younger, one older. Her older sister later attended the university with Anastasia. She saw her mother's best friend every week when they socialized, often at a swimming pool, as well as at the high school swim meets in which Anastasia competed. This family friend had attended college and recommended Anastasia pursue higher education studies. "She was like on my butt about going to college and she really helped me out, like filling out the scholarships and stuff." Her mother had always told her that she needed to go to college so she wouldn't have to struggle to support the family as she had struggled.

Outside of swimming and a brief time participating in the Earth Club which focused upon recycling materials, she did not interact much with school peers outside of class. Her first exposure to a university was when she was recruited by swim coaches from two universities. She knew then, that she would attend a university because community colleges don't have swim teams.

Well, I already knew that I was going to swim in college, so I understand the whole thing about saving money and all that and then it wasn't for me. Like, I was looking for that big campus feel and everything . . . at community school people don't live on campus.

She had no direction from her high school counselor as to which type of institutions to apply but she knew that she could receive application fee waivers if she joined a college exploratory program. She thought the program she joined was called Head Start. She joined yet did not participate in any program activities, only taking advantage of the fee waivers. She applied to two colleges and the university. All of them had swim teams yet they competed at different levels. She noted that she was not a very good swimmer but that since she had good grades, she was "the whole package." When asked about her standardized test scores she noted that she took the SAT three times, each time progressively lowering the score until her mother told her she was done taking the test.

She did receive a partial scholarship to the university from the swim team although it would have cost her less to attend the community college. The two colleges she had applied to were out of state and cost significantly more than the university. When the time of year came in which students were getting accepted to schools, only her best friend would be attending the community college because "it was cheaper for her." Anastasia noted that if she did not swim, she may have decided to attend a community college to save some money. She was apparently unaware that her university tuition and fees even with the partial scholarship still exceeded the costs she would have incurred attending the community college.

**Nesta.** Nesta wanted to become a forensic pathologist and conduct autopsies. That developed as a result of wanting to become both a medical doctor, which would be

too boring for her, and a detective. She had never met anyone in that field but thought it would be more exciting than pursuing physical therapy, which her parents had strongly encouraged her to pursue. When in high school, Nesta helped her father recover from a back injury and made a positive impact upon his health. However, she noted that “after I learned more about it, it wasn’t something I wanted to do.” She attended a zone high school and took five AP classes but only one AP test. She took the classes to receive a more rigorous education and did not want to receive any advanced standing from the courses in college, so she did not take the tests. Her goal was to retake those types of classes in higher education having already had strong preparation for them.

Nesta’s mother, who was a freelance accountant for some small businesses, and her father who managed a retail operation had separated while she was in high school but for economic reasons, moved back in together when the recession affected the area. The family members, which included two brothers, rarely spoke with each other. She described herself as the glue which held the family together.

I wouldn’t say that my family is how you see on TV, like we’re more estranged. Like I’m the closest one to everybody. Like I talk to my dad, I talk to my mom, I talk to my brother(s), but nobody else really has a close relationship. Like my brother and my mom don’t really talk, or my brothers don’t really talk. I would just say that what’s most important to our family, I would just basically say survival. We don’t really celebrate a lot of holidays or spend a lot of family time together but we all care. Like if we’re getting along, if we have food to eat or need a ride to work, we all take care of each other in that sense. But other than that, it’s no social, don’t really talk or have personal relationships with each other.  
(Nesta)

Her family did not discuss higher education and there was no real involvement in her high school studies either.

My mom always, just like her standard question for me was did you do your homework. I'd be like yeah I did it, no matter if I did or did not. . . . She looked at my report cards until I found out that if I just kept them she wouldn't look at them. Kind of like, if I checked the mail I would see the grades and she wouldn't, but if she checked the mail, then yeah, she would see them. But there was nothing really to hide, I didn't get bad grades.

Nesta was very active in activities at her school. She performed in the orchestra, was a member of the National Honor Society as well as the basketball team and was active in several other clubs. Despite her active schedule, she received no direction upon which type of institution to attend from either members or faculty advisors from those groups. She was unaware of the presence of the local four year college and wanted to stay away from the community college.

I just don't like community college where I want to start. I wanted to start at a university. I just felt it was, eh, maybe it sounds kind of snobbish, I just wanted to start at a university rather than a community school. . . . I didn't want to get mixed up transferring and what if some credits didn't transfer and all of that. I just wanted to keep it simple.

In addition to wanting to avoid the transfer process, she thought that others would perceive her studies at the university in a more positive light.

I would think that more, like if you wanted to go to another college or get a job somewhere, they would say university looks better than a community college, but that's just what I think, it could be wrong . . . cause universities are always better than community colleges. That's kind of the popular idea that most people think, that universities are better than community colleges . . . even though it may be cheaper (to attend community college) just because universities are better and anybody can go to a community college anytime in their life. But it's a little bit harder to get into a university, so you would have more credentials.

Nesta had not taken cost into consideration when she applied to the university.

At that time I wasn't really thinking too rationally. I don't know why I didn't think financials but my mom said that if I ever needed extra help, that she would try to help me no matter what. So I just figured what, that maybe if I couldn't

afford it, I would find a way, even if I had to take loans . . . I really didn't think too rationally about how I was going to pay for college.

### **Family**

Participants were initially asked what motivated them to pursue enrolling in a university. One of the first responses was that family members led them to this decision. This response was noted by all participants however it seemed to be more closely associated with the pursuit of higher education than enrolling in a university. The participants lived within different family structures which often included aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins and did not always include mother and father. None of the caregivers had participated in higher education. Approximately half of the participants had siblings, but none whom had attended higher education. In four of the families, the participants were responsible for caring for others in the house be they siblings or parents. Additionally, most of the participants contributed income from their part-time employment to the family to assist with expenses. Most of the parents were employed and several held multiple jobs. All of those who were employed held blue collar positions requiring extensive manual labor. Typical jobs included cooking, cleaning houses, driving a truck and landscaping. Those participants who did work generally did so at the side of their parent.

Each participant noted that there was an expectation that they would attend "college" from a time early in their youth and all but one noted that they were expected to be *the one in the family* who would earn high income, be employed as a professional and make the family proud.

We're all Mexican-American so family is one of our greatest values. Whenever there is a birthday party or a celebration our whole family goes . . . this is a regular thing for all forty to get together for some occasion . . . (of the whole group of forty) they see me as the person who sets the example and . . . the one with the bright future ahead . . . I believe in the whole culture in general, they stay close. Because in our culture, family is important and I imagine that's the same for everyone else. -Elian

That expectation came with the responsibility to financially support the family in the future. For some, this responsibility arrived as early as high school.

In high school the only hardship really that affected our family was we were having trouble paying our house and it was a time in our life where we weren't sure what we were going to do. My parents weren't sure what was going to happen with the house. They were trying to get help in many different places, help from the bank to lower payments, different things. It went on for a while. We just recently came to an agreement with the bank a month ago, and this was going on since my sophomore year in high school. That was when I really realized I have to start getting a job and make things a little easier for my parents . . . I felt like it was my responsibility as the oldest daughter, the oldest child, being able to help with payments . . . if they needed something, if they asked me for money, I'd give it to them . . . I felt it was my responsibility to help them. (Dana)

When asked how this experience affected her decision upon which career to focus, she noted that her decision was significantly based upon her own financial future.

I realized that I wanted a job in which I didn't have to worry about things like that, where I can provide for my family without worrying if I can't pay our house. If I can't provide necessary things, and that's when I started thinking about what kind of job salary I wanted to be earning. Yeah, it did play into me wanting a higher salary so I think that's why I changed into (studying to be) a pediatrician because I knew as a pediatrician you're going to earn more, really good money. (Dana)

Dana, like several of the other participants outlined the need to complete her studies in higher education as quickly as possible so that she could enter her career field and begin earning income which could be used to assist her family. She was aware of the higher costs associated with enrolling directly into a university. This presented an

obvious financial burden to her, but she preferred it to transferring from a community college or even studying at a four-year college. She thought that entering into the university would provide the most direct path for her.

I thought about it (transferring) because I know it is cheaper to do it that way, but I didn't want to. I thought it might just throw me off. I wanted to start here and get it done here. I didn't want to start over there and then maybe change my mind about coming to a four-year, so I just wanted to start here. –Dana

This rationale seems to be one which she developed independently, absent of discussions with her parents. The other participants also expressed that they were encouraged to enroll in higher education. However their families did not actively engage in discussions about preparing for entry into a specific type of institution. Neither the participants nor their parents seemed to grasp the differences in admission requirements amongst institutions including participation in extra curricular activities, leadership, standardized test scores, community service or attention to specific high school course sequences, course weighting and grades. Rather, the focus was simply for the student to perform well in high school. Good grades were important and that was the primary focus of the family. Nearly all of the participants noted that their parents reviewed their grade report each semester yet none of them had any interaction with the school, discussed homework or any other school related activity. It was up to the students to navigate their way through the college going process and this generally happened without significant research or planning.

### **Extracurricular**

Participants would relate through their interviews the amount of time they spent taking part in a variety of extracurricular activities. Three participants participated in

GEAR-UP although each for different reasons. While such programs have been shown to have positive correlations to higher education access in general, these students did not pursue participation as a means to prepare for entering a university. One participant noted that she joined the GEAR-UP program specifically so that she could have the SAT/ACT fees and college application fees waived. She did not engage in any other activities with GEAR-UP. Another student noted that he visited the GEAR-UP office to get assistance with completing an application for admission into the university, well into the spring semester of his senior year in high school. The third student expressed that she found GEAR-UP field trips, as well as college recruiter visits to her high school campus, as a way to escape the classroom. Those escapes from the classroom did enable her to see both the local four-year college and the university. “Yes I did, I visited (the university) through a program called GEAR-UP in high school and they bring you down for a field trip and I came” (Dana).

She commented on the beautiful buildings she had seen at an out-of-state university and compared them with those of the local university adding

The university (local) did have that. It didn't really attract me at first, but I got over it. I didn't think it was necessary to my education to have neat buildings . . . I don't remember too much, I don't think I did a lot of things with GEAR-UP.  
(Dana)

All of the participants participated in some extracurricular activity yet none of them participated for the express reason of preparing themselves for higher education or for enhancing their application for admission into a university. In fact, they seemed quite unaware of that potential. Two participants had participated in an off-campus program called Trial by Peers which required them to be work at a court house after their school



day had ended. They acted as peer advocates for juveniles who had waived their due process and opted for sentencing through this program, overseen by a judge. One participant joined in response to a seemingly random e-mail she received, and she made the decision to commit her time to this without discussing it with her family.

We got this e-mail sent from part of the magnet program and I remember that summer, like it was free to get trained for three months and then we would be sworn in by a judge and had to pass this bar exam. It was called the State Bar Exam. What we learned those three months, then we were pretty much being trained and then if we passed the test, we would be sworn in (in) front of a judge and then we would be licensed kind of and I heard through the e-mail, it was all by myself pretty much, I heard it, it interested me and I was like, I want to do it. (Nina)

Nina later explained how the program was life-changing and provided her with the opportunity to develop many skills. The other student who participated in this program was Nelita. She was the self-ascribed protector of the family, who lived in a household with an abusive father. She was responsible for protecting her younger siblings as well as her mother. Her desire to enter the criminal justice field had developed through watching crime and police shows on television. She wanted to help families which were similar to hers and were headed by an abusive parent. Nelita learned about the program through reading an e-mail announcement in similar fashion to Nina. It seemed to provide her with an opportunity to engage in a field of interest. She, like Nina, decided to pursue this opportunity without discussing it first with her family.

Other students joined clubs but few stayed committed to them for longer than a year. Some of the students would start their own organization to address a void they felt existed at their schools. Alejandra believed that her school offered very poor counseling services and therefore complained numerous times to the principal. These complaints

were not addressed to her satisfaction so she founded the Natural Helpers Club which provided peer counseling,

Diane joined the Hispanic Student Union and through this group developed a close relationship with her advisor who later became her mentor. During the interview, she was unable to articulate the goals or mission of the group, but provided insights into how the loosely knit group of students and a faculty member came to rely upon each other.

I know in the Hispanic Student Union there was a lot of discussion because one of our primary goals back then when I was there, was you know, we did give a lot to our community. We were always there to help our community, our school and stuff and at the end of the day, we all had like, well, I'm first generation, so are you, our parents, what are we going to do? What are we going to be able to do and thanks to our advisors, they're like, oh, you're first generation, here's this scholarship, here's this information you guys might want to look into . . . well I can't speak for other students, but I know I was really close to my advisor because pretty much throughout my summer of my junior year until even now, he helped me a lot and I was pretty open with him about my life. Everything that was going on because more than my teacher, more than my advisor, he was truly, besides my dad, my hero too because he was always there for me . . . (he would say) hey do you need anything, hey are you ok, do you need anything, what can I help you with. You know, here's a scholarship. It might be kind of late, but try to apply for it because you never know what might happen. What school are you going to? Have you thought about grad school? Like how are you doing? Just things like that. (Diane)

Diane noted that the students never received any direction as to which type of higher education institution they should apply nor any specifics in regard to academic pursuits following high school.

The participants seemed to participate in the organizations due to genuine, even if fleeting, interest and not as a means to deliberately build social capital or pad their applications for higher education. This group of students also seemed to make the most

out of the hours each day. A third of the participants were employed part-time and all but one of them had to commute to a school outside of their neighborhood. It was common for the students to note that their days started shortly after six in the morning and their work or household responsibilities concluded around nine o'clock at night when their studies would commence – studies that earned them high overall grade point averages in selective and challenging programs.

### **Peers**

The participants shared thoughts on how their peers impacted their decisions to pursue university studies. Their busy schedules left little time for interaction with peers outside of school. None of the participants expressed that they maintained social relationships with peers in their neighborhoods. In most instances, since their schools were located outside of their neighborhoods, it was unlikely that there would be many classmates living nearby. None of the students had cars with which they could travel to other areas, so they remained in their respective neighborhoods. At school, their peer groups had limited impacts upon their decision of which postsecondary institution to attend.

Half of the participants attended magnet programs which were housed in a zone school outside of their own neighborhood. These students would be among a small group of magnet program peers who were studying in another neighborhood's zone school which housed the district magnet program. They generally did not interact with students from outside of the magnet program except during occasional general education classes

and at those times they would often be differentiated by wearing uniforms reflecting enrollment in their magnet program.

Anibal was a student at a zone school outside of his neighborhood but was enrolled in an honors program which left him with a limited circle of program peers at the school although he developed relationships in his neighborhood.

I had a little bit of a varied group of friends. I come from, I was in a lot of the honors and AP classes and we all moved together because we ended up all taking the same classes and they only offer one class because the group is so small, so we all kind of moved in the same progressive order, a lot of us took classes together so we were with each other most of the day. But I also lived in an area different from a lot of the kids that I had classes with so I definitely had a base of friends that was outside of the honors/AP circle and I spent a lot of time with those friends. And as well as my sister, she wasn't in, she didn't do honors or AP classes so I knew a lot of her friends who were also from different backgrounds and groups, so I kind of had a varied group of friends. So I think there was a distinction between those I had in the honors and AP classes. They kind of knew where they were going, what they wanted to do, kind of had a path set out. My other friends were kind of different, they were still trying to figure things out. I had a few friends drop out, a lot of them were interested more in vocational training outside of high school. Not many of them wanted to attend college. So I had a little bit of variety in high school. (Anibal)

Anibal and the other participants who attended school outside of their neighborhood developed two sets of peers with potentially dueling peer influences. The program peers at the schools were more focused upon education yet did not develop expansive social ties. The neighborhood peers were spent more social time with the participants and little if any time focused upon education. Anibal noted that his school peers shared some question about what types of postsecondary institutions they should attend although none of them had a very clear understanding of the differences amongst institutions.

You know what, most of the time when I would hear about junior colleges, a lot of those kids who didn't know what career paths they wanted to follow just quite yet, or they wanted to play sports but weren't quite at the university level so they were going to play for junior colleges and get scholarships for those types of schools and generally though we all wanted to attend a university and I don't remember it ever being emphasized to us the difference between a university and college. (Anibal)

One-quarter of the participants had school peers who discouraged them from attending a university. Martha's peers pushed her to attend out-of-state schools regardless of the type of institution. Her friends felt it would be better to get away from home than to enroll in a nearby university. When she was accepted to the university, her friends courteously approved but were not enthusiastic. Participants noted that their final decisions more heavily weighted family responsibility – which included working and performing chores at home during their studies, than peer pressure.

### **Academics**

Participants discussed their classes, grades and the amount of focus they devoted to succeeding academically. All but one of the participants was enrolled in an honors curriculum, a magnet school or program and/or taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Each of these students expressed that they did so without the direction of their family, peers or any other persons. None of them expressed that they received any motivation from experiences in these classes to pursue postsecondary education at a university or other type of institution. They also did not seem to know that these classes were more heavily weighted by the university when reviewing applications for admission. In other words, they did not enroll in these classes in order to benefit themselves in the college application process. Rather, they each sought to challenge

themselves academically and to achieve as much as they could. They credited their families with that desire for challenge and achievement which indirectly led to their enrollment in the classes.

My (biological) parents died about twelve years ago and I was adopted by my aunt. My mom and dad, what can I say, they push me. They push me to do my best and my mom always tells me she wants me to be better than her. They're very hard working both of them are. My mom was a cosmetologist . . . and currently she's just cleaning houses. And my dad, my dad never went to work, not really. He's very smart, but he just doesn't know how to use his head. Actually he was recently deported and he was a finisher. So he does like cabinets and he paints them, that's what his specialty was. Other than that I don't know what else he can do, he's a handyman. Right now I'm working. I work at a law firm. I'm a file clerk there, currently trying to get out of there, to get something better. (Nina)

Nina further reflected upon the impact conversations with her mother had upon her -

we always talked in the car. The car is the place where we always talked and she actually asked me what I wanted to do and I said I wanted to be a cosmetologist like her . . . I wanted to get my own business, open up my own business, open up a salon so she could work with me. That was my idea. That's what I was thinking when I was in the eighth grade. Then she said no, you can't do that, you're doing that because of me and I don't know how I ended up deciding that I wanted to become an attorney . . . and for some reason I ended up, I applied to Magnet High School and I also applied to Vo-Tech where cosmetology was and I got into both and I ended up deciding to go with law at Magnet High School. (Nina)

Nina outlined that she had learned about lawyers through watching television and she thought that by becoming a lawyer she would be both able to help people and to generate a significant income. Other than that, she noted, she knew very little about the law.

Each of the participants completed their high school studies with very high grade point averages. Those grades in addition to the AP classes and tests made them highly competitive for admission as well as scholarships. They would have been able to gain

entry to the community college, the four-year college as well as the university had they applied to each of them.

### **Career Aspirations**

The participants provided outlines of how they developed their respective career paths and what role higher education would play in preparing them for employment. They developed career aspirations through a variety of ways. Nine of the 12 participants had decided to study for careers which would allow them to help their families or others. Three participants noted that they had wanted to pursue fields such as teaching or art but believed that the need to earn high income so that they could support their current families was more important than pursuing a study based upon passion or interest. Three other participants noted that they desired to help people who had experienced lives similar to their own. In order to provide such help, they would need to have jobs which paid significant incomes. Three other participants also wanted to help people, but decided that earnings potential income would not affect their decisions. The remaining three participants simply wanted to pursue areas of interest to them and did not consider how their potential careers would affect family or others.

Only one of the participants noted a desire to leave the region once she graduated from the university. The other participants were determined to remain at or near their current home, most often to maintain close relations with and to support their families. While most of the participants would require a four-year degree to enter their prospective careers, none of them needed to enroll directly into a university to achieve this goal. They could still have earned their degrees through the transfer route or attending a four-year

college. Most of them were vaguely familiar with graduate or professional school, yet none of them expressed knowledge about areas of specialization in their field except for Alejandra who wanted to become a pediatrician. As a collective, the participants were unable to articulate a clear path from high school through postsecondary education and into their career.

### **Teachers and Counselors**

The participants shared how their teachers impacted their decisions upon which type of postsecondary institution to enroll. Each participant had been influenced by teachers to pursue higher education in very general terms, but none of them were specifically encouraged to enroll in a university. In most instances, the students noted that their teachers had actually provided indirect encouragement to pursue university study. In one case, a teacher regularly spoke of the victories achieved by an out-of-state university sports team, which indirectly motivated the student to focus upon university study. In another instance, throughout the semester, a teacher made disparaging remarks about the community college to the class. This discouraged the student from considering enrolling in the community college.

Teachers also made a profound, although often indirect, impact upon the career aspirations of their students. One teacher constantly spoke in negative terms about her compensation and benefits package which led the student to change her career plans from becoming a teacher to a doctor. In general, the teachers insisted that the students should work hard at their studies and this is what helped prepare the students to become



successful applicants to the university. This occurred although it did not appear to have been the impetus behind remarks of the teacher.

Yeah, they (teachers) were more there to make sure you go to college. I mean they kind of wanted, if you could get into a good school, then, but they were really more about just going to college . . . my AP teachers, those classes are really geared for college, so they're really expecting you to go. The senior year teachers that weren't AP, they were all prepping you for college as well. (Jose)

Teachers appeared to have exerted a positive impact upon the students' pursuits of higher education, albeit without focus upon a specific type of institution. However, the counselors at the schools were much less effective. One-fourth of the participants noted that their counselors provided no advice in regard to the pursuit of higher education and two other participants noted that their counselors only provided general encouragement to participate in higher education. None of the counselors provided advice as to what types of institutions the students should pursue enrollment. Some of the counselors would post or pass along general scholarship information to students, but again, there was no specific interaction with any of the participants.

### **Recruiters**

The participants shared the role which college recruiters played in making their decision to enroll in a university. Recruiters from the community college, four-year college and university conducted presentations throughout the year within the high schools. These included classroom presentations, workshops, financial aid workshops for families and being present at college kiosks in school lobbies and hallways. Recruiters also participated in a large college fair held annually at the local convention center. High school students were bussed to this fair if they needed transportation. Out-of-area school

recruiters also participated in similar activities at the high schools and the fair.

Additionally, the local postsecondary institutions hosted open house events throughout the year and also promoted informal family visits.

However, none of the students attended an open house at any institution in the area and only two visited the university – one with GEAR-UP and one for a dance recital. Two students visited the community college when it was the venue for community events. None of the families had visited any postsecondary campus even by the time that the participants were beginning their university studies. Nearly half of the participants did meet with a recruiter from the university at their high school, but none met with the recruiter from the community college or the four-year college. The interactions with the university recruiter did not seem substantive. Two participants attended the large college fair at the convention center but did not engage college recruiters, rather they picked up literature and walked around.

Recruitment materials did not have an impact upon their decision to enroll in the university. None of the participants noted that recruitment marketing materials mailed to their homes were influential. In general, the materials were discarded. None of the participants' family members examined any of the recruitment materials. Furthermore, none of the participants had actually requested materials from any institution. Those who took the SAT or ACT noted that they began receiving materials shortly after they completed the test. One participant even noted that she received a letter of acceptance from a university, in a distant region of the country, to which she had never applied.

### **Applying to Higher Educational Institutions**

The participants applied to institutions of higher education in winter of their senior year. Several applied in response to general encouragement from their high school to submit applications. Four participants applied only to the university, two also applied to the community college and one also to the local four-year college. Five participants also applied to out-of-area universities, often using the GEAR-UP college application fee waiver. None of the students were denied admission to any of the institutions to which they applied. Most of them did not share the news of their university admission with their school peers. Some of the participants expressed that it was embarrassing to attend the local school and others noted they simply did not talk about it.

FAFSA's were submitted during the spring by the students. None of the students received assistance from family members in completing the complex application. Some of the students completed it alone and others had the assistance of GEAR-UP counselors.

### **Cost and Financial Aid**

The participants discussed the role of cost in their decision to attend a university. The tuition and fees for the public institutions were stratified from least expensive at the community college to most expensive at the university with the four-year college being priced in the middle. However, the students were unable to articulate the state's tuition structure even in the most general terms. Some thought that the university was *more expensive*, but were unable to provide any additional comparison or detail.

I think it's just because since like it's a university. For some reason they have to pay so many more fees and like it's a bigger campus with more people, so I would assume that that's why classes cost more and I guess some of the professors could be considered better but personally to me I see no difference. (Teresa)

Teresa's misconception was that the university had a larger student enrollment and larger campus and therefore, it must cost more to operate. The community college was actually among the largest in the nation, with far more students than the university and its physical structures also exceeded those of the university.

Two participants applied for scholarships prior to enrolling and both were awarded those scholarships. At the time of application, the participants had not planned on how to pay for their first year of study. Furthermore, the participants had not developed long-term plans on how to finance their years of education.

I tried to apply for scholarships, because I knew I had to apply for scholarships in order to get more money. My job, I didn't really start working to get money for college, but once I started working I started saving up because I know whenever I don't have enough money from my financial aid, my money from my job is going to help me. I got financial aid from the university and I did get a scholarship . . . and with all that I was able to see that maybe the first year or two I would be okay financially with what I got from the university and the scholarship, I'd be able to get some help from that. (Dana)

Jose had the option to attend an out-of-state college at no cost due to his religious affiliation, yet he chose to attend the local university. While he recognized that tuition would present a financial hardship, and he thought that the community college would cost less, he still decided to attend the university.

After when I filled out the FAFSA and seeing how much I would get, I had to pay for all of the college myself 'cause I didn't have any help from my parents. So I kind of needed a school that wouldn't go over budget with the amount of loans I would get. (Jose)

When asked about loans he responded-

In the long run they'll pay off, but it might get kind of bad in the end if you're not able to get that job right out of college. It might be a bad thing, but hopefully it all works out for me. I mean, you just hope you get help to pay for the school. If you do, it's a good thing . . . I wasn't really planning on taking out a loan but I really

needed the money so I added it to my, I accepted it later, like a few weeks into the semester, because I really needed the money to pay for things . . . because I pay rent to help my mom with the bills and I would also need it for books and a bus pass. I take the city bus to school.

No other students borrowed money for their tuition and fees and in fact all of them were quite averse to loans. Several of them noted that their families paid for everything in cash, avoiding the use of credit cards.

### **Enrolling in the University**

The participants decided to enroll in the university without parental guidance and without any direct interaction with teachers or counselors. They had very limited engagement with college recruiters and nearly none of them attended college fairs or presentations. The participants did not read college literature which had been delivered to their home nor did they use the internet to compare institutions. They exhibited a lack of financial literacy and did not correlate professional success with enrollment in a university setting. The typically promoted aspects of university life such as athletics, on-campus housing, and social activities did not seem to play a role in the participants' decision to attend the university. Why then did these students decide to attend the more expensive university despite the financial demands already upon them to help with their households?

Three themes emerged from the participants as to why they enrolled at the university. The most dominant theme, shared by 60% of the participants was that the process of transferring from another institution into the university would be laborious and inconvenient. This suggests that they all knew that they would need to complete their studies at the university in order to gain access to their career field. However, when asked

about the benefits associated with enrolling directly into the university or the benefits of first attending a community college and then transferring to the university, none of the students provided evidence of having secured details about either experience. Rather, the process of having to transfer simply seemed to be an activity which they wanted to avoid.

The second most dominant theme, shared by half of the participants was that the term *university* sounded more prestigious. None of the participants were able to articulate clear and accurate differences in academics, social activities or even cost between the university, four-year college and community college – all within the same state system and located within miles of each other.

The third theme which emerged was the desire to avoid attending the community college altogether. General observations about the community college included that it appeared more like a high school since they felt that students attended class and then went home, similar to the high school experience. Some participants also expressed that the community college campus was not attractive and therefore they would miss out on some of the higher education experience they associated with a single campus with large green public spaces.

In-depth discussions throughout several interviews with each participant yielded rich information in regard to how they formed their impressions of the institutions and what roles those whom influenced them played in their decision to attend the university. Also apparent was the lack of information and exposure they had to any type of higher education institution. The participants therefore constructed their own decision based upon their own unique rationale, to attend the university outside of what may be

considered the normative choice process as prescribed by Hossler et al. (1989). The participants did not weigh the cost of their education, the quality or appropriateness of academics programs, or the potential career benefits related to attendance at any of the institutions. When questioned about the differences amongst the types of institutions, the unanimous answer was “I don’t know.”

### **Transferring from Another Institution was too Cumbersome**

I thought about it (transferring to a university) because I know it is cheaper to do it that way. But I didn’t want to, I thought it might just throw me off. I wanted to start here and get it done here. I didn’t want to start over . . . I just wanted to start here. (Dana)

Those who wish to earn a university degree may pursue that route either directly, through entry into the university or through transferring in from a community college, four-year college or another university. In today’s challenging economic times, it is not uncommon to see more students who may have traditionally entered a university directly, to first enroll in a community college, earning as many transferable credits as possible at a lower cost per credit than at a university before transferring. In general, states encourage strong articulation agreements between their community colleges and public universities. Software programs on many university admission or transfer admission sites provide course-by-course articulations between local community colleges and universities. These articulations were available to the participants yet none of the students had examined them.

Tuition and fees were widely publicized and were established by the state system of higher education. The state system of higher education as well as the community

colleges promoted the cost savings of first attending the community college and then transferring into the four year college or university.

Community college, four-year college and university recruiters visited each of the high schools in the region, and often made visits together. The institutions promoted the ease by which students could transfer between institutions and they promoted other benefits associated with transferring. However, none of the participants noted that they had seriously considered the details involved in transferring. Instead, the participants widely expressed that the process of transferring would have been too cumbersome and confusing to endure.

I have also heard, I kind of had the impression from some of my advisors or just from other students in the program that because the grade doesn't transfer from Community College, you don't get a grade as far as going on your university transcript. You just kind of get a credit transfer. So you kind of hear weird stuff like that and it's just, I'm not sure what class I would want to take there as opposed to like science and math would be important for med school so I want them to have that GPA. It's integral to my med school application, so it's what classes should I take there and what classes I shouldn't take. (Anibal)

Transferring between high schools is different from between institutions of higher education but still shares some of the fundamentals. However, since none of the participants had transferred between high schools, they may have believed that it was more difficult than it could have been. None of the participants had attended an information session presented by a community college recruiter. Nor had any of them attended any other type of recruitment event hosted by the community college and therefore missed any authoritative discussion of the transfer process. Furthermore, they did not receive higher education advisement from their high school counselors nor did they conduct research on the community college on the internet. Their lack of knowledge



about the process may have disadvantaged them financially. The primary benefit associated with transferring would have been the cost savings over enrolling directly into the university. The participants were all Pell recipients yet none of them weighed the cost differential between the three types of institution.

### **The Term “University” was Prestigious**

“Well, it was just more of the title . . . ” (Nelita)

“I don’t know, in the end, it came down to the term college or university . . . I was just like, I like the title university more.” (Diane)

Six of the 12 participants expressed that the word *university*, was in itself, a prestigious term. When asked about the association with prestige, the participants struggled to identify specific traits of the institution. Rather, they noted general characteristics related to diversity, a large number of students, and a large number of student activities. However, their assumptions were often incorrect and at times they confused even the university with the community college. On several counts, participants believed that the university enrolled more students than the community college, however, the community college was approximately 40% larger. The participants had associated a larger enrollment, which they assumed existed at the university, with greater prestige. Both institutions shared a very similar racial/ethnic composition of students which closely reflected the local population and the local four-year college had proportionately fewer white students than either. These institutions were all considered to be among some of the most racially/ethnically diverse in the nation. However, again, there was the

incorrect assumption that a *university*, simply by classification, would be more diverse and hence, more prestigious.

I felt that they (University) would offer more classes, definitely. I didn't know if I wanted to graduate from a community college or you know, a different type of college. Well, initially I wanted a college degree, I don't know if I wanted to graduate from a community college. I thought maybe, I don't know, maybe this is just my thinking, but maybe there's more value to it because it was a university. I just felt like a bachelor's degree versus an associate's degree would be better for me, so that's why I looked into a four year institution . . . it would come to me that it (Community College) was a two year college and I knew that the job I wanted or the profession that I wanted would probably not be in a community college. I knew that if I wanted a job that paid well or something that I really enjoyed I would have to come to a university and I also wanted a real college experience I guess. I think of that as being a part of a university and experiencing four undergrad years . . . I didn't really know much about University until I got accepted. Then I started researching, really getting ready to come to school out here. But I didn't know much about it. It was just when I was in high school and getting ready to apply to it, but I didn't know too much about it . . . I feel like a university, I don't know. I feel that it helps you more, having a degree from a university and the resources they have for you here are just better. I don't know. (Dana)

When asked why she did not choose to attend the four-year college, which offered specialization in her academic area of interest Dana stated "Because it's not a university, that's the reason why. Really, 'cause I wanted to attend a university."

They (the community college and the university) were both OK. I only went to one (community college) location (to visit). I know that place is smaller but I know they have other places around town. And the university was just huge. Now it doesn't seem so huge, but then it was huge . . . I would think that the university has more students, but then again, the community college has a lot of locations. I'm not sure why the university costs more, it's just what I figured, I don't know why. Probably the chance to take high level classes I'm guessing. I don't think there's a big difference because I know there's some good professors at the university. I don't know if there should be good teaching, whereas over there (community college) there's also some pretty good teachers that I think are pretty good. So I guess it just depends on who they hire and how enthusiastic the students are about learning. (Marissa)

When asked about academic programs at the university, she stated “well, to some people, I guess that’s important. I guess that’s a good way to go if you want to be, if you want like the best programs for whatever you’re doing, I guess you could try that place out. Otherwise I think at any other college you’d probably learn the same thing.”

### **The Community College was Too Easy**

“I know they offer a lot, but I just kind of feel that a university would be a better education than a community college.” (Jose)

A significant percentage of the participants expressed that they wanted to avoid enrolling in the community college altogether. However, the topic of transferring and the aforementioned perceived burden associated with it was not the primary reason for this reaction. The community college had five campuses in the area and three of the campuses maintained large enrollments, with the remaining two considered more as satellite campuses. The community college enrolled significantly more students than the university and the tuition was roughly half the rate of university tuition. The college had executed a very aggressive marketing campaign for three years through direct mail, outdoor media and television as well as radio advertisements. The focus of the promotions had been upon outcomes such as career placement, degree attainment and salary levels of graduates.

The admission criteria at the community college recently changed and they ceased admitting students who had not graduated from high school. Slightly fewer than two thousand community college students transferred into the university each year and hundreds of students took classes at both institutions concurrently.

Participants expressed disdain for the institution on the grounds that they believed it was too similar to high school. Jose had not visited any college campuses prior to enrolling at the university. However, based upon a viewing a photo of the community college in an advertisement he believed felt that it resembled a high school, and therefore, it would have been as easy for him as high school had been. He added that he was concerned that his mother would not approve of him attending the community college. “I feel like she wanted me to go to at least a state college or a university. She wanted a good education for me.” He was unfamiliar with the four-year college and did not consider the community college to be of the same quality as a *typical college*.

Only one of the participants in the study had ever visited the university prior to the first day of university orientation and therefore actual comparisons between campuses were not made by the other participants. They were also unable to see that the overwhelming majority of the students at the university lived locally and commuted every day. The perceptions they had of the university may have changed once they had visited the university campus, for it was more like the community college than they may have assumed.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussions and Conclusion**

#### **Overview**

This section provides answers to the research questions and incorporates findings from other researchers. The theories of college choice (Hossler, et.al, 1989), habitus (Bourdieu, 1986), structuration (Giddens, 1973, 1984, 1991) and curation (Valadez, 2008) will be visited to determine whether the data can be contextualized within any of these theories. It is hoped that these conclusions provide a base for other researchers as well as those who may impact a student's decisions upon where to pursue higher education.

The interviews with the 12 participants provided insights into what factors motivated them to enroll in a university. Their decision making process differed from the Hossler et al. (1989) college choice model. The participants indicated who influenced them directly and indirectly and also spoke of the impact of other entities which have traditionally been thought of as significant motivators. Much research has been conducted to understand what has led Latino students to pursue higher education as well as into which types of institutions they have enrolled. A significant factor which has been found to affect the decision of Latino students to pursue 2- and 4-year institutions has included high school peers. However, in this study, the peers were not significant factors.

Pearson and Rosenbaum (2006) and Perez & McDonough (2008) determined that Latino students who had strong peer networks also had more extensive information networks. They also found that there may have been significant information gaps among

their networks which could result in limiting perceived paths of higher education. Perna (2006) noted that access to college information resources contributed to disparities in the enrollment among low-income, Black and Hispanic students.

Engberg and Wolniak (2009) conducted a study drawing upon the Educational Longitudinal Survey to better understand factors which influence postsecondary attendance and found that as parents became more concerned about the cost of higher education, students were less likely to attend 4-year institutions. However, the subjects of this study were all from lower SES backgrounds so an assumption could be made that cost would have been an important factor. However, it was found that the parents were not engaged in the choice process and that the students did not consider cost an important factor.

Through an examination of their individual experiences in extracurricular activities, interactions with friends and school peers as well as family, direction from teachers and counselors, attendance at college recruitment activities and visits to campus, consideration of career trajectories and their focus upon academic achievement, it became evident that their journeys were not directed by a compass leading them toward university enrollment. Rather, they each made decisions throughout their high school years to work hard academically while contributing to the household, and to essentially make short term decisions within their goal of satisfying family expectations of success and becoming eventual providers for their families. Their internal locus of control developed a sense of agency within them whereby they felt confident in making important decisions without the need for peer or parental approval.

The participants noted that they were to become successful in their careers and would eventually assist their families with support. The parents did not specifically direct them to pursue higher education in order to secure those careers. The participants were unable to clearly outline how their fields of study would lead them to their prospective careers and it is assumed that their parents did not provide them with any guidance in regard to this trajectory. The participants noted that they had developed the predisposition to pursue higher education when they were young, yet did not provide data which indicated that their parents had directed them to follow such a course of study.

Participation in extracurricular activities is often a past time promoted by teachers, counselors and college recruiters as a way to enhance one's college application portfolio. However, this appears to have not been the case with these participants. Their participation stemmed from a desire to help others and to spend time learning new skills. This genuineness and the resultant outcome of responsibility and new knowledge is probably what colleges really desire in aspiring students. In today's world, many student activities are scripted, not for these students. They did not choose to enroll in a university based upon their experiences in the organizations nor did they participate in order to gain a foothold in the admissions review.

Peer groups existed in clubs and within their magnet programs or class environments yet none of the students noted that they had strong friendships with persons outside of their family. Several noted pressure from classroom peers to avoid attending University however, this pressure did not discourage them from pursuing their studies. It

appears that the family was the nucleus and friends were incidental. Any extra time was spent with extended family, working with family or providing assistance to the family.

Their teachers and counselors seemed absent from the discussions about participation in higher education. However, they did have a passive influence. The participants noted how a teacher flying the pennant of his favorite university's sports team or the derogatory remarks another teacher made in passing about a community college being too easy were picked up. Another student spent time studying math with a math teacher during lunch who was a Latina and did so simply because of the cultural connection and that it pleased her. It appears that these staff were the only college educated persons with whom the students were exposed. One can surmise that any intentional direction these teachers would have provided to the students would have been extremely powerful in their quest for higher education. Unfortunately, no direct interventions occurred.

The participants had career aspirations as all young people do and were impressed upon by their families as well as others around them. Several participants' families encouraged the students directly to pursue high paying careers without providing any guidance on postsecondary studies. Similarly, several participants changed career aspirations once they realized that earnings in their field of interest were less than they would be in a different field. In one instance this was based upon comments from a teacher about the poor pay and benefits teachers receive. Again, there was no direction for these participants to pursue their studies in a university in order to attain these career goals.



College recruiters attended a great number of college fairs and high school visits promoting their own institutions. The only students in this study who interacted with college recruiters had done so because it was a means to escape a class period at school. None of them examined the college literature that arrived at their house, and none of them discussed institutions of higher education with their families. Only two had visited a campus and at neither time was it for a campus tour. These students did not develop an understanding of what a university or any type of institution was from the materials and staff deployed by the colleges.

The students had virtually no knowledge of cost and financial aid prior to enrolling at the university. They did not weigh the differences in cost between the various local institutions although all of them were from the lowest socioeconomic status group. They believed that things would “work out” and they focused upon one semester at a time. Several of them worked alongside their parents to earn additional household funds, which detracted from their time studying and socializing. Despite the heavy obligations they each carried which included in most instances of funding their own higher education, none of them explored how to finance their studies.

Those activities and persons who interacted with the students have been thought to play a strong role in motivating students to pursue higher education at specific types of institutions. However, in this study, the participants seemed to have made their decisions to attend the university without the influence of those events and groups.

The participants appear to have followed a choice process similar to that of a group studied by Valadez (2008). His ethnographic study of 12 high achieving rural

Mexican immigrant students found that they did not follow a conventional path to college. Rather, they conformed to Giddens' (1973, 1984, 1991) *structuration* process in which individuals were guided by the produced and reproduced rules or structures which were embedded within their individual selves. Valadez (2008) asserted that the American individualism confronted with the family based Mexican culture led the students to make decisions in a far more complex manner than that of non-immigrant students. They individually weighed the needs of their families, of the benefits associated with higher education and crafted a rationale to attend a university. Their culture played a significant role in their decision making process. This culture rationale was unique to each individual and appears to have negated some of the constraints, such as cost, which is generally associated with redirecting low socioeconomic students to pursue a less expensive path to higher education such as a community college. In Valadez' study, the parents did not have knowledge of higher education, the students did not seek assistance from their high school teachers or counselors, and they, similarly to the participants in this study, shared the belief that they would *somehow* pay for higher education. The intersection of economics, culture and structure led the students in both Valadez' as well as this study, to make highly complex decisions and determine what was to them a sensible solution, despite the lack of financial resources. Due in part to their lack of social capital, they did not fully understand the differences between a community colleges and a university, and therefore made the decision to attend the university based upon factors embedded within them related to their culture and role within the family.

The participants expressed that a significant reason they chose to study at the university was the term *university*. They expressed that the other two reasons for attending the university were to avoid the unknown prospect of transferring and to avoid enrolling in the community college. They acknowledged that they knew little about transferring and had limited information about the university as well as the other institutions in the area.

Participants perceived the term *university* to be one which was prestigious and which represented both tangible and intangible benefits. When pressed to describe what defined a university, the participants spoke of an “experience” in general terms. In some instances this included access to a diverse and large population. In other instances, it represented a wide range of clubs and activities. None of the students were aware of the actual difference in student headcount among the three institutions and most struggled to explain any relation of headcount to academic offering or quality. None of the participants mentioned course availability, program breadth, exposure to a wider variety of classes, nor access to research opportunities or resources as reasons for attending the university – all of which were promoted by the institution. To these participants, the university simply seemed to be the right place because of the cache they believed to be associated with the term university.

The participants expressed strong feelings to avoid transferring between institutions. It is unknown how they developed their resistance to the transfer process since they did not have experience transferring between high schools. If they had transferred, they may have learned how courses and credits move from one institution to

another. They also had not met with any postsecondary representatives who discussed community colleges and the potential benefits which could be associated with transferring, specifically related to cost. The participants had not examined the websites of the university, community college or the four-year college and therefore did not see how each institution promoted the transfer process. What then made the transfer process seem so daunting as to prevent them from attending the community college and four-year college? They perceived the transfer process to be cumbersome and confusing – something which would slow down their studies and interrupt their *structure*.

Finally, the participants noted their specific desire to avoid enrolling at the community college. They lacked factual information about the community college, four-year college and the university and developed their own set of ideas about each institution. For example, on multiple counts, the participants incorrectly assumed that the community college had a small campus and enrolled fewer students than the university. Those assumptions coupled with the correct assumption that students at the community college commuted from home to school made the community college appear to be more like high school. The participants did not know that 95 percent of the university's population commuted. Nor did they know that the university enrolled fewer students than the community college or that the community college had five campuses and was physically, very large. None of the participants expressed any positive characteristic with the community college or benefit associated with attending the institution. Despite a great deal of marketing which promoted the benefit of earning an associate degree which would provide access to the workplace for higher pay than that of a high school graduate,

none of the participants expressed that they considered that process. It could have provided them with the opportunity to increase their earnings and contributions to the household while they continued studying at the university, yet it would have interrupted their *structure*.

### **Research Question Answered**

**What led you to enroll in a university.** The participants noted that the term *university* was a primary reason they chose to pursue studies at the university. They perceived that it carried a certain element of prestige although they were unable to associate any specific benefits of university attendance. They were generally unable to explain the differences between a community college, a four year college and a university, and often confused characteristics among the three types of institution. The participants incorrectly believed that the university was larger in both size and student headcount than the community college and they thought that to be preferable. They were aware that the university would cost more to attend than the other institutions yet they were unaware of the actual differences in cost and how they would finance their education. The students also failed to note how attending the university would benefit them academically in regard to their career paths and reiterated that by nomenclature alone, the university was the best place to study.

A second motivating factor to attend the university was that they could avoid the burden of transferring from a community college. Participants believed that they would lose the grades affixed to the courses they would transfer, which in effect would be the loss of one of their hallmarks – high grades. Additionally, they believed that the transfer

process would be confusing and they did not want to be forced to *start over* at the university. It was clear that the participants had not developed a clear understanding of the transfer process. One of the primary benefits often associated with first attending a community college and then transferring into a university is the cost savings on lower division courses. The participants were all low socioeconomic status who were often employed during their secondary school studies so that they could contribute finances to the household. However, they did not associate cost savings with enrollment at the community college.

The third motivating factor to enroll in the university was to specifically avoid attending the community college. The participants expressed that the community college seemed to be an extension of high school and that students would take classes and commute home. They were unable to articulate any perceived differences in academics or career preparation among the three types of institutions. They had not developed any perceptions about the four-year college and were unable to compare it with the community college or university.

### **Theories Revisited**

**College choice theory.** The Hossler et. al. (1989) choice stage which follows predisposition, stipulates that students are impacted by parents, peers, siblings, and others with whom they come into regular contact. Students interact with these groups and form a foundation upon which they choose a particular school to attend. In this study, the parents had not participated in higher education. They did not visit college campuses with the participants, did not review college marketing materials with them at home, and did

not encourage them to participate in any activities in high school which would better prepare them for entry into or success in higher education. The parents did not assist the participants with filing their FAFSA or even discussing how higher education would be financed. The parents were absent from the college going and college choice process.

The participants' peers did not significantly affect the decision to attend the university. Some of the participants attended magnet schools, some attended magnet programs in zone high schools and some were enrolled in honors and AP courses. Despite being encompassed in the classroom by other high achieving students, there was no apparent influence from their peers. The participants did not engage in college choice discussions, did not compare marketing materials they received and did not visit campuses together as they searched for schools to attend.

Siblings also did not provide any influence upon which institution to pursue enrollment. In several situations, participants noted that they would become a resource to their siblings – both older and younger, and would encourage them to pursue higher education. However, none of their siblings had provided any motivation for them to pursue study in any type of institution.

The only other persons with whom the participants came into regular contact were other members of extracurricular activities or those who were employed where they had part-time jobs. There was no mention of any discussion or impact from those colleagues. Even for the participants who had limited involvement in the GEAR-UP program, they did not mention any impact from other students who were engaged in the group. That

may be reflective of their own limited interest in the group which was expressed as a means to escape class or to take advantage of application fee waivers.

In this model, students would then deliberately choose courses of study in high school and participate in activities which would best prepare them to be competitive in the admission process. The participants in this study did not mention any action they took throughout their secondary education which was done to help them gain admission into any type of postsecondary institution. Rather, they noted that due to the work ethic instilled in them and possibly their cultural pride, they embarked upon enrolling in challenging high school programs simply to *achieve*.

The final decision of which institution to pursue enrollment, the choice itself, is said to be made with parents through an examination of the costs and benefits associated with each institution which the student has considered attending. Again, the parents of the participants did not engage them in any college-going discussion. They did not discuss participation in higher education nor did they discuss at which type of institution the participant would be best suited to attend. The participants exerted their own cost-benefit analysis which placed interruption of their role in the family as a high cost, the perceived burden of transferring between institutions as a cost and attendance at the community college as a cost. Those costs were highest to them if they attended an institution other than the university. The benefits they considered placed high value upon the term university and with it a number of factors they found favorable which were also associated with the university – although in most instances those factors were incorrectly assumed. One factor traditionally associated with this model is the monetary cost



associated with attendance at an institution. In this study, the participants had little understanding of how they would finance their education and how the costs of attendance varied at the other institutions. The participants did not choose to attend the university through the same process outlined in the Hossler et. al. (1989) model and this model is unable to account for the variety of experiences and backgrounds which affect secondary students throughout the nation.

**Habitus.** Bourdieu's (1986) notion of habitus establishes that class structure is defined and maintained by the ruling class. This class creates systems which benefit the upper class and prevent the lower class from entering into the same status. While the systems may not seem so visible, one can quickly determine which class is being benefited by the numbers of participants from the class engaged in the benefits. In this study, the participants all were classified as low SES status. The established systems which one may believe could affect secondary school students would be school resources.

The first system which affects students is school zoning. Students are required to enroll in the schools which serve their zones, which are politically created by boards or municipalities. Zoning can impact schools and students in a manner of ways. Funding for the schools may be reliant upon the real estate tax base of those who reside in the zone. Those who live in wealthier zones may contribute more resources to their schools and those who live in less wealthy zones enjoy less resources at their schools. Such is not always the case and in this study, there were funding disparities between schools in zones reflective of the wealth of zone residents however it was not directly associated to real

estate taxes. Another factor evident in zone schools is the student. Those who live in wealthier zones are more likely to have parents who earn greater incomes, who have participated in higher education and who understand the positive impact generally associated with parental engagement in a student's education. Students in low SES zones are more likely to have parents who have not earned college degrees, who may work multiple jobs and who are unable to participate in supporting the education of their children. Their lack of postsecondary education disadvantages the student who will not likely receive advice about the college going process from their parent. Therefore, the students may not understand the benefits associated with enrolling in more demanding courses in high school, of studying for standardized tests and of preparing to finance their postsecondary education.

**Comment [LS1]:** more

The participants in this study were able to break some of the constraints associated with the model. The majority of the participant attended magnet schools or magnet programs. There was also widespread participation in honors and AP classes. Participants noted that they pursued enrollment in these high schools without consulting their parents. They were interested in the themes of the schools and interested in challenging themselves. The participants noted a strong work ethic and the satisfaction of accomplishment. Their parents did not assist them with homework, participate in parent organizations at school or engage in any other manner in the postsecondary education of the participants. However, the participants had a sense of agency which led them to make important decisions without consulting others and to structure an educational path which

they believed would lead them to fruitful careers whereby they could continue to provide for their families.

It is possible that the effects of habitus were evident in the lives of many others with whom these students lived and attended school. However, the participants in this study who enrolled in a university, did so without the effects of habitus having confined them to poor education.

**Structuralist and culturalist positions.** The participants generated their own set of college-choice rationale in relation to the individual structure or context of their world and through their own sense of culture as well as agency. The structuralist position which was also observed by Steppes (2011) in his study of African American males who aspired to attend a four year university. The participants in Steppes' study each weighed various factors, individual to their own lives, in determining to attend a university. The distinct structures of their lives provided them with a set of rationales which they felt important as they pursued higher education. As with the participants in this study, those in Steppes' made their decisions in a manner which deviated from the Hossler et. al. (1989) model as well as Bourdieu's habitus which would have confined those participants to study at the community college if they participated in higher education at all. This deviance from the mainstream choice model posited by Hossler, et. al. (1989) suggests that there are factors outside of the traditional choice model which affect different populations.

Noguera (2008) has further provided that culture will affect the family's belief system and values, upon which the student contextualizes a structure from within which choices are made. Those choices will weigh factors which affect the student's ability to

maintain the structure if it is culturally important. In this study, the participants placed high value upon the family and their role or structure in providing financial and often caregiving support. The participants believed that directly entering the prestigiously titled university, not participating in the transfer process and avoiding the community college would best maintain their structure, which was a cultural requirement even if only developed through their own sense of agency, throughout their studies. Other factors including cost, were not strongly considered. The combination of the culturalist and structuralist positions provided the foundation upon which these participants based their decision making process. They were motivated to perform well in high school which, though not directly planned, led them to be academically qualified for admission at the university, which provided them with prestige, the ability to avoid transferring and attendance at the community college.

**Efficacy of the theories.** The participants made their decision to attend the university based upon structuralist and culturalist contexts. These frameworks were shared by each of the students who participated in the study however one cannot apply the weight that they placed upon the factors which supported their structural roles. The commute time between home and postsecondary institution was important to some of them, but not noted by all of the participants. The ability to continue working while studying was important but not shared by all participants. Each expressed the need to remain part of the household structure, to earn a degree, and then to continue providing support to their family. However, for each participant, the activities and opportunity costs they needed to consider which would allow them to follow that path were unique. It does

not appear that it is possible to structure a decision making process for similar students as was prescribed in the Hossler et. al., (1989) model in which students would weight specific costs and benefits. The benefits for students who are similar to the participants will be determined individually with respect to their own specific roles in the house. It is incumbent therefore to consider ways that provide urban low SES students with greater amounts of information and more deliberate exposure to persons who can stimulate them to consider enrolling in a university. This study has shown that teachers provide motivation to consider studying at a university. It has also shown that the participants had acquired little if any knowledge of financial aid and had not developed a complex understanding of financial literacy. They discarded college marketing materials, their families did not engage in the college search process and the participants would participate in some college-going groups such as GEAR-UP without a vested interest in full program participation.

### **Recommendations for practice**

**Teachers provide guidance.** Some of the students were strongly influenced, although indirectly, by their teachers. These teachers may have been the only college graduates with whom the participants had regular interactions. The teachers influenced the participants to pursue education in a university rather than a four year college or a community college through a variety of innuendo and classroom comments. The students listened to and retained casual remarks made by the teachers. A disparaging remark about a community college or an expression of allegiance to a university sports team was enough to sway students to pursue attending the university.

Teachers should recognize that for many students, their remarks about higher education will be taken very seriously. The impact can be extensive even if the level of interaction is minimal. While many teachers may not have the ability or time to spend individually with all of their students and encourage them to pursue higher education appropriate for their career interests, their general comments have an impact. Teachers also have an opportunity to explain the importance of high school course sequencing and engagement in high school activities which are important to many colleges as they weight applications for admission. The students who participated in this study were encouraged by teachers to perform well and they took this seriously. If they had been encouraged to participate in other activities, they may have been receptive to those as well.

Finally, teachers have an opportunity to discuss career paths with students and what degrees may be required for entry into those fields. Teachers can explain what paths they took to earn their degrees and they can outline alternative paths. The participants were aware that postsecondary attendance was important, however they did not express an acute awareness of the degrees necessary for their careers or at which types of institution they could earn such degrees. Such a discussion could also highlight the associated costs with fields of study and degree attainment. Earnings potential could provide students with the ability to calculate the return on investment for tuition in relation to potential earnings. Furthermore, a discussion of where such career opportunities exist could help students decide if those jobs will coincide with their desire to remain near or live away from home

**Explain financial aid.** The participants in the study were all Pell grant recipients.

Some of them were also awarded additional scholarships and grants. However, the students were not encouraged to apply for financial awards until very late in their senior year and with little direction from high school staff. The students' lack of financial literacy and planning may lead to a negative consequence as they continue their postsecondary studies. It is important for postsecondary students to complete applications for aid by deadline, helpful for them to seek additional avenues of funding and to limit their employment so it does not interfere with their studies. The more this topic is discussed in school, potentially, the greater the likelihood that it gets discussed at home and families can make plans and discuss options. While it may be unrealistic to expect counselors to speak with each student individually, a group presentation to students or even notifications which are sent home, possibly in a bilingual format would provide students with some valuable information.

In regard to the type of financial aid information, the participants expressed an awareness of aid in general yet did not understand the specific types of aid for which they may have been eligible. It is important to clearly outline need and merit aid, grants, scholarships and loans as well as payment plans. It is also important to teach students how to explore and compare institutional costs with the Net Price Calculator and other tools. The participants in this study were all low SES students yet all of them incurred higher tuition costs because they chose to enroll in the university instead of the four year college or a community college first.

**Monitor student participation in college preparation programs.** None of the participants in the study who joined college preparation groups such as GEAR-UP fully participated in those programs. They noted that they joined the group to take a day trip away from school to visit a college, or took advantage of fee waivers for standardized tests or college applications. The students chose to take advantage of specific benefits which they believed would alleviate a burden – either financial or attending class. If the students had fully participated in the programs they may have gained a better understanding of the differences between the types of institutions and been provided with more information upon which to base their decisions. The participants were employed or active in organizations outside of class time and then held important roles within their homes, so they appeared to have limited time with which to engage in another group. Organizations may consider when it is best to offer such programs for such busy students and to consider the amount of time they ask student to commit. For example, it may be less burdensome for students to participate during their lunch time than after school.

**Share information with parents.** None of the participants' parents had attended college nor did they have extensive social networks of college graduates. Most of them participated little if at all in their children's high school experience. It is not realistic to expect parents, especially those who work multiple jobs and have extensive household duties to become engaged with teachers and school personnel. However, information should be shared with the parents so that they have the opportunity to learn about college-going activity and types of postsecondary institutions. The parents of the participants in this study may have benefited from receiving college-going material literature in Spanish,



their primary language. One cannot determine the level of engagement which will result from distributing literature. However, any engagement level would have been more than the parents exhibited in this study.

**Distribute clear college going material.** First generation students do not have the resource as those whose parents have attended college. There are critical issues to share with students so that they are best prepared to be competitive applicants to postsecondary institutions. Materials should include an outline of high school courses which need to be taken for admission into a postsecondary institution; clear explanation of grade requirements necessary for admission; discussion about the value of standardized tests, advanced placement courses and test and honors courses; financial aid and financial literacy; and an outline of what degrees will be necessary for entry into career fields.

It is also important to more clearly outline the differences between types of postsecondary institutions and to associate challenges and opportunities associated with attendance at them. The students who participated in this study did not understand the differences in cost nor did they understand the process of transferring between institutions. While the students may have chosen to attend the university even if they had such information, they would have at least been able to weigh the costs and benefits associated with their options.

### **Recommendation for Further Studies**

This study examined the factors which motivated first generation Mexican students of low socioeconomic status in an urban environment to pursue study at a

university. Further studies should examine the graduation rates and employment the same population. The financial burden for low SES students should be examined as well as the means by which the students cope with this issue. It would also be useful to compare students who enter the university directly with those who transfer into the university from a community college to examine differences in time-to-degree, financial burden and employment.

It would be of further benefit to learn about course scheduling and employment scheduling behaviors of this population. The majority of the participants noted they would remain employed during their university studies and would continue to contribute to household finances. An examination of the amount of time as well as the times that they are employed may help postsecondary institutions schedule classes to best serve these students. It may also provide guidance to higher education administrators in creating supplemental modalities of course delivery including online, experiential and independent study. These modalities may provide some relief to such busy students who may be struggle with attending traditional class meetings.

Finally, first generation students from different ethnicities whose families have recently arrived in America may provide evidence on the decision making process in regard to attendance at different types of institutions. Such studies could provide universities with more targeted recruitment plans and materials which could better educate families on the enrollment process.

**Summary**

The students who attended UNLV were asked what the primary factors were which influenced their decision to enroll in the institution. The participants noted that parents and teachers were important in their college-going decision yet did not provide specific motivation to enroll in a university. The participants' parents were not actively engaged in their education, their friends were not supportive of postsecondary education and they did not have close relationships with their teachers. Some of the participants noted that comments from their teachers influenced their decision to enroll in a university yet the teachers did not actively engage in discussions about postsecondary institutions. The influence from the teachers underscores their powerful impact, especially when there was a lack of parental engagement in regard to education.

The participants' culture and structure within their families led them to pursue higher education. However, they were not active in the college search process, nor were their parents. The participants contextualized the need to provide future financial assistance to their families and pursued postsecondary education as a means to enter various careers.

Their decision to attend the university stemmed from the element of prestige with which they associated the term *university*, alleviating the perceived burden of transferring which would interrupt their structure, and avoiding the community college. Some benefits associated with attending the university including a reduced commute time when compared with travelling to the community college and perception of earning a degree without interruptions potentially associated with transferring. These benefits were very

pragmatic and related directly to how they would affect the participants' structure in the household. Cost, traditionally associated as a part of the choice process, was not considered when choosing to attend the university despite the low socioeconomic status of the participants.

Through this study, the researcher learned that teachers may be among the limited number of college educated persons with whom low SES first generation immigrant students interact and therefore provide a great impact on students' choice in deciding which postsecondary institution to attend.

The researcher also learned that the participants developed short term tactical plans instead of long term strategies. Their tactics included securing financial aid and generating employment income for the current school year rather than considering how to finance subsequent years of study. Such tactical planning has the potential to create negative impacts and prevent them from enjoying potential benefits if they had developed a long term strategy.

The role of the participants' culture which placed high value upon the family and the participants' structure within the family setting led to a distinct set of rationale used in making their college choice. It was of primary importance to the participants that their education would not interrupt their pragmatic contributions to the family. Therefore, considerations such as commute time, and a perceived burden associated with transferring were given high value. The aspect of prestige which the participants associated with the term *university* as well as avoiding enrollment at the community college may have also brought an element of pride to the family

Educators must recognize that all high school students do not make college choices the same way and that the traditional means of promoting higher education is not universally effective. They should recognize that cultural and structural or pragmatic considerations may play a strong role in the choice process. It is important that educators learn more about their students' decision making process so that they can present valuable college-going and –choice information to the students, granting them the greatest opportunity to make the most informed decisions.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample Recruitment E-mail/Letter**

Date

Dear (Student),

My name is Luke David Schultheis and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska- Lincoln in the Educational Studies Program (EDUS). I am inviting you to participate in a study about low socioeconomic students who enrolled at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). This research is entitled A Phenomenological Study of the Factors Which Led Low Socioeconomic Status Urban Students to Enroll in a University. This study is being conducted in order to identify factors that contribute to the students' decision to enroll in a university.

This research will examine the people and experiences which provided positive influences upon the students and helped them decide to enroll in a university. The findings will have practical implications as they can serve to provide policy makers and educators with developing ways to replicate and support those positive factors, leading more low socioeconomic students to enroll in a university.

I shall conduct interviews at UNLV which may take up to 2 hours. The initial interviews will be followed by one to two additional follow-up interviews. I shall compensate each participant with twenty-five dollars cash for the time spent in the interviews. During spring 2012, I shall ask questions about what influenced you to enroll at UNLV in fall 2011 or spring 2012. Your participation in this study is important and will be very much appreciated. Your identity will be kept confidential and the reporting will not identify any participants by name.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to decide not to participate. I am happy to provide you a copy of the dissertation before I submit it for approval. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at LukeSchultheis@yahoo.com or by phone at (702) 349-6222. Dr. Miles Bryant is my faculty advisor and he can be contacted at (402) 472-0960. Should you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or about the research, please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965. Thank you in advance for your time and participation in this research.

Sincerely,

Luke David Schultheis  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
EDUS Program Doctoral Candidate

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Phone Script Reminder about the E-mail**

**Sample Phone Script Reminder about the E-mail**

Good Afternoon (Student Name),

This is Luke Schultheis, a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I sent you an e-mail last week asking for your participation in a research project. Do you remember the e-mail?

If yes: Great, do you have any questions about it?

If yes (answer questions), then: Do you think you would be interested in participating?

If no: Do you think you would be interested in participating?

If yes: Thank you. Let's set up a time to meet at the Lied Library at UNLV for our first interview. Feel free to call me at this number (702) 349-6222 with any questions or if you change your mind.

If no: Thanks for your time anyway, good bye.

If no: Would you like me to resend it and call you in a week or would you like me to go over it with you now?

If resend: I'll send it to you today and call you back in a week. Thanks for your time.

If review now: (read the e-mail to them), then: Do you think you would be interested in participating?

If yes: Thank you. Let's set up a time to meet at the Lied Library at UNLV for our first interview. Feel free to call me at this number (702) 349-6222 with any questions or if you change your mind.

If no: Thank you for your time anyway, good bye.

## **Appendix C**

### **Sample Phone Script Reminder of the Scheduled Interview**

**Sample Phone Script Reminder of the Scheduled Interview**

Good Afternoon (Student Name),

This is Luke Schultheis, the investigator conducting the study titled A Phenomenological Study of the Factors which led Low Socioeconomic Status Urban Students to Enroll in a University. I am calling to confirm our interview appointment scheduled for (date and time) in the Lied Library at UNLV.

Is this date and time still good for you?

If yes: Super, I look forward to seeing you. I'll meet you at the front door. I have a study room reserved on the lobby level for the interview. If you have any questions or concerns or change your mind about participating, please call me at 702-349-6222. If not, I'll see you at (appointment time). Good bye.

If no: OK, is there a better time that might work for you?

If yes: (Arrange new mutual time). Great, I look forward to seeing you then.

If no: OK, are you interested in continuing your participation in the study?

If yes: Great, when should I call you back to reschedule?

If no: Thank you so much for considering participating. Take care, good bye.

## **Appendix D**

### **Sample E-mail Reminder of the Scheduled Interview**



Date: , 2012

Dear (Student),

I am writing to remind you of our appointment scheduled for (Date & Time) at the Lied Library at UNLV during which time I will interview you in regard to the study title A Phenomenological Study of the Factors Which Led Low Socioeconomic Status Urban Students to Enroll in a University.

The interview may last up to two hours and is one of a series of three interviews I am conducting with you. Please reply to this e-mail indicating your confirmation of the appointment or if you need to reschedule or if you wish to discontinue participating.

If you need to reach me by phone, please call me at 702-349-6222. Thank you for considering participating in this important study.

Sincerely,

Luke David Schultheis

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

EDUS Program Doctoral Candidate.

## **Appendix E**

### **Interview Protocol**

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Title: A phenomenological study of the factors which led low socioeconomic status urban students to enroll in a university

Thank you for participating in this research study. As outlined in the Informed Consent Form, the interest of this study is based upon what motivated you to enroll in a university. The proportion of low socioeconomic students attending universities is low and your responses may help others understand what motivates low socioeconomic students to attend a university as you have done. I shall invite you to return for one to two more interviews to further explore some of the responses you provide today.

The guiding question of this study is: What motivated you to enroll at a local university?

The sub questions that guide this investigation are:

1. Did the participants indicate their parents were an influence and if so, what was the nature of the influence?
2. Were siblings important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
3. Were peers important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
4. Were high school guidance/college counselors or teachers important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?

5. Were higher education representatives, counselors or marketing materials important in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
6. Was cost a factor in influencing the participants to decide to attend a university and if so, in what way?
7. How did perceptions about the local community college and four-year college affect, if at all, the decision to attend the university?
8. What perceived benefits of attending the university, if any, were associated with the decision to attend the university?

## **Appendix F**

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**

**Sent By:** IRB NUgrant System  
**Sent On:** 05/24/2012 01:29 pm  
**Reference:** Workflow - 77184  
**Subject:** Official Approval Letter for IRB project #12492  
**Message:** May 24, 2012

Luke Schultheis  
Department of Educational Administration

Miles Bryant  
Department of Educational Administration  
133 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20120512492 EX  
Project ID: 12492  
Project Title: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE  
FACTORS WHICH LED LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS  
URBAN STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN A UNIVERSITY

Dear Luke:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as Exempt Category 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 05/24/2012.

1. The approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant (file with -Approved.doc in the file name). Please use this document to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent form, please submit the revised document to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- \* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP  
for the IRB



## **Appendix G**

### **Sample Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement**



**Confidentiality Agreement  
Transcription Services**

\_\_\_\_\_, a professional transcriptionist, agrees to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Luke David Schultheis related to his doctoral study titled A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE FACTORS WHICH LED LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS URBAN STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN A UNIVERSITY. Furthermore,

\_\_\_\_\_ agrees:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Luke David Schultheis;
3. To store all study-related audiotapes or computerized files and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in our possession;
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Luke David Schultheis in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

She is aware that she can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if we disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which she will have access.

\_\_\_\_\_ signature

Date

Luke David Schultheis signature

Date