PARENTS OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate

School of The Ohio State University

By

Allen W. Delong, B.S., M.Ed.

The Ohio State University
2003

Dissertation Committee:

Professor Mary Ann Danowitz Sagaria, Adviser

Professor Len Baird

Professor Susan R. Jones

Approved by

Adviser
College of Education
ABSTRACT

Large, quantitative studies have been the primary source of information about first-generation college students. Although several qualitative studies about this cohort have been conducted, there is little research that has included parents as key informants. Whether qualitative or quantitative, parents are, however, often cited as one reason for first-generation college students’ lower enrollment in and persistence rates at college because of parents’ inability to advise or support their students in an environment in which they have little or no experience.

The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions of first-generation college students’ parents about college attendance, and how they came to form these perceptions. Why did they think that college was important for their children, if they thought college was important at all? Additionally, this study set out to how parents might discuss and exhibit support for their children while they attend college.

Central to this study was the use of social, cultural, economic and human capital as theoretical frameworks. These four forms of capital served as lenses through which to view parents’ responses about the importance of college. Was one form of capital more salient than another? The study was grounded in a constructivist epistemology and utilized critical inquiry. The primary mode of data collection was semi-structured interviews with four sets of parents of first-generation students, which included nine-
parents, all of whom lived in the Midwest. Two of the parents had brothers who attended college. Parents cited them as important to children’s college selection process. These brothers were also interviewed for this project.

The results suggested that: (1) some parents of first-generation college students consider existing familial and community-based social capital equally important as the economic, or cultural capital conferred by obtaining a college degree; and (2) parents believed that a college degree would allow their children more vertical and horizontal job mobility and to work in white-collar jobs in a credential-driven job-market. Parents often used strong familial and community norms to support their children, norms that could come in conflict with wanting their children to succeed in college. For example, at their children’s ages, parents were often married, with full time jobs, houses and children. Familial norms of adulthood were complicated by college attendance, so parents were wary of encouraging him or her to grow to expect the support or become unappreciative. Participants knew about the many benefits available to college graduates, that include increased earnings, access to jobs that are less physically demanding than those held by parents, and both a lateral and vertical job mobility that could allow movement between companies, types of jobs and perhaps, towns and cities. And although the human capital gains of job mobility were often cited as the most important benefit of the college degree, this movement could also be disruptive to the social capital and the norms of the family if the student chose to move away from his or her family either during or after college.
DEDICATION

For my parents,

the smartest people I know.
AKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I applied to the Higher Education program in 1998, I said in my faculty interview that to succeed I would need a collaborative intellectual environment in which faculty and students engaged with each other in the teaching and learning process. As I packed for home, Dr. Mary Ann Danowitz Sagaria called me to say she would help create that environment for me at Ohio State. Faculty like Dr. Danowitz Sagaria, Dr. Patti Lather, Dr. Antoinette Errante, Dr. Len Baird and Dr. Susan Jones have been encouraging, patient and engaged in my learning, and I am deeply indebted to them. Dr. Danowitz Sagaria has provided great latitude in my academic program, and allowed me to explore many seemingly unconnected intellectual strands that hopefully converge here.

The doctoral cohort with which I have been affiliated has inspired and helped me incredibly. Dr. Elisa Abes, Dr. Chris Shaffer and the doctors-to-be Schott, Shaheen, Maltzan, Oliver, and Heiser have discussed and read and edited and collaborated with me beyond my expectations. Dr. Mabel Freeman has been more than generous by employing me in an office so closely related to my research interests, and in such proximity to her that I could learn from her leadership. My assistantship, which allowed me to work with people like Eric Reasoner, has truly been a wonderful complement to my academic engagements, for which I am very thankful.
Dr. Susan Jones and Dr. Gretchen Metzelaars have quite literally ensured my personal and academic success at The Ohio State University and in Columbus. These two have reminded me to study hard, and to eat, to drink and to be Mary. I am humbled by their generosity of time and resources, and in awe of the integrity with which they live their lives, always expecting the best from and offering the best to those with whom they come in contact. This is indeed a great gift to their students and their friends.

In many ways, my formal intellectual work started in 1987 with a group of brilliant, hilarious people from the University of Vermont. They and their partners have continued to serve as the sometimes patrons and always supporters of this endeavor. Finally, this dissertation exists not in spite of, but because of my parents, my brothers and sisters, their partners and children.
VITA

October 25, 1964………………………………………Born-Houlton, Maine

1987…………………………………………………B.S., Elementary Education, The
University of Maine, Orono, Maine

1989…………………………………………………M.Ed., Higher Education and
Student Affairs Administration, The
University of Vermont, Burlington,
Vermont

1989-1993…………………………………………...Student Affairs Administrator, The
University of Virginia,
Charlottesville, Virginia

1993-1999…………………………………………...Student Affairs Administrator, The
University of Maryland, College
Park, Maryland

1999-2000…………………………………………...Graduate Administrative Associate,
The University Honors & Scholars
Center, The Ohio State University,
Columbus, Ohio

1999-2003…………………………………………...Graduate Administrative Associate,
The Office of Undergraduate
Admissions and First Year
Experience, The Ohio State
University, Columbus, Ohio

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Education
Program: Educational Policy & Leadership
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication .......................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................... v

Vita ................................................................................................................................. ix

List of Tables .................................................................................................................. xi

Preface ............................................................................................................................. xii

Chapters:

1. Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1  
   Defining First-generation college students ............................................................ 3  
   Confounding Factors Which Complicate a Definition of First-Generation College Students ......................................................... 6  
   Concepts of Capital: Economic, Cultural and Human Capital Theories ........ 7  
   Parental Influence on Student Enrollment and Perseverance .......................... 11  
   Purpose of Study ...................................................................................................... 13  
   Significance of Study .............................................................................................. 14  
   Summary .................................................................................................................. 15

2. Review of the Literature ......................................................................................... 16  
   Introduction .............................................................................................................. 16  
   The study frame: Forms of capital .......................................................................... 16  
   Cultural capital .................................................................................................... 18  
   Cultural capital in its objectified state ............................................................. 18  
   Cultural capital in its embodied state ............................................................ 19  
   Cultural capital in the institutionalized state .............................................. 22  
   Economic capital ................................................................................................ 23  
   Social capital ....................................................................................................... 23  
   Social capital and the use of norms ............................................................... 25  
   Social capital and social class ........................................................................ 26
LIST OF TABLES

Table

3.1 Description of participants........................................................................57
I am the youngest child of a retired railroad worker and potato farmer and a stay at home mother of five. My parents raised us in a big farmhouse that we often heated with three woodstoves: one in the kitchen, another in the living room and a wood furnace in the cellar, on the opposite side of the canning room. In the fall, the schools in our county closed for a month so children could help in the harvest, a practice that continues today. Because our parents were potato farmers, my siblings and I started working in the fields in second grade, with the help of small platforms that allowed us to reach the sorting beds on the harvester my father drove. The sorting beds dumped the potatoes into a moving truck driven by my sister, my brother or my uncle, or my mother in a pinch. Growing up, we often ate potatoes, deer or moose meat, and the vegetables my mother had grown, frozen or canned from our enormous garden. In the summer, we lived in a camp on a lake just 10 minutes from our house that my parents built after one lucrative year of farming. We lugged in our drinking water, had an out or backhouse, a two-party phone and no television. As children we canoed, fished, swam and bicycled from morning until night and often enjoyed drop-in company--friends and relatives who stopped by unannounced or uninvited, a great compliment to the hospitality of my parents. With the exception of the outhouse, I often see my childhood portrayed in magazines or on television shows as quaint. In fact, Martha Stewart has featured my
hometown both in her magazine and on her television show. Today, my mother and father say of these times: “I guess we were poor but we didn’t know it, because we lived the same as everyone else around us.”

My father attended the University of Maine for only one semester, convinced his professors could teach him nothing about farming that he couldn’t learn better from his father on the farm. My mother declined a four-year scholarship to a local liberal arts college to marry my father one month after her high school graduation. Neither parent ever indicated to me any regret at not attending college. The youngest of my family, I consider myself a first generation college student, although my oldest sister completed an associate’s degree at age 42, and one of my brothers received a two-year degree in auto-body repair from a technical college. Because of my current educational pursuits and my job history in white collar, administrative positions at research universities, I appear to fit into a middle class milieu, what Pierre Bourdieu might call a visible “habitus,” a “set of constantly reformulated and modified dispositions and preferences rooted in social class and the power relations which define groups’ and individuals’ relationships to one another and to the structures of our society” (Horvat, 1996, p. 6). On a daily basis, I interact with people who possess PhDs and wealth I could not have imagined as a child. In short, I am a poor kid in middle class adult’s clothing.

I have been fortunate to write and learn with Tammy Maltzan, a rural student who now lives in a city, whose dissertation is about students from rural areas. Several times over coffee we have remarked that we are unsure how to feel when we read research about rural or first-generation college students who, it seems, are slated for failure in higher education. We often wondered, why us? Why are we research-defying anomalies?
How did we get from poor, rural America to here? And, is here better? Tammy and I remembered our childhoods in small, safe and tightly-knit communities. Like my parents, we didn’t know we were poor or rural until we left our towns and were told about how rural, how poor how uneducated life was back home. Now that we “knew,” how did we engage with our research?

Several members of my dissertation proposal committee expressed concern about the personal-ness of this project and the potential that my personal investment might overtake a more scholarly endeavor. With their guidance and cautions, I advanced this research looking to use my own experiences to inform rather than drive my work. Van Maanen (1995) wrote about the potential for ethnographers to consider distinct periods of their own lives as fieldwork. Although a stretch to consider my life fieldwork, I did bring my own experiences and interpretations—my biases—to this project, and worked to utilize them as methodological tools. Olesen (1994) encouraged researchers to use feminist methodology to explore the potential within biases: “If the researcher is sufficiently reflexive about her project, she can use biases to guide data gathering or create an understanding of her own interpretations and behavior in the research” (p. 164). So rather than hold my own life at bay within this study, I worked to straddle a line between researcher-scholar and participant-insider, and to use my experiences as a first-generation college student to acknowledge as Rich (1986) wrote: “Everything that ever helped me has come through what already lay stored in me. Old things, diffuse, unnamed, lie strong across my heart” (p. 4).
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At no time in my years as a student did I march in a graduation ceremony…I felt too much uncertainty about who I had become. Uncertain about whether I had managed to make it through without giving up the best of myself, the best of the values I had been raised to believe in—hard work, honesty, and respect for everyone no matter their class—I finished my education with my allegiance to the working class intact (bell hooks, 2000, p. 37).

Effective norms can constitute a powerful form of social capital….A community with strong and effective norms about young persons’ behavior can keep them from ‘having a good time.’…Even prescriptive norms that reward certain actions, like the norm in a community that says that a boy who is a good athlete should go out for football, are in effect directing energy from other activities. Effective norms in an area can reduce innovativeness in an area, not only deviant actions that harm others but also deviant actions that can benefit everyone (Coleman, 1997, p. 86).

Scholar bell hooks (2000) described her journey as a poor, first-generation college student who ultimately graduated with a PhD from Stanford University in her book Where We Stand: Class Matters. hooks struggled with the tension of whether going to college would somehow change her into someone she and her community would not recognize, uneasy of who she might become because of her college attendance. hooks’ working class values were the norms of her community, norms that were not recognized at college. Like hooks, first-generation college students often negotiate a desire to
succeed in college with an allegiance to their home communities and familial norms that often do not include college attendance. hooks’ story, and the stories of other students who are first in their family to attend college, are framed by the work of sociologist James Coleman, who wrote about norms as a powerful form of social capital. If hooks had traded the values and norms of her working class community for those of higher education, she would have risked losing access to the social capital, or the networks and connections (Bourdieu, 1997) of that community. The college graduation ceremonies represented the potential loss of working-class values. By not participating, she had not become someone her community would not accept. Here the norms of hooks’ community worked to keep her as an integral member, still working-class with a Stanford education. For many first-generation college students, going to college can be viewed as non-normative, social network disrupting behavior. London (1989) named the tension first-generation college students feel between maintaining community norms while adopting those of a college environment the “long leash of loyalty” (p. 154).

The struggle hooks’ (2000) autobiographical work describes can help inform research about first-generation college students, research that is critical to enrolling this growing cohort. In 1996, of the 1.5 million Scholastic Aptitude Test takers, 33 percent were the first in their family to pursue post-secondary education. Of the 1.4 million SAT takers headed for college in 2003, 38 percent would be the first in their family to attend college (College Board, 2003). Because first-generation students persevere and graduate at lower rates than non-first-generation students in both two and four-year institutions (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), it is important that colleges and universities learn
more about this cohort to help them persevere to graduation, and to help them negotiate the long leash of loyalty.

Defining First-Generation College Students

This study did not employ an authoritative definition of first-generation college students. Rather than construct first-generation college students and their families as knowable objects with similarities based on race, ethnicity, experience with college or socio-economic status (SES), this study resisted such constructions. Throughout the rest of this section, the research perspectives which helped in the redefining of first-generation college students are discussed. This was a methodological move inspired by critical theory, which will be discussed in Chapter Three.

First-generation students have most often been described as students whose parents have never attended post-secondary education or as students whose parents may have attended college but did not complete a degree (Shirlin, 2002). However, Lather and Smithies (1997) said that “no life fits neatly into any one ‘plot’ line and narratives are multiple, contradictory, changing, and differently available, depending on the social forces that shape…lives” (p. 125). A critical perspective to this research required a more complicating search for a definition of first-generation college students and for a better understanding of the complexities of the roles that families can play in students’ college lives. The following questions helped with this task.

1. How might definitions of first-generation college students take into consideration that family members other than parents are involved in college selection?

2. What experience do family members have with post-secondary education? What type of college or university did family members attend and for how long?
3. How might socio-economic status and race affect the category of students called “first-generation college students?”

Dominant definitions of first-generation college students have often considered which family member has had college experience, such as a student’s parents versus an aunt or an uncle. Some researchers focused only on the highest level of education attained by a student’s parent (Billson & Terry 1982; Duggan, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Riehl, 1994; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Thus a student would be considered first-generation if neither parent had been to college. Other researchers included older siblings or other family in their definitions of first-generation college students (McConnell, 2000; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Therefore, although a student’s parents had not attended college but an older sibling had, the student would not be considered first-generation.

Also important to how first-generation students were defined is the amount of time a family member spent pursuing a degree. Did any family member attend college long enough to advise a student on how to succeed in post-secondary education? More specifically, did the family member attend college briefly or complete a degree?

Although students with a parent who attended some college and students with a parent who attended no college are sometimes both considered first-generation college students, one study suggested variations in the two groups’ enrollment patterns. One study using data from the 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS) found no differences between the student enrollment patterns of those whose parents had attended college but had not earned a degree and those whose parents had earned a bachelor’s or
an advanced degree. Both cohorts were equally as likely to attend a four-year institution (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Another study, however, using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), the Baccalaureate and Beyond Study (B&B) and the BPS, found that whether a parent or older sibling completed a degree was important to a student’s success. Students whose parents had some college experience, but not a bachelor’s degree, did not appear to have an advantage over those whose parents had no post-secondary education (Choy, 2001).

Studies about first-generation college students have not examined the influences of divorce, single-parent households, or remarriage (e.g. what if a student’s step-mother has experience with college?). Also, little distinction has been made between the types of post-secondary institutions family members attended. That is, if the definition of first-generation college students is connected to experience with post-secondary education (which increases the family’s ability to advise a first-generation student at college), will a parent who attended a two-year technical college have transferable information from his or her experience to guide the student who attends a comprehensive four-year college?

Within a feminist framework, Colker (1994) named such over-generalization about a person or group of people as essentializing. A researcher essentializes participants when constructing them as knowable cohorts like “the poor” or “first-generation college students.”
Confounding Factors Which Complicate a Definition of First-Generation College Students

Often, factors other than parents’ or other family members’ education are noted as central to a student’s enrollment in and success at college within the research on first-generation college students. A family’s income, race, and ethnicity were often indicated as central to the research about first-generation college students. There is a high correlation between first-generation college status and low SES. Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001) used data from four national data sets (the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL), the High School and Beyond Sophomore Cohort, the BPS, and the NELS) and found that compared to their high-SES counterparts, low-SES students who entered post-secondary education in 1992 were more likely to have parents who completed no further education than a high school diploma (75 versus nine percent). Other researchers have noted the overlap by consistently pairing first-generation and low-income in their work (Thayer, 2000; Ting, 1998). Roberts and Rosenwald’s (2001) study on upward social mobility was very much based in students moving from a lower to a higher economic stratum and all 15 students interviewed were first-generation. But although many first-generation students are from poor families, some are not. Those from middle income backgrounds find the adjustment to college less difficult than poor or racial and ethnic minority students who are also first generation students (Thayer, 2000).

Researchers who wrote about first-generation college students often referred to the race or ethnicity of students in their studies. For example, Duggan (2001) wrote that first-generation students were more likely to be non-white than were second-generation
students and more likely to be from homes where English was not the primary language. Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) wrote that this cohort of students was also more likely to be Hispanic and compared to their higher SES counterparts, low SES students entering post-secondary education in 1992 were more likely to be a member of a historically underrepresented racial and/or ethnic group (Terenzini, et al., 2001). Other researchers (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999; Choy, 2001) provided confirming data.

Concepts of Capital: Economic, Cultural, Social, and Human Capital Theories

A review of the literature on first-generation college students revealed a pattern of promoting college attendance for first-generation students using economic capital arguments, since college graduates earn significantly more, on average, than high school graduates earn (e.g., Duggan, 2001; Hossler et al., 1999; Terenzini, et al., 2001). Additionally, the concept of cultural capital has served as an important concept for researchers. Serra Hagedorn and Tierney (2002) encouraged practitioners to help students “cultivate the kind of cultural capital that will not only sustain students to college, but will evolve and grow to nurture students through college” (p. 4). Social capital also served as a framing concept for research. Several writers discussed social capital losses at home as students reported feeling alienated from their families or communities of origin due to college attendance (Ochberg & Comeau, 2001; Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001). Finally, college attendance was viewed as an important contribution to human capital through its production of both skilled workers and willing consumers (Fallon, 1997; Hossler et al., 1999).

To conclude that first-generation students are deficient because they do not have the pre-collegiate experiences of most students does not appropriately explain the
complexity of the first-generation picture or the success of many first-generation students (Shirlin, 2002). Shirlin’s thoughtful approach can be expanded to include family members, who have been described as obstacles to their children’s success at college (Hsiao, 1992) and either unable or unwilling to provide the needed support for their student’s college enrollment or perseverance. Shirlin used French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction to conceptually ground his study of first-generation students. Central to Bourdieu’s work is the concept of cultural capital. When discussing cultural capital, Bourdieu (1977) used the term culture to mean those items and experiences which have high status within a given society--those considered “most worthy” of being consumed or experienced like museums, the theater, concerts, art cinemas, and what he calls the symbolic wealth that constitutes “legitimate culture” (p. 492). Smith (2001) used Bourdieuan concepts to discuss how the elite class, with high economic and high cultural capital, dominates the non-elite classes and how they define high status culture. What is defined as high or the most valued culture is defined as such by elites because they participate in it. One’s participation in legitimate culture then, measured both by the type of cultural event and how fully one is able to participate, allows one to accrue cultural capital.

Although McDonough (1997) said that all classes have their own forms of cultural capital and suggested that cultural capital can be accrued at college, Bourdieu (1977) was emphatic in his assertion that higher education cannot significantly alter one’s cultural capital. Other concepts of capital, however, provide researchers a means to explain how parents who have not attended college might view the importance of post-
secondary education for their children. Economic capital, social capital and human capital served as strong referents for those who studied first-generation college students.

Economic Capital

Economic capital is either money or what is immediately and directly convertible into money (Bourdieu, 1986/1997). This might be the traditional notion of capital, as it encompasses what one purchases, owns and is able to sell. Houses, cars, and works of art might all be considered economic capital because their monetary value is easily named according to market value and these items are easily exchanged for money. Economic capital is perhaps the most quantifiable of all types of capital, with poverty lines drawn based on its possession and, pertinent to this study, direct correlations are made between higher education and material wealth. In the research on first-generation college students, economic capital is often presented as an argument for the importance of post-secondary education (Duggan, 2001).

Research reviewed by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) indicated that a bachelor’s degree remains a critical requirement for high status and high paying technical, managerial, and professional jobs. Terenzini et al. (2001) wrote that students who completed a two-year degree enjoyed significant and substantial income and occupational status advantage compared to those who held a high school diploma. Duggan (2001) added that having a bachelor’s degree from any college has enormous economic implications. Citing a 2000 study by Mortenson, Duggan noted that the lifetime income of a college graduate could be as much as one million dollars more than that of a high school graduate. When first-generation students attained either bachelor or associate’s
degrees, they earned comparable salaries and were employed in similar occupations as their non-first-generation peers (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

**Social Capital**

Social capital is comprised of social obligations or connections, which can be converted into economic or other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986/1997). In the United States, family names like Kennedy, Vanderbilt, or Hilton carry great social weight, regardless of what one knows about a specific Kennedy’s net-worth. The assumption being that he or she has access to great wealth, but also has personal “connections” to other powerful people. Bourdieu (1997) defined social capital as the:

> actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity—owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (p. 51).

**Human Capital**

Human capital is created by changes in the self that bring about new skills and abilities that allow one to act in new ways or perform different functions (Coleman, 1997). The concept of human capital refers to workers’ investment in themselves, through education, training, or other activities that raise their income (Woodhall, 1997) and has direct productivity outcomes for American business (Smith, 2001).

**Cultural Capital**

According to Bourdieu (1997), cultural capital exists in three forms: the objectified state, the embodied state, and the institutionalized state. In its objectified state, cultural capital might consist of objects that one can purchase such as artwork or books. In its embodied state cultural capital is more difficult to discern because it is
embedded in its possessor in the form of manners and mannerisms considered appropriate to specific social settings. Embodied cultural capital might be described by the phrase *je ne sais quoi* (as in, “she possesses a certain…”). Embodied cultural capital is passed from one person to another through long-term, daily interactions which Bourdieu (1977) called “imperceptible apprenticeships” (p. 495).

A college degree might be considered an example of cultural capital in an institutionalized state. The institutional recognition of the degree “makes it possible to establish conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986/1997, p. 51). In short, like objectified cultural capital, the college degree can have a specific economic value in that college graduates earn more on average than those who do not attend college.

**Parental Influence on Student Enrollment and Perseverance**

Much of the research on first-generation college students described how and why they select specific colleges, their academic and social success at college, and how college ultimately affects them (Choy, 2001; Duggan, 2001; Fallon, 1997; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton et al., 2001). The vast majority of studies of first-generation college students rely on students as primary research participants.

Additionally, researchers have cited parents as causal to explain students’ lower success rates at college (Duggan, 2001; Fallon, 1997; Hsiao, 1992; London, 1989). The social capital of the parents of first-generation college students has been considered to be a disadvantage to the students because parents may be unable to advise their children about college processes (Duggan, 2001). Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) interviewed 15 students from North Carolina and Michigan who were the first in their family to attend...
college. A student in Roberts and Rosenwald’s (2001) study reported: “Neither of [my parents] really knew about college. They didn’t really know about how to apply, about how to get money, even that you should visit and find out what’s there” (p. 108). One first-generation student reported to London (1989): “There’s a lot of stuff that goes on on this campus and my parents don’t know what it means. It’s like I’m living in a totally different world” (p. 146).

Only three studies (Antonio & McNamara Horvat, 2002; Hossler et al., 1999; Smith, 2001) were located that included family members in the research about students’ college aspirations and attendance. When Antonio and McNamara Horvat (2002) studied the college aspirations of six African American girls attending a private college-preparatory high school in California, they interviewed one of each girl’s parents. Smith (2001) interviewed eleven low-income African American parents whose children attended a low SES, public high school in California about how they guided their children through the college application, selection, and enrollment processes. These parents had not attended college. Hossler et al. (1999) performed a longitudinal study of nearly 5,000 Indiana students about how they were predisposed toward college and their subsequent enrollment patterns. Hossler et al. interviewed 56 students and their parents as part of this study. With the exception of these three studies, parents are seldom viewed as fundamental contributors to researchers’ data collection. If, as Hossler et al. found, parents are a significant factor in whether students begin to plan for college in high school and therefore whether they attend post-secondary education, it is critical to know more about how parents view the importance of college and how they came to form those perceptions.
Purpose of the Study

Despite the importance of the family in college students’ college preparation processes and success once enrolled, missing from the literature is information about family members’ perceptions on college attendance. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of first-generation college students’ parents about college attendance, and how they came to form these perceptions. Why did they think that college was important for their children, if they thought college was important at all? Additionally, this study set out to examine how parents defined, offered and withheld support for their college student. Because most studies about first-generation college students used students as the primary participants, no explanation of support from the parents’ perspectives existed in the literature. The intention of this study was to discover how parents might discuss support for their child.

Central to this study was the use of social, cultural, economic and human capital as theoretical frameworks. Specifically, the study was designed to use these four forms of capital as lenses through which to view parents’ responses about the importance of college. Was one form of capital more salient than another? Additionally, the study was grounded in a constructivist epistemology and utilized critical inquiry. The primary mode of data collection was semi-structured interviews with the parents of first-generation students, the content of which was analyzed critically. Two primary research questions guided this study:

1. How do parents view the role and significance of college attendance?
2. How do families define and exhibit “support” for their first-generation college student in both the college selection process and once the student is enrolled?
Significance of the Study

Large, quantitative studies have been the primary source of data about first-generation college students (e.g. Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 2001). Some researchers have performed qualitative studies (London, 1989; Ochberg & Comeau, 2001; Roberts and Rosenwald, 2001) in order to learn more about first-generation college students but few of these have used family members as key informants in data collection, with the exception of Smith (2001) and Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999). Hossler et al.’s (1999) study was in fact a mixed methods study in which they interviewed a sub-sample of respondents. Whether qualitative or quantitative, researchers often attributed first-generation college students’ lower persistence rates at college to family members’ inability to advise or support the student in the college environment (Duggan, 2001; Fallon, 1997; Hsiao, 1992; London, 1992; Riehl, 1994; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Few studies have used parents as research participants, although parents have been noted as contributing to the lower perseverance rates of their students. I found no study that used parents as primary participants.

Social, human, cultural, and economic capital also provide a specific significance to this study. Researchers often advocate college attendance for first-generation college students as a means by which students will increase their capital in at least one of its four forms. But, although parents have been found to be central in students’ college aspirations and enrollment decisions (Hossler et al., 1999), little is known about whether these four forms of capital are salient to parents in terms of how parents view the importance of college attendance for their children, or if one is more salient than another. Therefore, the significance of this study is that it utilized parents as the primary research
participants and worked to better understand which of the four forms of capital, if any, were more significant for parents as they developed their views on the importance of post-secondary education for their children.

Summary

This study was designed to learn more about first-generation college students’ parents’ perceptions on college for their children. This was a qualitative study that used a constructivist approach and used as a conceptual framework social, cultural, economic, and human capital. I designed the study to learn more about which, if any, of these forms of capital might be more salient for parents as they formed their perceptions on the importance of college for their children. The partnering of constructivism and critical inquiry allowed me to critique the research on first-generation college students as perspective-laden. To this end, Chapter Two is divided into two sections. The first is an introduction to the four forms of capital that I used as conceptual frameworks for this study. Next is a review of the literature on first-generation college students. The chapter is designed to provide the reader the ability to critique existing research using the forms of capital. In Chapter Three, I discuss my research methodology and methods in more depth. In Chapter Four, I add my own findings to this literature and offer my work in Chapter Five as equally perspective-laden and open to critique.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on first-generation college students and the theoretical perspectives on which much of the research, and this study are based. The chapter is divided into two sections. First is a review of economic, cultural, social, and human capital followed by a review of Pierre Bourdieu’s perspectives on how education can or cannot help students increase their capital through college attendance. The second part of this chapter presents a review of the literature on first-generation college students. The two sections are juxtaposed in such a way that the reader might make some connections between how first-generation college students and their families are discussed in research, and how college attendance could affect the economic, cultural, social and human capital of the student and the family.

The Study Frame: Forms of Capital

I draw on the literature of capital to provide a scaffolding for identifying forms of family relationships and the types of support that parents offer their first-generation college students as they select, enroll, and persevere in post-secondary education. Social, economic, human, and cultural capital were chosen as the study frames because a college education could be viewed as increasing one’s capital in all forms. Because this study was grounded in critical theory and utilized critical inquiry, however, I was also
interested in exploring whether college attendance might decrease a student’s capital. As
the work of French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is widely used by researchers who study
college students’ college selection processes, enrollment patterns, and perseverance (e.g.
Berger, 2000; Horvat, 1996; Kuh & Love; 2000; MacLeod, 1987; McDonough, 1997;
Roberts & Rosenwald; 2001; Serra Hagedorn & Fogel, 2002; Terenzini et al., 2001), his
work was central to helping define capital within this study.

Bourdieu (1997) defined capital as “accumulated labor which enables those who
appropriate it on a private basis to also appropriate social energy in the form of reified or
living labor” (p. 46). A factory owner who supervises and controls the work of hundreds
of floor workers who produce a product controls living labor from a cultural capital
perspective. The owner acquires capital from the individual’s toil, realizing the profits
from the collective of all workers. Woodhall (1997) called capital assets that will
generate income in the future. Therefore, stock portfolios, houses that appreciate in
value, factory workers or a college degree might all be categorized as capital. But the
possession of capital can also provide benefits that are not solely economic. Bourdieu
(1997) wrote that the greatest advantage of controlling capital was the increased amount
of useful time made possible through directing other people’s time and work. This could
be manifested in a personal assistant, a housekeeper, a nanny or family member to care
for one’s children, owning a house in a neighborhood convenient to one’s work, or
perhaps owning and driving a car rather than riding a bus to travel to and from one’s job.

In the following sections four specific forms of capital will be introduced: economic,
cultural, human, and social capital. Central to the discussion of each form of capital will
be how each might be exchanged for something else such as money, materials, goods, or
services, in short, other forms of capital. Also central to the discussion will be how post-secondary education might affect each form of capital.

**Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu (1977) used the term *culture* to mean those items and experiences that have high status within a given society, often but not exclusively affiliated with the arts, such as attendance at museums, staged theater, concerts, the art cinema, and “the symbolic wealth that constitutes ‘legitimate’ culture (p. 492). Smith (2001) used Bourdieuan concepts to discuss how the elite class (high economic and high cultural capital, both explained within this chapter) use their privilege and their ability to define high status culture to dominate the non-elite classes. Thus what is defined as high or the most valued culture is defined as such by elites because they participate in it. One’s participation in “legitimate” culture, measured both by the type of cultural event and how fully one is able to participate, allows one to accrue cultural capital. Within this study the concept of culture is not used to define the actions or values of a group of actors as in the phrases “youth culture,” a “culture of poverty,”” or racial, ethnic, or sexual identity based “cultures.” Instead, Bourdieu’s perspectives on culture will be utilized. According to Bourdieu (1997), cultural capital can exist in three forms: the objectified state, the embodied state, and the institutionalized state, each of which will be discussed in the following sections.

**Cultural Capital in its Objectified State**

In an objectified state, cultural capital takes the form of cultural goods such as paintings, books, dictionaries, or musical instruments, which might be considered the “trappings” of wealth or high culture (Bourdieu, 1997). These items could also be
considered economic capital in that they are readily bought and sold, and ownership presupposes the economic means to possess such items. For example, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) categorizes one’s socio-economic status (SES) using several broad criteria that include items in the home such as books or magazines, a dishwasher, and parental occupation, all of which reflect either wealth or educational resources and family income. But not all economic capital is cultural capital. An expensive pick-up truck might have high economic value but low value in terms of objectified cultural capital because pick-up trucks are not considered part of what constitutes legitimate or high culture—unless perhaps the truck is used on one’s thoroughbred farm in Kentucky. The same truck would probably not increase one’s cultural capital if parked in front of a house-trailer in rural America because any individual with economic capital can purchase items that represent objectified cultural capital like a piece of art or a box at the opera. When non-elites purchase these items, these individuals are at times disparagingly referred to as *nouveau riche*, or the newly rich. Thus, the objectified state provides an avenue by which individuals with the economic means might consume legitimate culture via buying and selling, but from an elite perspective, cultural capital in its objectified state is a less impressive and less valued form of cultural capital because it is more easily acquired than other forms of cultural capital.

**Cultural Capital in its Embodied State**

In its embodied state, cultural capital becomes intangible as a component of one’s being, and is therefore significantly more difficult to both explain and to pass from one individual to another (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu’s sense of embodied cultural capital
could be described by the French phrase *je ne sais quoi* (as in “she possesses a certain…). A nearly inexplicable component of one’s composure, embodied cultural capital is how one knows which flatware to use at a formal dinner party, or how to act or dress appropriately in a specific social or cultural situation.

A popular culture example of how one needs do more than attend a cultural event to accrue cultural capital is the musical *My Fair Lady* in which Eliza Doolittle, a flower-vendor is dressed “like a lady” and taken by the professor Henry Higgins to the opening race day at Ascot, an event of the elite. Although she is dressed like elites and has been trained how to act appropriately by Higgins, Doolittle lacks the tools to participate in an elite cultural event and ends up embarrassed and alienated. Similarly, in a qualitative study on first-generation and poor college students, Roberts and Rosenwald’s (2001) participant Mary, a recent college graduate, provided an example of embodied cultural capital that speaks specifically to what college attendance can or cannot provide students and how small she felt at one particular event:

> You put me in room full of people all dressed better than I am, all sipping champagne, all talking about a favorite kind of wine and why it tastes the way it does, and I’ll feel about that big. I’ll just want to shrink into a corner (p. 107).

This is an example of Bourdieu’s embodied cultural capital, “the language skills and information about manners, fashion and style” (Roberts and Rosenwald, 2001, p. 95) that Mary does not possess. Theoretically Mary could learn enough about wines to discuss them in a social setting, if she knew why wines were important, understood the discourse on wine, or knew how one learned about them. Bourdieu (1997) wrote about the importance of exposure to, rather than lessons on, cultural objects at an early age. Bourdieu said that all cultural goods “particularly all those which belong to the childhood
“environment—exert an educative effect by their mere existence” (p. 56). Thus, there is a distinction made between formal lessons about culture and what he called “imperceptible apprenticeships from the family upbringing” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 495). If Mary, from Roberts and Rosenwald’s study, had been raised in a family that often served different wines and discussed how one distinguishes between them, the arrow effect would have created within Mary a knowledge about wines that would have allowed her to feel comfortable at the party without formal training.

The embodied state introduces a second way to “consume” cultural goods other than by purchasing them. This consumption is more symbolic, and might be evidenced in one’s ability to “understand” a piece of artwork in a contextual sense. One might own a piece of art, which proves economic or objectified cultural capital, but lack the understanding of the work in a historical, artistic, or cultural context. Thus owning a work of art by Monet or a Manet might allow one to accrue and prove the possession of economic or objectified cultural capital, but be valued less than one’s ability to discuss the difference between the two artists or why that difference is important. In an embodied state, external wealth is converted into an integral part of the person, unlike money or possessions. It is often transmitted from one person to another over time, via the family (Bourdieu, 1997).

Tierney (2002) wrote that some families must make a choice between social and cultural capital. Family members who must work for financial reasons and therefore cannot be at home with their children, make a decision to generate economic capital at the expense of cultural capital (Tierney). bell hooks (2000) discussed her transition from working class to the ranks of the upper-middle class in the book *Class Matters.* hooks
wrote about not knowing how to use the revenue earned from book sales to make more money through investment and savings possibilities. For hooks, a lack of embodied cultural capital inhibited her economic capital growth because, as hooks—a Stanford graduate—said: “If you do not know something exists, you do not know to ask about it” (pp. 61-62).

Cultural Capital in its Institutionalized State

A college degree is considered an example of cultural capital in an institutionalized state. The institutional recognition of the degree “makes it possible to establish conversion rates between cultural capital and economic capital by guaranteeing the monetary value of a given academic capital” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51). Bourdieu wrote that institutionalized cultural capital could be disseminated through national standardized tests that produce distinct lines between those who excel and those who do not or as he wrote, tests that emphatically distinguish “the last successful candidate from the first unsuccessful one” (p. 51). Like objectified cultural capital, the college degree could have a specific economic value. This is particularly evident in studies that analyzed the earnings differentials between those with and those without a college degree. For example, Terenzini et al. (2001) wrote that students who complete a two-year degree enjoy statistically significant income and occupational status advantages over those holding only a high school diploma. Although Roberts and Rosenwald’s (2001) participant, Mary, had achieved the institutionalized cultural capital of a college degree, embodied cultural capital (knowing how to talk about wines) was valued more than institutionalized cultural capital (the degree) at that particular party because the subtleties of high culture were more difficult to achieve than a college diploma.
Economic Capital

Economic capital is perhaps the most quantifiable of all types of capital, with poverty lines drawn based on its possession. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau classified an individual under the age of 65 who earned less than $9,214 per year as living below the poverty threshold (U.S. Census, 2001). Central to this study is the belief in American society that a college degree allows an individual to increase one’s economic capital or simply put, to make more money (Duggan, 2001). Duggan referenced a study in which the lifetime earnings of college graduates could be as much as one million dollars more than high school graduates (Mortenson, as cited in Duggan, 2001). Economic capital is also the form of capital most easily transferred from one individual to another via gifts or inheritance.

Social Capital

Social capital is comprised of social obligations or connections between people and organizations that can be converted into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu defined social capital as:

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity—owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (p. 51).

According to Bourdieu (1997), social capital, like cultural capital, is the domain of elites and the author did not speculate about the existence of either social or cultural capital in non-elite groups.

Social capital, like other forms of capital, can be traded for other types of capital. The transformation of social capital to economic capital might be evident in exclusive
social organizations like golf or country clubs whose members develop personal relationships with each other—which might later develop into business relationships. This is an intersection of social, economic, and cultural capital.

To elaborate, in many organizations sponsorship by a current member is required and current group members vote to admit or reject new members, an example of social capital. Dues and fees are also required for membership, an economic capital requirement. Bourdieu (1977) wrote that “the most culturally privileged find their way into institutions capable of reinforcing their advantage” (p. 497) and in the private club example, belonging to an elite club shores up one’s cultural capital by socializing with other cultural capital elites in a closed social environment, such as a private club. Situations in which the most material types of capital present themselves in the immaterial form of cultural capital or social capital and vice versa, Bourdieu (1997) named “transubstantiation” (p. 46). In a poor community, the social organizations of churches, civic organizations or families might also allow for this transubstantiation of capital. Rather than using daycare, family members might baby-sit for other family members with little or no money exchanged, allowing a parent to work outside the home.

Although Bourdieu (1977) wrote about social capital as the realm of elites, Coleman (1997) made no distinction between what capital is available to elites compared to non-elites and said social capital was a resource for all persons, valuable for both economic and non-economic outcomes. Coleman wrote about “rotating credit associations” of Southeast Asia and elsewhere, a social construct in which a group of people contribute small amounts of money into a collective “pot” monthly. Each month, one of the collective takes the entire pot, creating a credit-union-like savings plan for
group members. Coleman wrote that such social networks only function because members trust other members to participate equally. A member who violates the norm of trust by not contributing each month would be expelled from the social collective.

**Social Capital and the Use of Norms**

Bourdieu (1997) wrote that social relationships allow a group to define itself and its limits and that when new members are introduced to a group, the whole definition of the collective is put at risk. According to Coleman (1997) norms help define the parameters of a social-based group:

> A community with strong and effective norms about young persons’ behavior can keep them from ‘having a good time.’ Norms that make it possible to walk alone at night also constrain the activities of criminals…Even prescriptive norms that reward certain actions, like the norm in a community that says that a boy who is a good athlete should go out for football, are in effect directing energy from other activities (p. 86).

Foucault (1977/1995) discussed “Norms” (emphasis in original, p. 179) and normalizing structures in *Discipline and Punish*. He wrote that often those who contradict communal norms are punished as a means to normalize or encourage an individual’s conformity to a group norm. This could be accomplished at formalized and institutionalized levels, such as the credentialing of a profession via a type of training required to become a teacher, for example. Teachers without a certificate indicating a certain set of experiences are at times not allowed to practice in certain communities. Norms also work on a local level and might dictate that suits versus casual clothing are appropriate in the workplace, or community norms that prohibit interfaith or mixed-race marriages, or same-sex relationships. Foucault (1977/1995) wrote:

> The power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another…the norm introduces,
as a useful imperative and as a result of measurement, all the shading of individual differences (p. 184).

Thus for Foucault (1977/1995), norms define the most common requirements for group membership, and group members are ranked or ordered in relation to how similar or dissimilar they are to the group norm. This allows less rigid parameters for group membership so that not all members behave exactly the same, but also allows the social forces of the group to act on the individual, encouraging movement toward the norm. For example, students who leave a community and return after college might be allowed to reenter into the social systems of that community, but be expected to “not put on airs” or act like a “college boy” with family or friends who have not attended college. In fact, students might be discouraged from attending post-secondary education because this endeavor is too far from the group norm, which as Bourdieu (1997) wrote could put “the whole definition of the group at stake” (p. 52).

Social Capital and Social Class

Because first-generation college student status and low SES are often linked in research, a discussion of how social capital and social class might or might not intersect is included here. Writing about how low-income African-American families view college choice, Smith (2001) used social class and socio-economic status as synonymous when writing about poor families, and did not include in his article a definition of either term. Rita Mae Brown (cited in hooks, 2000) created a broader definition of social class and said that class is much more than one’s economic worth and involves behavior. Brown wrote that class is “the basic assumptions, how one is taught to behave, what one expects from one’s self and from others, one’s concept of a future, how one understands
problems and solves them, and how one thinks, feels and acts” (Brown, cited in hooks, 2000, p. 103). Using social class and economic class interchangeably can in fact raise important issue of how one changes when her or his economic status changes. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that about 31.1 million people were poor in 2000, 1.1 million fewer than in 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). John Ogbu (1997) wrote that he doubted whether a middle class American’s being categorized as below the poverty line one year would cause him or her to immediately shift to assume different class values and behaviors or visa versa. Higginbotham and Weber (2001) defined middle class not by economic terms, but by occupation, including in the middle class people whose supervisory and ideologically based jobs have as their functions to control workers’ lives, such as professional, managerial, or administrative occupations. Hence there is great subjectivity involved in defining the poor and the rich and economically defined social classes, except perhaps when individuals are situated at the extreme ends of the economic continuum.

Referring not to economics, but also to attitudes that help define class, Ochberg and Comeau (2001) interviewed 160 college seniors and found that upwardly mobile students in their study reported that their parents were constrained by a working class attitude:

The problem is not just that [parents] do not know how to seize the world and shake it but that they regard as indecent the presumption that one should. In short, upwardly mobile students feel that they have entered a world where people not only have more and know more but one that takes for granted a different notion of character (p. 142).
Here social class is connected to how much one earns and owns, but is also part of one’s way of being, of his or her embodied cultural capital, which the students find the parents lacking.

**Human Capital**

Human capital refers to the ways that human beings invest in themselves through education, training, or other activities that raise their future earning potential (Woodhall, 1997). Coleman (1997) juxtaposed physical and human capital and wrote, “just as physical capital is created by changes in materials to form tools that facilitate production, human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways” (p. 83). This change in skills can therefore increase workers’ range of job choice within the workforce (Schultz, 1977).

From a human capital perspective, a person and what he or she is able to do or produce has value insomuch as what is produced can be exchanged for other types of capital. For example, a person with a specialized set of skills often earns more money than a person without the specialization. Also, human capital is often discussed in loftier, civic terms. Fallon (1997) wrote about the importance of enrolling poor and first-generation college students in post-secondary education to allow the United States to “compete in an increasingly competitive, technologically oriented global market-place. The future of this nation rests on the shoulders of its young people” (p. 385).

Bluestone (1977) critiqued human capital theory and said that within bourgeois economics, competition supposedly distributes workers so that the more skilled earn higher wages. Therefore, those who earn less must be less skilled, since each worker is paid only what she or he is “worth.” “It then follows that the poor must be unskilled,
unhealthy, or lack the proper work attitudes, and that the only way to improve their standard of living is to change them” (Bluestone, p. 335). Massimo Paci (1977) used a Marxist lens to discuss what he called the “scholarization” (p. 341) of the workforce via wide access to post-secondary education, and said that the type of worker most in demand is one who possesses “generic or basic qualifications on which are grafted specific professional specializations” (p. 345). Paci (1977) wrote that human capital theory might be skewed to focus on the credential, that is, the education or training, rather than the skill. He suggested that the formal educational qualifications of new recruits are often higher than those of the recruits replaced, even though the job responsibilities may not have changed significantly. Thus even those with college degrees must receive additional training to fit bureaucratic structures. Within many human capital arguments, the labor market is assumed to be perfect, so that once the human capital of an individual is raised, he or she would be able to rise above low-wage employment or unemployment (Bluestone, 1977).

Bluestone (1977) argued against the suggestion that the poor only need more education, asserting that many of those who suffer from low wages and unemployment have a considerable amount of human capital:

Compared with some workers who have found steady employment in the high-wage industries, these workers have, in many cases, even more human capital, but happen to be the wrong color or sex, to be too young or too old, or to live on the wrong side of town or in the wrong part of the country (p. 337).

Bluestone (1977) focused the human capital argument on demographics external to the individual, and suggested that racism, sexism, or ageism in the workforce might be implicated in a misuse of human capital. When industries move out of communities or
go bankrupt, it is the economic capital which vacates the community. Institutions which support the social capital of the community such as churches, synagogues or civic organizations, neighborhoods, and the human capital, that is, the skills that workers possess and allowed them to be productive in the now bankrupt industry, remain. These social networks and human capital may exist, but in a part of the country where there might no longer be an industry to employ them. Bluestone’s counter-proposition was to focus on industry rather than the worker and he suggested providing economic capital opportunities where social and human capital already exist.

Bourdieu’s Views on Educational Structures

Critical to an understanding of Bourdieu’s use of the concept of cultural capital to post-secondary and other schools is his assertion that schools do not and cannot provide to students the amount of cultural or economic capital required to enable movement from one social stratum to another. Instead, schools can only shore up existing cultural capital that students bring to school—from home. What happens at home he calls the “domestic transmission of cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 48). Bourdieu wrote that inherent in all types of capital is the increased volume of useful time that is made possible through the use of other people’s time and that the best measure of cultural capital is the amount of time devoted to acquiring it. This is because the transformation of economic capital into cultural capital “presupposes an expenditure of time that is made possible by possession of economic capital” (Bourdieu, 1997, pg. 54). Thus families’ time away from work presents opportunities for the collection and transmission of cultural capital from elders to children and students then bring to school the cultural capital that helps them join or cement social groups based on what happens at home.
As integral as acknowledging that Bourdieu (1977) found educational structures complicit in reproducing social and cultural structures is recognizing his assertion that education also conceals its role in doing so. Students who were raised in environments in which college attendance was an embodied requirement of family membership, that is, it was always known that the student would go to college, are at a distinct advantage over students whose families might have seen college as an option, an aspiration, or an expectation. Bourdieu (1977) wrote that one’s ability to appropriate any type of capital presupposed the possession of the instruments of appropriation. He found that elite classes attended theater productions and concerts, and attended museums at higher rates than non-elite classes and wrote: “The inheritance of cultural wealth, which has been accumulated and bequeathed by previous generations, only really belongs (although it is theoretically offered to everyone) to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves” (Bourdieu, 1977, italics in original, p. 488). To use Bourdieu’s theater statistics then, an individual without the embodied cultural capital required to understand an opera could attend an opera, but would gain no cultural capital via the attendance, because she or he lacks the tools of appropriation.

Referring to first-generation college students, Riehl (1994) provided an example of how first-generation college students, although admitted to a college or university, might not succeed as first-generation students, because they “do not have the benefit of parental experience to guide them, either in preparing for college or in helping them understand what will be expected of them after they enroll” (p. 16). Bourdieu (1977) firmly asserted that as prestigious as the diploma might be, or even though it could increase students’ earning potential, the diploma is less capable of guaranteeing access to
the highest positions and is never sufficient to guarantee, in and of itself, access to economic power because first-generation college students do not have the tools of appropriating the cultural capital college attendance could provide. Therefore, to Bourdieu, the college diploma is a weak currency.

Discussion of First Section

Social, cultural, economic, and human capital provided important conceptual frames to this study. Social capital, especially the concept of norms within social capital, provided a compelling question of how the norms of a student’s family or community and the norms of the college environment might interact, complement or compete, as in the case of bell hooks, who held tight to her community’s norms. Bourdieu’s (1977; 1997) use of cultural capital as a realm of elites is a provocative concept within a study on first-generation college students, as we will see in the following section that college is often seen as a “social escalator” (Hossler et al., 1999) for disadvantaged students. Bourdieu, conversely, found the college degree a weak currency in reference to cultural and social capital.

Although solidly a French concept, Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital is directly applicable to contemporary American educational structures. The United States is often considered an educational meritocracy, based on a Horace Mann’s approach to common schooling in which any student with the abilities can become economically and socially successful through education (e.g. Cedric Jennings in A Hope in the Unseen). Although designed as institutions that would bring together the rich and poor, the rich or elite chose to send their children to more exclusive schools, leaving the common schools for the middle and lower SES classes. “In practice, the common school was used to
integrate the immigrant into American society, curb social radicalism, protect republican institutions, and teach those necessary social skills, attitudes and values so necessary for a growing bourgeois culture’ (Karier, 1986, p. 66). This runs parallel to Bourdieu’s (1977) assertion that French educational structures were complicit in reproducing social and cultural structures and concealed its role in doing so.

Economic capital is the most quantifiable of all the forms of capital, and because poor students and first-generation college students are sometimes considered to be the same cohort, the perceived economic benefits of a college degree are important to explore. Tied to economic capital is human capital, because often a “better job” is one in which an individual makes a higher wage and has career mobility. Each of these forms of capital can be exchanged for another, but can also intersect with another form. For example, a college education, a form of institutionalized cultural capital, could allow a first-generation college student to obtain a higher paying job that allows her or him to join an expensive country club to socialize with other rich people. The better job could also be in a town in which the student did not grow up, severing social ties to family and community, or reorienting those social ties over geographical distance.

The remaining sections of this chapter discuss research on first-generation college students. The section begins with an overview of first-generation college students before they enroll in college, or as they “predispose” toward college enrollment. The next section examines the enrollment and perseverance patterns of first-generation college students, including into what types of colleges they enroll, their major selection, their involvement in the life of the campus, and their academic successes. The changes that often occur with family members due to college attendance are also discussed. The
chapter ends with a critique of several studies selected as examples of particularly essentializing depictions of first-generation college students and their families. It was my goal to juxtapose the forms of capital and the literature review in such a way that the reader could experience the literature about first-generation college students using the forms of capital.

The College Predispositions of First-generation College Students

Hossler and Gallagher (cited in Hossler et al., 1999) developed a model of college choice selection with three components: predisposition, or the plans students and families make to prepare for college enrollment, sometimes referred to as the college pipeline; the search stage, in which students search the possibilities for what type and which college they will attend and; the choice stage in which students choose from among those colleges that were possibilities in the search stage. In this section, I will discuss Hossler and Gallagher’s predisposition stage of college selection.

Within the predisposition stage, students’ and families’ aspirations can serve as important motivators for maintaining a family focus on college (Hossler et al., 1999). For example, students who plan to attend a four-year institution would generally need to be in a college-preparatory track by 9th or 10th grade, because of admissions requirements at four-year colleges, such as several years of foreign languages and sequential college preparatory mathematics courses. First-generation students often have lower college aspirations that can affect their college enrollment. Choy (2001) found that first-generation students were significantly less likely to aspire to a bachelor’s degree in 10th grade (46% versus 86%) and even though they had completed all the other steps in the college pipeline, they were a third as likely to enroll in a four-year institution.
An important part of the predisposition stage is taking the required high school courses that colleges require for admissions. Warburton et al. (2001) used data from the First Follow-up of the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) for 1995-1996 and found an important correlation between first-generation status and the chance a student would take a rigorous high school curriculum, noting that in their data set “about one-fifth of students whose parents had a bachelor’s degree took rigorous courses in high school, and just nine percent of first-generation students did so” (p. 4). First-generation college students were also less likely to take upper-level math courses in high school, which might be related to parents’ tendency to be less active participants in important curricular decisions (Warburton et al., 2001). This is important to note because taking upper level math courses was associated with a high degree of enrollment at four-year institutions (Choy, Horn, Nuñez & Chen, 2000; Choy, 2001). Even first-generation students who took advanced mathematics in high school, however, were considerably less likely than second-generation student to enroll in four-year institutions (64% versus 85 %) (Choy, 2001). A 1997 study conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and The Education Resources Institute (TERI) used data from both the Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Education and found other college pipeline deficiencies that could negatively influence the enrollment in college of first-generation students. Comparing first-generation students to their second generation peers, the IHEP and TERI (1997) study found that:

Of first-generation students, only 36 percent aspire to a bachelor’s degree or higher, 45 percent take the SAT or ACT, and only 26 percent apply to a four-year institution. By comparison, 78 percent of students for whom at least one parent has a bachelor’s degree aspire to a bachelor’s degree or higher, 82 percent take the SAT or ACT, and 71 percent apply to a four-year institution (p. 6).
Terenzini et al. (1995) also found first-generation students to have deficiencies in their predisposition stage:

First-generation college students are more likely to have weaker reading, math, and critical thinking skills; have lower degree aspirations; have less involvement with peers and teachers in high school, probably in part because they worked more hours; have more dependent children; have received less encouragement from their parents to attend college and have spent fewer hours studying and more hours working (p. 16).

Duggan’s (2001) research corroborated that of Terenzini et al. (1995) and found first-generation college students deficient in the college predisposition stage. Duggan wrote that first-generation college students reported lower high school grades and a less rigorous high school curriculum and lower scores on standardized tests like the SAT or the ACT that colleges use for admissions purposes.

Hossler et al. (1999) found that parents play the most significant role in shaping their children’s college aspirations, and that aspirations have a direct correlation to college enrollment. Hossler et al. included within their definition of parental support parents saving for college, taking students on college visits, or attending a financial aid workshop as a family. When examining pre-college activities such as filling out forms required by colleges and writing essays, first-generation students receive less assistance from their parents in the application process and are also unlikely to receive help from staff at their high schools (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Choy et al., 2000). Duggan (2001) suggested this might be a social capital deficiency on the part of the family that precluded the student from familial and institutional support in the college application process. However, a 2002 report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance did not find poor families lacking in knowledge about financing
college. The report found that poor students and their parents were as or more likely than higher income students to have received information about financial aid from more than one source.

In a 2002 report entitled *Meeting the Access Challenge* St. John, Droogsma, Musoba, Simmons and Chung cited the “erosion” of the affordability of a college degree as one of the national trends that had and would continue to have an adverse effect on college enrollment for the poor. They wrote:

> for the lowest-income families in 1980, tuition at public two-year colleges represented six percent of their family income. For the lowest-income families in 2000, tuition at these colleges represented 12 percent of their income. Likewise, tuition at public four-year colleges and universities represented 13 percent of income for the lowest-income families in 1980. In 2000, tuition at these colleges and universities equaled 25 percent of their income (p. 1).

Additionally, St. John et al. (2002) suggested a possible cause as to why poor students were more likely to live at home and work more, and suggested what type of support families might “withhold.” The authors wrote that first-generation students could be inhibited from college-going by fear of high debt and they suggested a high correlation between the decrease in the amount of state and federal grants and the increase in loans with which students might finance college, especially since low income families often cannot help repay student loans and the student might also make economic contributions to the family (St. John et al., 2002). An important point within the argument St. John et al. made is that colleges and universities’ have moved from financial based to merit based aid. The authors wrote “in 1981, 91 percent of state financial aid was allocated on the basis of need or a combination of need and academic qualifications. In 1999, 78 percent of state aid took need into account” (St. John et al., p. 4). Here St. John et al. made an
important critical shift from depicting parents as deficient or unhelpful to focusing on universities and state and federal funding agencies as highly implicated in reducing poor and therefore first-generation college students’ access to post-secondary education.

Research from Indiana’s Twenty-First Century Scholars Program (2002) indicated that more than 22 percent of low-income, academically qualified students do not attend higher education, possibly because they cannot afford college even with financial assistance. This intersection of merit and need is startling, and again directs us away from student and family deficiencies to instead interrogate educational institutions. Citing a 2001 report from the same organization, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid Assistance (ACSFA) found that:

The lowest achieving, highest socioeconomic status students attend college at about the same rate (77%) as the highest achieving, lowest SES students (78%). And, even among those high school graduates who are highly and very highly qualified, those with low unmet need attend a four-year college at a rate 43 percent higher than their counterparts with high unmet need—67 percent versus 47 percent (2002, p. 5).

First-generation Students’ College Enrollment Patterns

First-generation college students are often found lacking in the college predisposition stage, but for those who sufficiently complete the tasks within the college pipeline process, where do they enroll? First-generation students are more likely to delay enrollment in college after high school, more likely to enroll on a part-time basis—53 percent, versus 38 percent and are concentrated in two-year institutions: 53 percent attend public two-year colleges and eight percent attend private two-year institutions (IHE & TERI, 1997). Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) used data from the 1989-90 BPS and the 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Study and their findings corroborated those of the
IHE and TERI study when comparing first and second-generation students’ college choice, finding 51 percent versus 37 percent at public two-year institutions and; 15 percent versus six percent at private, for-profit institutions. In fact, first-generation students composed more of the student body at public two-year institutions than either public four-year or private not-for-profit four-year institutions (51% versus 30% and 25%) (Nuñez & Cuccaro Alamin, 1998). Nuñez and Cuccaro Alamin found that students whose parents had any college education were more likely to attend either public four-year (36% versus 20%) or private, not-for-profit four-year institutions (19% versus eight %). Additionally, Warburton et al. (2001) wrote that of the students in their study who attended four-year institutions, first-generation students were much more likely to attend public comprehensive institutions instead of research universities than those with at least one parent who had a bachelor’s degree (41% versus 26 %) (p. v).

**Academic Major and Course Selection**

Some students in Roberts and Rosenwald’s (2001) study corroborated the importance of parental involvement in students’ success at college via negative examples. Parents who had never attended college often asked students when they would join the “real world” or were dismissive of what parents felt were impractical studies like theater or other fine arts courses, or classes or majors in philosophy. At times students felt confined to certain academic majors that families could translate into a career, like education versus philosophy, leaving “little room for deliberate exploration of one’s work possibilities” (Roberts & Rosenwald, p. 111). One student interviewed by Ochberg and Comeau (2001) as part of their mixed method study of 160 college seniors said if he told his father he wanted to study Art History his father would ask: “What kind of job is that
going to give you?” (p. 135). Terenzini et al. (1995) did find that first-generation college students take more courses in technical and pre-professional courses and fewer in the humanities. Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) wrote that first-generation students were more likely to be in certificate (22% versus 12%) or associate’s degree programs (39% versus 30%), and less likely to be in a bachelor’s degree program (23% versus 43%).

First Year Grade Point Average

Brown and Burkhardt (1999) studied 653 first-year students at a large, urban, two-year California college. In their literature review, they found that studies that compared first-generation and second-generation students’ grades at college were inconclusive. In a review of four studies that compared the GPA’s of first-generation and other college students, Brown and Burkhardt found that although some researchers concluded that first-generation students were more at risk academically, that conclusion was not always supported. Duggan (2000) and Warburton et al. (2001) also found that the first year grades of first-generation and second-generation college students were not statistically significant.

Academic Integration

Academic integration refers to how students engage with the curricular versus the social life of the campus. Academic integration was defined by Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) based on a composite of student responses regarding how often students attended career-related lectures, talked with their advisor or a professor about academic issues or plans, or studied with other students. First-generation students were less likely than students whose parents had at least some post-secondary experience to have high levels of academic integration and were more likely to report low levels of integration
(Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Brown & Burkhardt, 1999). Academic integration was cited as very important to students’ perseverance at college. Duggan (2001) found that students who did not meet with an advisor to discuss academic plans were almost 24 percent less likely to persist than were students who often talked with their advisor. First-generation college students are also less likely to perceive faculty members as concerned with student development and teaching (Terenzini et al., 1995). Of all students who dropped out after their first year, those who ended up returning to any college were more likely to have been more academically integrated (Choy, 2002). First-generation students often have less information about the college experience, including important skills in the areas of time and money management and how to negotiate the bureaucratic nature of educational institutions (Thayer, 2000; Hsiao, 1992).

**Social Integration**

Social integration refers to kinds and levels of student involvement with campus life and activities outside of the classroom (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation college students may find college more stressful than do second-generation college students because they have fewer role models or advisors to teach them how to become more socially integrated into the campus community (York-Anderson & Bowman 1991). First-generation students may also delay involvement in the social systems of college until they feel confident that they can perform well academically (Duggan, 2001). Terenzini et al. (2001) wrote that compared to the highest SES-quartile students “lowest-quartile students reported lower levels of involvement with other students, clubs, and organizations, the student union’s facilities and programs, and their institution’s athletic and recreational facilities” (p. vi). Because Terenzini et al. found a
high correlation between first-generation status and lower family income, their results are noted here.

Other components of social integration pertain to where students live, and where and how much they work. First-generation college students were less likely to live on campus (16% versus 40%) and more likely to live off campus (39% versus 19%). They were more likely to cite being able to live at home and being able to work while attending the school as very important reasons for selecting their college, and they were more likely to work full-time while enrolled and to work off campus (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella et al., 1995).

First-generation college students also reported lower levels of encouragement to become involved in the social life of the campus. They were less likely to receive encouragement from friends to continue their enrollment and to attend a racial or cultural awareness workshop (Terenzini et al., 1995). Overall, first-generation students were less likely than other students to have high levels of social integration (17% versus 29%), and more likely to have low levels of social integration (38% versus 19%) (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Retention

Once enrolled in post-secondary education, first-generation college students are at significantly higher risk of dropping out than students coming from families that have some college experience. Thayer (2000) found that students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds were among the least likely to remain in college to complete a degree. Riehl’s (1994) single-institution study found that “first-generation students were more likely to drop out during the first semester, had lower first-semester grades, and
were less likely to return for their second year” (p. 14). Overall, first-generation college
students are more likely to drop out of college than other students (Choy, 2001; Duggan,
2001; Ting, 1998).

Familial Relationships and College Attendance

Hsiao (1992) wrote that “one of the greatest challenges facing first-generation
students in pursuit of a college education is their position on the margin of two cultures—
that of their friends and family and that of their college community” (p. 2). Roberts and
Rosenwald (2001) found that in their study of 15 North Carolina and Michigan students
who were the first in their family to attend college, participants experienced strains in
family and peer relations, feeling trapped between the appeal of the potentials of higher
education and allegiance to family, “the transition point at which students might separate
themselves from working-class families and peers” (p. 94). One student told Ochberg
and Comeau (2001), “By saying, ‘I don’t want this life’ you are telling [parents], ‘What
you have is not good enough for me’” (p. 138).

Several students in Roberts and Rosenwald’s study felt shame or embarrassment
at the class and educational distinctions between their lives and those of professors and
fellow students. One white student told of a paper she wrote on the historical struggle of
African Americans in the United States, for which she received an excellent grade from
her professor. Unsure of what conversations the content of her paper might ignite in her
racially prejudiced family, she chose not to tell her family about the paper or the grade,
an action which distanced her from a potential source of academic support (Roberts &
Rosenwald). Similarly, students in Roberts and Rosenwald’s study did not discuss their
home lives with faculty or second-generation college student peers at college.
The divide between the cultures of home and college could manifest itself in speech patterns of first-generation college students as well. First-generation students often work to tailor their speech patterns to communicate with parents, to guard against the potential of appearing disrespectful by talking “down” to family members, and for fear of being further ostracized. Hsiao (1992) wrote that:

particularly as they begin to take on the symbols of the college culture—be it style of dress, taste in music, or vocabulary—first generation students often sense displeasure on the part of acquaintances, and feel an unwelcome separation from the culture in which they grew up (p. 2).

For example, one student in Roberts and Rosenwald’s (2001) study used the word “eschew” at a summer job site with his father and his father’s work colleagues and was referred to as “eschew” for an entire day, learning his lesson to remain well within accepted vocabulary and social patterns.

Ochberg and Comeau (2001) wrote that students and parents often struggle with the students’ college attendance because parents wonder how college-going could affect their student’s character. London (1989) interviewed one student whose father had been very supportive of his daughter attending college in the predisposition stages of college enrollment, but once she enrolled he became afraid that college would change his daughter too much, that she would “become too different, more independent, more liberal, join a religious cult and become a feminist” (p. 150). Another student in the same study reported that “feminism, lesbianism, questioning [Roman Catholicism], if I got into anything too radical at all, it would in no way be tolerated” (London, 1989, p. 159). A third student said his father would not help pay for college because he did not want his son to become “a bum” (Ochberg & Comeau, p. 137). Ochberg and Comeau wrote that
students may struggle between being self assertive and humble with their parents about issues surrounding college. Similarly, parents may struggle between helping their students be independent and responsible like they are, rather than supporting the student at college in a way that may seem indulgent to the parents. Here it becomes more evident that the parents of first-generation college students have been historically marginalized as peripheral to studies about their children, yet parents are often constructed in the research as a problematic.

Life After College

For those first-generation college students who persevered, graduated, and joined the work force, no differences were found in average annual salaries among bachelor’s degree recipients according to first-generation status (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) and first and second-generation students were generally distributed similarly among broad occupation groups (Choy, 2001).

A college degree also presents intergenerational effects because the children of college-educated parents will recognize the benefits of the parents’ degree (Duggan, 2001). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found great advantages for the children of college-educated parents:

Ample evidence indicates that successive generations and cohorts of students are increasingly more liberal in their social, political, religious, and sexual attitudes and values…thus, it would appear that as children are raised by successively better educated generations of parents who have themselves increased to varying degrees in social and political tolerance, humanitarianism, and sense of civic responsibility, the children’s attendance at college leads to even greater differences relative to grandparents and great-grandparents. (p. 588)

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote that on a number of quality of life indexes, college-educated individuals ranked higher than those without a college education.
Making a distinction between the types of lives college and high school graduates might lead, the college-educated are more likely to:

have better overall health and a lower mortality rate; have smaller families and be more successful in achieving desired family size through informed and effective use of contraceptive devices; spend a greater portion of time in child care, particularly in activities of a developmentally enriching nature (such as teaching, reading, and talking). They also tend to be more efficient in making consumer choices, save a greater percentage of their income, make more effective long-term investment of discretionary resources; spend a greater proportion of discretionary resources and leisure time on developmentally enriching activities (reading, participation in arts and cultural events, and involvement in civic affairs) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 584).

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote that it is difficult, however, to cite college as the key cause in increased life satisfaction because of the financial gains a degree provides, and many of the listed outcomes could not be enjoyed without the money to do so. College graduates also “do not, on the average, express appreciably greater satisfaction with their lives than do those with less education” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 586). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) speculated that college might cause individuals to develop a more critical approach to life and therefore “college men and women may be more sophisticated, skeptical, analytical, and critical in their judgments of some facets of job satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and overall sense of well-being,” (p. 586).

Discussion

Researchers often discussed the importance of college-going using the concepts of economic, social, human and cultural capital to frame their arguments, and implied that students and their families were capital-deficient. College was frequently offered as a remedy for these deficiencies and for those of a greater society as well. Serra Hagedorn and Tierney (2002) wrote that education has long been considered the great equalizer in
the United States and that quality K-12 education combined with college access will “not only benefit the students themselves, but will also benefit society in general” (p. 1). Here the researchers make a strong human capital argument for college attendance, noting the larger, societal benefit. Similarly, Fallon (1997) wrote that not the student, but America would suffer unless first-generation college students were provided with opportunities to attend college. To further explicate the benefits, Hossler et al. (1999) wrote that college graduates both produce and buy more products, pay more taxes and are more likely to vote and less likely to be involved in criminal activities. What Hossler et al. do not speculate is whether people who did not attend college could produce more if given the opportunity as Bluestone suggested, or buy more and pay more taxes if employers paid them higher wages. Are we certain of the benefits of a college education?

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote that the economic returns to a college education are “substantial” (p. 500) and that “social mobility as defined by changes in occupational status and income, is inextricably linked to post-secondary education in modern American society” (p. 369) citing cause and effect between a college education and an increase in earning potential that also leads to an implied move up in social stratum. Serra Hagedorn and Tierney (2002) wrote “a college degree can no longer be considered a luxury, but rather a necessary passport to the middle class” (p. 3). But the question Serra Hagedorn and Tierney do not answer is from where the trip begins. Levine and Nidiffer (1996) helped explain where students might begin their journey to the middle class.

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) described the neighborhoods of the poor with words like “warzones.” They called the protective social institutions in these neighborhoods
“bunkers” and any opportunity to vacate these neighborhoods “escape routes” (p. 10).

Other researchers also marginalize the poor and those without a college degree, often the same cohort. Billson and Terry (1982) wrote about a research sample of 701 first-generation college students and named their study *In Search of the Silken Purse: Factors in Attrition Among First-Generation Students*. First-generation students were presumably the sow’s ear in their metaphorical title, in search of becoming the silk purse through college attendance. When students’ homes are described as “warzones,” and the road to college as an “escape route,” researchers do not often question who might be left in the warzones when the student escapes, and how the student is to succeed in college, knowing that those she loves live in a warzone. Here, I do not romanticize the well-documented cases of poverty that can trounce students’ college aspirations (e.g. Ehrenreich, 2001; MacLeod, 1987) but I also do not believe that poverty is only debilitating (e.g. hooks, 2000). Similarly, researchers take on the role of Henry Higgins when they allude to students as “sows’ ears,” and from Bourdieu we learn to be suspicious of those who believe college can create of them silk purses. From studies that indicate the strain some first-generation college students feel in their relationships with their families, could it be the family members who remain sows’ ears, and therefore the problematic in the analysis of the familial relationship?

In a foundational piece about first-generation college students, London (1989) borrowed his title from the popular movie, *Breaking Away* to describe what first-generation students do when they leave their communities for life in and after college. Must students break away from their families? When the families are presented as living
in warzones or alluded to as sow’s ears, it becomes easier to understand why a first-
generation student might want to break away from his or her family.

Within a constructivist framework that utilizes critical theory and inquiry, important questions about the construction of communities and families must be raised. How do we know that poor communities are warzones? Are all poor communities battlegrounds? And if education is considered the “great equalizer” as Serra Hagedorn and Tierney (2002) suggested, to whom do students become equal, and what become the inequities between student and parent? Between student and the community in which he or she was raised? In Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) metaphors of war, who is left in the bunkers, and what are their perceptions on college?

This chapter worked to juxtapose the research on first-generation college students with the concepts of economic, human, cultural and social capital as study frames with which the former might be viewed. My intent was to allow the reader access to the tools of critique so that she or he might better be prepared to critique my own data analysis and results presented later in this document.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of first-generation college students’ parents’ about college attendance, and how they came to form these perceptions. Why did they think that college was important for their children, if they thought college was important at all? Two primary research questions guided the study:

(1) How do parents view the role and significance of college attendance?

(2) How do families define and exhibit “support” for their first-generation college student in the college selection process and once the student is enrolled?

Research Elements

Epistemology

This study was grounded in the philosophies of constructivism. Schwandt (1994) said that constructivists believe that what is often taken to be objective knowledge and truth is a result of perspective. Constructivists hold that knowledge of the world is not a simple reflection of what exists, but “a set of social artifacts; a reflection of what we make of what is there” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 20). Constructivists are greatly concerned with the dangers of essentializing or categorizing individuals or groups of people as knowable cohorts. A researcher essentializes participants when constructing them as knowable cohorts like “the poor” or “first-generation college students.” This group
classification can also be utilized individually (e.g., he’s a high school drop-out).

Critical feminist Michelle Fine (1994) drew from the work of Edward Said and called this practice “Othering.” Fine said that when we as researchers write about “subjugated Others as if they were a homogeneous mass (of vice or virtue)…we tilt toward a narrative strategy that reproduces Othering on, despite, or even ‘for’” (p. 74). The parents of first-generation college students are often constructed as a problematic in the research about their children. Within this study, constructivism allowed an epistemological shift to view the research about first-generation college students as subjective and constructed from researchers’ biased perspectives. In the Preface, I wrote about my biases to highlight researcher subjectivity within this project. In Chapters Three, Four and Five, I remind the reader that the four families in this study are not representative of all parents of first-generation college students. In short, I encourage a non-essentialized construction of the parents of first-generation college students.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study used as a theoretical framework cultural, economic, human, and social capital. Each form of capital was discussed in Chapter Two. Social, economic, human, and cultural capital were chosen as the study frames because a college education could be viewed as increasing one’s capital in all forms. Parents’ perceptions about the importance of college attendance and parents’ support for their student were analyzed using as a theoretical framework each type of capital.

**Methodology**

This study utilized critical inquiry as a methodology. Critical inquiry is not a set menu of actions or activities that a researcher carries out and then considers a research
project finished (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, I worked to build a methodology that fit this particular project. Crotty (1998) wrote of the types of inquiry born in a critical tradition, researchers find themselves “interrogating commonly held values and assumptions, challenging conventional social structures, and engaging in social action” (p. 157). Black feminist bell hooks (1994) said that interrogation required a persistent questioning of each stage of the research process and reminded researchers that “critical interrogation is not the same as dismissal” (p. 49). hooks’ point is important to this project because I offered a critique of the literature on first-generation college students, but did not dismiss the research as unhelpful in a larger attempt to better understand how first-generation college students enroll and persevere in post-secondary education. Instead, I interrogated my own work, both checking and using my biases as methodological tools in the tradition of critical inquiry. Crotty (1998) wrote that within critical inquiry:

With every action taken, the context changes and we must critique our assumptions again. Viewed in this way, critical inquiry emerges as an ongoing project. It is a cyclical process (better seen, perhaps, as a spiraling process for there is movement forward and upward) of reflection and action (p. 157).

Also central to a critical research project or one that offers critique, is a researcher’s acknowledgment that he or she is positioned and affected by the social constructs within a research project, that he or she has a subjective researcher’s stance, which affects how the researcher understands the world and conducts research. I again refer the reader to the Preface of this document in which I discussed my subjectivity as a researcher.
Methods

Sampling Strategies and Participant Selection

In response to first-generation college students and their families often being constructed as poor, I was intrigued with the question of whether there were parents of first-generation college students who had economic means to send their children to college. I also wondered if some first-generation college students were supported by their parents in ways that researchers did not recognize. I therefore purposefully sampled (Schwandt, 1997) for participants who were not represented in the literature, like families who possessed the economic means to financially assist their children with college costs, or parents who had shown other types of support for their children’s college attendance. Stated differently, this search for participants not represented in extant research projects could be called “sampling against the literature” (Errante, personal communication, autumn, 2002).

I recruited parent-participants who had limited experience with post-secondary education, and who had children currently enrolled in college. Parents in this study had the economic means to help their children with the financial aspect of college and were solidly working class. I use the term working class here because although two parents in this study held office jobs, or what might be considered white-collar jobs, they had “worked their way up” from manual labor positions to become supervisors and managers. Parents were able to help their children financially because of their long-term and meticulous financial planning.

Specifically, criteria for sampling against the literature included (1) parents who have not completed a college degree who live in central Ohio, a geographical
consideration for me; (2) parents that exhibited either financial or other types of familial support for their student at college that the recommender would have recognized when meeting families, (e.g. attending college recruitment events, or otherwise making her or himself known as an engaged parent to college staff); (3) variation in race and/or ethnicity; and (4) little variation in SES between families. Each set of families in this study lived in two-parent, heterosexual households. This was not a deliberate decision to exclude single parent or gay or lesbian households, but was instead a feature of the families who were recommended to me for study.

To solicit participants, I enlisted the assistance of professionals at The Ohio State University who work with parents of first-generation college students. Staff from offices such as Undergraduate Admissions and First Year Experience, Minority Advising Retention Services, Minority Advising Recruiting, and the English Department’s Freshman Writing Program assisted in recommending participants. I sent them formal electronic letters (Appendix A) requesting their assistance in identifying parents who might participate, and I had many personal conversations with staff to better explain my research interests and the criteria for inclusion within this group of families. Several families were recommended as potential participants but were excluded from this study because they were significantly richer or poorer than the families already included in this study; they did not provide variation in race or ethnicity; or their student was not yet enrolled in college. These potential participants were not contacted to discuss their involvement in this study.

The person who recommended the parents as participants contacted the families to gauge their initial willingness to participate in this study before I was given any
specific information about them. In one case, the recommender contacted the first-generation college student about her parents’ involvement in the study. Next, the recommender provided me with participants’ names, addresses, phone numbers and students’ names. I then telephoned the mother or father to introduce myself and explain the research project, and sent each family a letter of introduction that further explained the study (Appendix B) and a list of questions we might discuss in our first interview (Appendix C). After approximately one week, I again called families to ask if they were still willing to be interviewed. In this phone conversation, I asked participants if there were close family members who had attended college. In two families, one of the parent’s brothers had advanced degrees in education, and the parents cited the brothers as advisors to the children in the college selection process. All four sets of parents who were invited to participate agreed to be part of this study, and subsequently, the college-educated brothers were invited and agreed to be interviewed as well.

I chose four sets of parents, a group that included nine individual parents and the two uncles to interview. Because wide variation among study participants was not the goal, I chose participants who could provide rich data for this study. Regarding sample size, there are no “fixed rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry…validity, meaningfulness and insights…have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected” (Patton, 1990, p. 184). Lather (winter, 2001, personal communication) encouraged her students to “do more with less data,” or to recognize at what point a research must stop collecting and begin analyzing data. In fact, these four families provided me with 185 pages of single-spaced data to analyze.
Introduction to Participants

The four families in this study are represented by nine parent-participants: three married couples in which both husband and wife were interviewed, one mother who is married, but whose husband was unavailable for interviews and two brothers of different parent-participants. Table 3.1 introduces participants by name and throughout this document I will refer to them collectively as “participants” or “families” unless writing about a specific family, when I will use pseudonyms. Of the four sets of parents I interviewed, two fathers and one mother have some post-secondary experience, but none of the three completed a degree. One father attended a college for nearly two years and another father for one, both with significant grant-based financial aid, the prevailing reason for their attendance. One mother took a class at a community college within several years of graduating from high school, for which her family paid. The parents attended colleges that are different in mission and in size from the colleges their children attend. In two families, a parent had a sibling who completed both an undergraduate and an advanced degree, and these parent-participants listed these brothers as advisors to the students in the college selection process. I interviewed the two brothers to ascertain how helpful they perceived themselves to be in the college selection and enrollment process. One family was African American and three families were Caucasian. All families lived in similarly suburban homes, with the exception of one family who lived in a more rural setting. The distinctive stories of these families are presented in Chapter Four. What follows in Table 3.1 are the names of the members of the participant families and a brief description:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam &amp; Charlotte Bradshaw</td>
<td>Caucasian couple; own a 3rd generation family business; Sam works as an important set of hands in the daily work of the business; Charlotte works as a secretary at the high school; have two children, Mary and Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Bradshaw</td>
<td>19 years old; first-year student at mid-sized Midwestern, state university studying education; university is 1.5 hours from where her parents live; lives on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Bradshaw</td>
<td>21 years old; second-year student at local community college; pursuing a degree directly related to the family business; completed one year at a private, liberal arts college but did not do well academically; Lives at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John and Cheryl Campbell</td>
<td>Caucasian couple; live in what they call “tornado alley”; John is a supervisor in an industry in which he has worked his way up over 27 years; John attended college for one year; Cheryl works as an aid at a local elementary school. Cheryl took one college course post high school; have two children, Gary and Barbara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Campbell</td>
<td>21 years old; first-year student at a private college known for the strength of its teacher-education program, in which Barbara studies; made Dean’s list her first semester; college is 30 minutes by car from her parents’ home. Lives on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary Campbell</td>
<td>18 years old; high school senior; one of eight valedictorians in his class; student-athlete; accepted a partial merit scholarship at a large, public university in the sciences. University is one and a half hours by car from his parents’ home. Will live on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewart Campbell</td>
<td>Brother of John Campbell. Has an advanced degree in education. John and Cheryl cited Stewart as important to their children’s college selection processes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Description of Participants

Continued
Table 3.1 continued

Garson and Donna Hunter  African American couple; Donna is an administrative assistant; she did not attend college after high school; Garson works 12-noon to 8 p.m. and often on the weekends in the shipping and receiving department of a national company; Garson attended two years of college post high school but did not receive a degree; they have one daughter, Samantha

Samantha Hunter  19 years old; first-year student at a large, public university; on full academic scholarship for racial or ethnic minority students. University is 20 minutes by car from her parents

Tammy and Donald French  Caucasian parents of two sons, Tommy and Carl; Tammy worked her way up to become Assistant Plant Manager at a local factory; Donald has also worked his way from floor worker to an office job; works nights; the couple’s time together is limited and therefore Donald was unavailable for interviews; they have two sons, Tommy and Carl

Tommy French  24 years old; works as a valet and takes courses at a community college one at a time, enabling him to pay as he goes. Lives in his own apartment

Carl French  20 years old; works as a pizza deliverer; is thinking about enrolling in a local, community college; lives at home

Charles French  Brother of Tammy French; has an advanced degree in education; Tammy cited Charles as important to her children’s college selection processes

Data Collection

Interviews

Data primarily came from semi-structured interviews with parents and other family members. I chose interviews as the method of data collection because they allow for “careful questioning and listening…with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested
knowledge” (Kvale, 1996, p. 6). Because the parents of first-generation college students had not been included in studies about their students, I wanted to pose my questions directly to them, and critically follow up on their answers (Kvale, 1996). My approach to semi-structured interviews was to have a sequence of themes or questions to be covered, and also to be open to changes in themes and questions in response to participants’ stories (Kvale, 1996). The interviews evolved into reflective discussions on parents’ views on college, and how they made their views known through actions. My approach was influenced by the view that the qualitative research interview is quite literally “an inter view, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale, 1996, p. 2).

After each family agreed to participate in this study, I scheduled interviews to fit into their very busy work and home lives. Three families invited me to their homes and one family asked to meet at the home of one of their family members, a generous gesture on their part to allow interviews in such intimate settings.

The interview protocol (Appendix C) for the first interview contained three types of questions: how parents advised their child on college selection, changes participants had seen in their student since she or he went to college, and parents’ personal educational decisions. Often participants told me stories that led to unanticipated areas of inquiry. For instance, initial interview questions did not ask parents about their work histories. In the first interview with the first participant, it became clear that her work history and experiences were powerful influences on her perspectives on the importance of college for her sons. I therefore revised my questions to ask each family member about his or her work histories.
The First Interview

During the first interview, I attempted to establish rapport with parents, cognizant of the power dynamic that was present within each interview setting. To build rapport (Lather, 1991) I relied heavily on my own life as a first-generation college student from a working class background, and my close relationship with my own parents, both components of my life that caused participants to become visibly more at ease with this process. I audiotaped each interview, which signaled that the interview was more than a friendly conversation about their children’s lives at college and that I was the doctoral student interviewing people who had little or no college experience. Interviews took place in participants’ homes, except for one set of parent-participants who asked to meet in the home of a family member.

After I transcribed the first interview, I sent the full transcript to each family member for their review, indicating these transcripts were for them to keep and that I would like their comments and suggestion about the content. Approximately one week after sending participants their transcripts, I called three families to schedule a second interview. One family chose to do an extended first interview with the potential of completing a second interview one month later, because of their son’s demanding baseball schedule. Because the first interview was comprehensive, I decided not to conduct a second interview, but instead relied on email and phone communication to gather further data.

The Second Interview

I began the second interview by asking each family if they had responses to the first interview after they had read the transcripts. Responses ranged from feeling it was a
good representation of our conversation, to one participant telling how she spent a great deal of time rethinking whether she had done the right thing regarding the educational decisions she had made for her sons. In all cases, families expressed appreciation about having a written record of the conversation to share with their children. I gave the brothers who had been to college a copy of their transcripts as well, but I did not choose to conduct a second interview with either of them because my interest had been to assess the college enrollment process, which I learned about in the first interview.

In the second interview, I asked questions specific to each family. These were developed after the first round of interviews was completed and transcribed. These interviews were designed to elicit further information from the first interview. Some of the questions were similar for all participants. For example, each family talked about wanting a life for their student that greatly resembled their own lives. I, therefore, asked each family why a college degree was the route to achieving what the parents had achieved, especially since the parents had little or no college education. I once again transcribed the interviews and sent each family a copy of their transcript and made follow-up phone calls and emails to ask if families had any comments about the content of the second interview.

All interviews lasted between one and three hours, the average lasting ninety-minutes. After each interview, I wrote in my researcher’s journal describing themes within the narratives that seemed especially important.

Electronic Mail Correspondence

Electronic mail was an important method of data collection, especially to do more extensive probing with two families. Shoemaker and Kirk (2000) wrote “email
respondents tended to answer more honestly and with fewer social inhibitions than did comparison groups who answered paper questionnaires and/or face-to-face interviews” (p. 5). The authors speculated that more candid responses from participants could be due to the less formal social context of a more formal interview that includes a tape recorder on the kitchen table, in our case. For example, I sent an email to Tammy and asked: “Were you encouraged to join your family’s business?” a question I had not asked in person. Although I phrased the question in a format as a yes or no response, Tammy sent me a 1.5 page, single-spaced, intimate response. She wrote about decisions her parents had made about the business, how those decisions had affected her relationships with her parents and her brothers, and how this family story informed her parenting. This email provided an important written documentation of our communication (Glesne, 1999).

Additionally electronic mail was often an expedient manner for me to pose questions, to fill in holes in the data (e.g. how long couples had been married) and for families with many time constraints, a quick route to answer my questions. The number of emails per family varied, and a father and I exchanged five succinct emails while a mother from a different family exchanged more than ten emails. In these, she often wrote more than one paragraph in response to my questions.

Email is important to the lives of college students (Brackin, Ferguson, Skelly & Chambliss 2000), and I learned that each family had access to the internet and used it as an important method of communication with their children. My emailing family members also differed from views that parents of first-generation college students are poor and have less access to computers and the internet. In fact, one family explained
they often used AOL’s Instant Messenger (IM) to communicate with their daughter at college.

**Data Analysis**

I closely followed Huberman and Miles’ (1994) approach to data analysis including data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. Within data reduction, I chose theoretical frameworks, wrote data summaries, coded and clustered data by themes to select and condense data (Huberman and Miles). Huberman and Miles wrote that data display is the organization and experimental display of data. This can take the form of summaries, vignettes, or diagrams. Conclusion drawing includes the researcher’s work to make meaning from the reduced and displayed data which could be by comparison and contrast, the use of metaphors, a search for negative cases or member checks (Huberman and Miles).

In an attempt to reduce the amount of data, I organized single interview transcripts into themes, ideas and connections and gave each section headings and subheadings. For example, I coded the data “hometowns” when participants discussed their communities and what happened in them. I coded as “guidelines or parameters” the stories that included references to what parents would or would not allow their children to do socially, such as go to friends’ homes if the parents didn’t know the friends’ parents. In these early coding schemas, there was no search for the themes of social, cultural, economic or human capital because I wanted to remain open to other conceptual themes within the data, with the chance they could somehow affect how parents discussed the concepts of capital. For example, a broad coding scheme was “girls and women” in which I sorted data about women and girls’ roles within communities, which ultimately
interacted with both social and human capital. Parents’ stories about work experiences were coded early as “work” and this category later developed into a more specific theoretical category called “human capital.”

With several extensive interview transcripts, I created what I called “redacted transcripts” in which I edited out conversations or stories I thought would not be pertinent to this project, such as discussions about the weather, pets or the best and worst routes to arrive at families’ homes. Because I had manipulated the data by editing out some stories, these redacted transcripts also served as a mode of data display. I then searched across different families’ transcripts to organize narratives between families into broad coding schemes that allowed me to see connections and dissimilarities between different families. With each family, I also coded the family’s narratives by the concepts of social, economic, human or cultural capital, my conceptual frameworks. This allowed me to analyze and organize data, especially as I began to write the analysis section of this study.

Within a tradition of critical inquiry, Crotty (1998) wrote that with every action taken, the researcher must again critique his or her assumptions in an upward, spiraling process. To be consistent in employing a critical approach, I enlisted peer debriefers to critique my work. Peer debriefers were an important component of this critique, and I met with peer debriefers both individually and as a group to present my emerging conclusions. In these meetings I asked peer debriefers to question my analysis, to challenge my assumptions and conclusions and to provide both confirming and disconfirming evidence from their professional experiences working with the families of first-generation college students. They posed new questions to me and of my data, such as “how does college make one happy?” and introduced new metaphors to my way of
thinking about the project. One peer debriefer asked me to think of first-generation college students as fish swimming upstream and wondered what the drag-nets in educational systems were that pulled them from the water. The peer debriefers for this project and their roles are discussed more within this chapter under the heading *Credible Portrayals of Those Who are Socially Constructed*. My researcher’s journal served as an important, personal way to critique my conclusions. Several times I read and reread other researchers’ findings about first-generation college students and looked for similarities and differences with my own work to remind myself that conclusions can often promote the essentialization of participants.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness within qualitative research is often compared to reliability and validity in quantitative studies (Schwandt, 1997). Validity is concerned with findings that accurately represent the phenomena to which they refer (Schwandt). I was greatly concerned with the concept of accuracy, as this was a constructivist project informed by critical theory. What is an “accurate” portrayal if constructivism centers the researcher’s subjectivity in a study? Rather than dismiss trustworthiness as unobtainable, I viewed the search for trustworthiness as a spiraling process of reflection and action (Crotty, 1998) and chose to work towards trustworthiness through the credible portrayal of constructions, or “anticipatory accommodation” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 151), both to be discussed in the following sections.

**Credible Portrayals of Those Who are Socially Constructed**

What is an “accurate” portrayal of research participants and how did I come to know mine was accurate? Participants’ recognition of their lives within the narrative was
an important verification of the trustworthiness of this project. Often called “member checks” (Schwandt, 1997) this is a way to solicit feedback from participants. Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) wrote that critical researchers award credibility only when the constructions are plausible to those who constructed them. After each interview, I sent copies of the interview transcripts to each family, and asked them for their reactions to the content of the transcripts. In subsequent interviews, I asked parents if they wanted to talk further about the transcripts, to add or elaborate on something they said. There was varied interest in the transcripts on the part of participants: one participant told me she read her transcripts several times, and another told me I should give him a deadline to read the transcripts to ensure he did. For the former this seemed like an important endeavor, to the latter it seemed that rereading what he had said was a mundane exercise. Most participants told me it was interesting to read what they had said, but they suggested no revisions.

In addition to sending participants transcripts, I also wrote what I called “family biographies” that later came to be part of Chapter Four. These biographies served as five-page introductions to participants and included demographic information like hometown and number of children and as an introduction to the complexity of family members’ lives. In two families, I read their biography to them and asked for feedback, and in two families I mailed them their biographies. In all cases, I asked them to check for accuracy of facts such as dates, places and names, but also requested that they tell me if they felt the biographies represented how they lived their lives and made decisions about and with their children. All families responded that they were satisfied with these biographies and none indicated that they would like any parts of the documents changed.
I also utilized trusted graduate student and professional colleagues to help me test the research design and my data analysis. Often one or more persons who serve as sounding boards or informal advisors are called peer debriefers. Schwandt (1997) wrote that by sharing evolving description and analysis with peer debriefers, the researcher can move toward a type of consensual validation. The peer debriefers for this study were two doctoral students and a group of professionals who work with first-generation college students and their families. The graduate student peer debriefers were current doctoral students in the Educational Policy and Leadership School at The Ohio State University. Both were familiar with qualitative research methodology. One doctoral student’s dissertation topic is rural students’ college attendance, and, due to the close relationship between our topics, her insight and comments about my analysis were very important. The second doctoral student had less familiarity with the research on first-generation college students. Her fresh approach to my study was especially helpful as she often posed questions that I had not anticipated as a researcher immersed in my data. I asked both peer debriefers to compare my writings about the individual families against what I had written about other families in the study. For example, after they read parts of my analysis I asked them to compare those documents. What did they know about one family they did not know about another? What conceptual themes were present and which themes were missing?

Additionally, after I interviewed three of the four families at least once and transcribed those interviews, I convened a group of faculty and administrators who work closely with scholarly research on first-generation college students or who work closely with students and parents themselves. This group consisted of a professor and a doctoral
student in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership and staff members from the Office of Minority Affairs, the Office of Student Financial Aid, and the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. At this meeting, I presented my initial research questions, demographic profiles of the families in the study, and preliminary coding schemes. I then asked for feedback and direction from this group of experts. I audiotaped this session in order to have a record of these comments and suggestions and listened to the tape again as I performed data analysis.

**Anticipatory Accommodation**

Within the second element of trustworthiness, anticipatory accommodation, researchers reject the notion of external validity (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994) often referred to as generalizability, or the ability to explain some phenomenon across a variety of instances or cases (Schwandt, 1997). The tension within this critical study was to remind myself and my readers that first-generation students and their family members have been essentialized as knowable objects. The challenge was to deconstruct existing research about families of first-generation college students while adding to the knowledge base through the specifics of these four families. Kincheloe and McLaren stated that, “If researchers are to be able to apply findings in context A to context B—then we must make sure that the contexts being compared are similar” (p. 151). Broadly, participants in this study were similar in economic terms, in having little experience with college, in being heterosexual and married, but often they were dissimilar from each other in terms of jobs held and their expressed importance of religion in their lives. These differences reminded me of the dangers of essentializing participants into one category such as the parents of first-generation college students, who are so similar that
they can be treated the same when working to enroll or help their students persevere in higher education.

Researcher reflexivity (Lather, 1991), a tool borrowed from feminist methods, was utilized throughout the study in the form of an ongoing researcher’s journal and informal lunch meetings with doctoral student colleagues and professional colleagues who are noted as peer debriefers in this chapter. These informal meetings helped me sort through how my researcher-self and my first-generation-college-student-self (as discussed in the Preface) intersected in this project. Schwandt (1997) wrote that reflexivity can be especially important to critical researchers concerned that their work might be dismissed as self-serving and to feminist researchers “wary of duplicating androcentric perspectives and race and class bias in their investigations” (p. 136). As discussed, I read research about first-generation college students and compared it to my own work. Where were the similarities? Where were the differences? How were other research projects and my own essentializing and how did they contribute to scholars’ and practitioners’ knowledge of the enrollment and success of first-generation college students in post-secondary education?

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were important to me at all times. All information participants shared with me remained confidential. Only my academic advisor and I saw or heard the names of participants, read or listened to their taped and written transcripts or read any field or researcher notes that included participants’ true names. Each participant reviewed portions of the narrative that I wrote for the analysis section to ensure they were in agreement with the way I wrote about their lives. Procedures for
ensuring confidentiality were stated in a Statement of Informed Consent (Appendix D) that each participant signed as required by The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board. I also told participants that pseudonyms would be used throughout my writing, except in documents they would read that referenced them. Otherwise, their names, the names of their towns, and any references that might somehow make clear their identities would be changed. My log-book, my researcher’s journal, and all interview transcripts were stored in my home throughout the research project. The Statement of Informed Consent also made it known to participants that participation in this study was voluntary.

I also realized that the information the participants told me was very personal, and recognized the risks they were taking by telling me about their family and family decisions. It was important that I treat each family member with respect and remain non-judgmental. I attempted to create an interview atmosphere in which participants did not feel compelled to share more than that with which they were comfortable. I told each participant about the voluntary nature of this project, and their rights to discuss with me only that which they were comfortable discussing.

Summary

My intent as I designed this study was to contribute to existing literature about first-generation college students while guarding against essentializing first-generation college students and their parents as knowable objects, or others (Fine, 1994). I chose a constructivist epistemology and used social, cultural, economic and human capital as theoretical frameworks with which to better understand how parents view the importance of college for their son or daughter. Critical inquiry, as a methodology, enabled me to
acknowledge my own biases within this project and to critique my assumptions about participants and their stories (Crotty, 1998) through researcher reflexivity (Lather, 1991) and the use of peer debriefers (Schwandt, 1997). In the next chapter, I offer a subjectively constructed view of participants’ narratives to analyze but not essentialize the complex lives of those parents and family members who participated in this study.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

bell hooks (2000) said that as a student she chose not to march in graduation ceremonies because she felt too much uncertainty about who she had become because of her college education. hooks held fast to the values instilled in her by her working class upbringing. These values directed hooks’ energy away from the ritual of academic life, graduation, and toward her community of origin, her working class roots. From a higher education perspective hooks’ working class values might negatively affect her success at college. From the perspective of her community, (the people who raised her), hooks remains one of them. As Coleman (1997) said and hooks’ story shows, in a community with strong and effective norms those norms can serve as a powerful form of social capital.

The purpose of this chapter is to present the perspectives on college-going of four families of first-generation college students and how those perspectives relate to the concepts of social capital, economic capital, cultural capital and human capital. The findings are presented first by presenting individual stories of each of the four families studied. Through these presentations\(^1\), I attempt to emphasize stories that revealed how parents came to develop their viewpoints on college. After the four family narratives,

\(^1\) The narratives include generous quotations from the participants’ interview transcripts. I often omitted placeholders such as “like,” and “um,” and corrected grammatical errors when these aspects of the participants’ diction detracted from understanding the meaning of the quotations. Words in italics note a participant’s verbal emphasis on those words. In several sections I portrayed narratives as if they were one continuous story, when in fact the story might have been segmented by my questions, by barking dogs, ringing phones or a participant’s insertion of a story in a subsequent interview.
threads which run through each family’s perspectives are also described in an attempt to make clearer any relationships among the familial stories. These relationships are found in the experiences of their individual upbringings, of their lives as husbands, wives and parents, and their experiences in the workforce.

The following narratives are intended to represent how each family developed and acted upon their beliefs about college attendance. The lenses of social, economic, cultural and human capital were used to organize and interpret the families’ words. The narratives focus primarily on family members’ experiences that provide insight into how opinions on the importance of college were constructed. While analyzing data and assembling what follows however, it became clear to me that the four concepts of capital that guided the analysis were not discrete concepts, but they had complicated relationships with one another. For example, a parent’s wanting her daughter to have a “better life” could mean having a higher paying, less physically demanding job than her parents; living in a more expensive neighborhood and traveling more or meeting people unlike those she knew growing up. This particular example is located at the intersection of economic, human and social capital respectively. I attempt to work with the complications of the intersection of the forms of capital in Chapter Five.

As noted in Chapter Three, one family, the Hunters, is African American and three families are European American. It was important to the design of this study that race or ethnicity not become the prevailing characteristic of these families by default. That is, it was important that the Hunter’s narratives were not compared against the three other families’ stories because of racial differences. Therefore, race and ethnicity were
mentioned only when a parent made reference or when it helped make clearer a family’s perception of college.

The Hunters: I Was Very Strong Minded About Being There for My Daughter

My first interview with Donna and Garson Hunter took place in the kitchen of their home. Their nineteen-year old daughter Samantha sat on a stool at the bar listening to the conversation. The Hunters told me they have made all of Samantha’s educational decisions as a family of three, so it seemed very natural to them for their daughter to listen as they discussed how they made decisions about her college.

Donna has lived most of her life in the state capitol in which the couple currently lives, although she was raised in a contiguous, more southern state until the age of ten. Her husband, Garson, was also born in a southern state and lived there until he finished high school. Although Garson and Donna were both born and spent some of their lives in small, poor southern towns, they have significantly different stories of their childhoods.

When he was five, Garson’s mother died and his father left his five children with family members to pursue work. Garson described the difficulties for him and his four siblings when his mother died:

We all got split up. My grandmother took my baby sister, and some of my other aunts took my other brothers and sisters. And we were all scattered around. We were in the same little town, but we weren’t raised together.

Both of the Hunters became visibly animated when talking about Donna’s family of nine brothers and sisters. Garson’s tone changed from somber to lighter when he told me about discovering family life at Donna’s house:

When I would go and visit her house, I would feel so at peace. You would think a family, that big, there would be a lot of chaos going around the house all of the time. I grew up with my aunt, and myself, and my cousin. There was three of us.
And I would go over to her house, and sit there, and I would be like, ‘I’m in a different world.’ And I loved it! Her mom’s cooking dinner. And her older sisters and brothers stopping by from work to see how her mom was doing. That was pretty interesting to see how a real family would actually do that.

Donna’s mother lives with one of Donna’s sisters, within ten-minutes of the Hunters. With the exception of one brother, all nine of Donna’s siblings live in the same city as she does. Garson and Donna approach parenting their daughter Samantha from perspectives that are deeply rooted in each of their upbringings. Garson told me:

Being raised the way I did and not being with my sisters and my brothers, that made me want to have a closer family even more. To be close with my daughter, because my daddy wasn’t really that close with me. He wasn’t there for me like I would like him to have been so that’s something that I was very strong minded about--being there for my daughter as much as I could.

Although raised in a large, closely-knit family, Donna told me that her father’s death just before Samantha was born reminded her of the importance of family, especially in difficult situations like a family member’s death: “Because even the small family we have, [getting over my father’s death] taught me a lot about not taking anything for granted. And loving. I’m talking about us three. And Deacon (the dog) makes four.”

Donna and Garson met while he worked as an assistant manager and she as a cashier at a fast food restaurant. They laughed through the story of how they met while working at the same restaurant. Donna told me: “I thought he was cute, but I really didn’t like him,” making it obvious she did like him.

After high school Donna told me that her mother encouraged her to think about college but her father did not. A self-described “hot-head” at that point in her life, Donna said she rebelled a bit and dreamed of becoming a flight attendant. Looking back, she had
some regrets about not attending college. She said: “I thought it would be so cool to go to a college, to experience college life at a university. And I never had that opportunity. Because this is the decision I made,” referring to her family. In addition to wanting to pursue a degree in human resources management now, Donna told me that her regrets might have fueled her encouraging her daughter Samantha to think seriously about college.

While working for the fast-food company where they met, Garson attended a university in an adjacent state for nearly two years, sent there by the company as a management trainee. Although he earned a certificate in “managerial skills,” Garson left before finishing a degree. He explained with no sign of regret: “I got a little bored with it.” Instead of regretting past decisions, Garson focused on how his experiences might inform his advice to his daughter. Telling me that there was no one to help him plan for what he would do after high school, he said:

In [names home-state], when you finish high school, you get the best job you can get with the education you already have. A lot of people don’t think about going to college. No one ever asked me: ‘What do you want to do when you finish school? Do you want to go to college?’ That’s what I wanted to do with Samantha. I wanted to make sure that the opportunities were there for her. That’s why I wanted her to go to school--to make something out of herself. And of course, these days now, that’s all you hear: ‘You’ve got to go to college to get a good job, make decent money and take care of yourself.’ Whereas back then, there wasn’t so much of that.

“That’s the end product”

Donna worked as an administrative assistant from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in a state-government agency. Garson worked 12-noon to 8 p.m. and often on the weekends in the shipping and receiving department of a national company. He has worked similar jobs on rotating shifts that included the 12-midnight to 7 a.m. shift. This allowed him to
attend Friday night high school football games, at which Samantha was either on the drill team or in the band. He told me about those important family nights together: “I did love that. I looked forward to that. We’d get home Friday night around about ten-thirty, eleven o’clock, and fall asleep on the couch until about one o’clock, two o’clock in the morning.” Donna added more detail about this important family ritual:

We’d crash, and Samantha is in her drill team uniform (all laugh) and her pom-poms are on the floor. And we’re just a pathetic family. We’d all be sleeping at eleven o’clock. And then one or two o’clock in the morning, we’re going up to bed.

The Hunters told me often during our interview how proud they are of their daughter, who sat silently five-feet away. They talked about her academic accomplishments, and at length about the choices she has made socially and in high school co-curricular organizations. They told me they feel blessed to have Samantha as their daughter, and recognized that their parenting was critical to Samantha’s current successes. Garson said: “I think having good role-model parents is a big step. We don’t drink or smoke or party.” Donna was more emphatic about the couple’s involvement with their daughter:

We didn’t have a lot of money. But we were comfortable. We always did a lot of quality stuff with Samantha. And spent a lot of time with her. And we sacrificed a lot. And that’s the end product (pointing to Samantha). We’re very proud of her. We really are. We instilled a lot of good values in her.

Donna’s mother provided childcare for Samantha until pre-school when the Hunters decided their daughter needed to be around other children her age. Donna and Garson chose a pre-school in which Samantha would not be the only Black child, and one in which she would be exposed to children from other races and ethnicities. They also moved from one neighborhood to another to ensure Samantha would have a similar
experience in elementary school, wanting her to have what Donna called, “the melting pot experience” to make Samantha more “well-rounded.”

“Whatever was hidden in Samantha, she just pulled it out”

Samantha’s grades in her first few years of school were inconsistent, with an especially tough time in second grade due to one teacher who Donna described: “She said so many negative things about Samantha. And she discouraged her. She wanted to hold Samantha back. I felt that she just assassinated her character.” Donna’s tone shifted when she told me about the turning point in Samantha’s schooling that Donna attributes to one particular teacher:

Her name is Nancy Wiggin. And when she got hold of our daughter, everything about [Samantha] changed. The way she looked at school. Whatever was hidden in Samantha [Nancy] just pulled it out. And ever since then, Samantha has received numerous awards for her honors. All kinds of accolades. In the D.A.R.E Program in fifth grade, her essay won. She was Student of the Month, Student of the Year when she went to middle school. Honor Roll student. Lots of awards. Lots of awards.

Nancy Wiggin became such a critical member of Samantha’s education and therefore a part of the Hunter family that Donna and Garson asked her to become Godmother to Samantha.

The Hunters encouraged their daughter to do well academically, but they were also highly involved in the life of the school to help insure Samantha’s success. Donna told me:

We’ve been involved in nothing but the best things for Samantha. We go to everything together. If our schedules conflict, one of us will go. We have always been there for Samantha. We do all the teachers conferences—as a family. And we were involved. I was on PTA. The teachers knew me. The principals knew me. Because they knew our face. And they knew we were concerned about [Samantha’s] education. If there was a problem up at the school, we were up there.
When it was time for Samantha to go to high school, the Hunters were very thoughtful about which school she would attend. Donna laughed as she told me about the family tension as they selected a high school for Samantha, but it was evident from her tone that this was a very serious and deliberate decision for the family:

We didn’t want her to go to Local Public High School. I wanted her to go to either a Christian school, or Private Girls’ School. And she didn’t want to: ‘I don’t want to go to that all girls school!’ I said: ‘You are not going to Local Public High School.’ Because I had nieces and nephews that went there and it was a rowdy school. I said, ‘Oh, no. You will not go. I mean you won’t go. (All laugh). Some of the schools we visited. And we put our name in a lottery. And at that time, you put your name in the lottery, and you move up the list. First come, first serve. And she was always stuck between one and five at Local Magnate High School. And I kind of gave up. Because she was doing so well. And she begged and pleaded with us. I said: ‘Samantha, I’m not letting you go to Local Public High School because we have to start preparing for college. I don’t want your grades to slip.’ She said: ‘I promise. They won’t slip.’ And I backed off. My husband and I sat down and we talked to her and we said: ‘Okay. If your grades slip…(pause), we’re yanking you.’

“They’re adults. Old enough to get into trouble”

When the Hunters talked about how their lives at nineteen years old were different from how their daughter Samantha experienced life at the same age, the couple was surprised at the differences. Donna said:

I look at her maturity level and my maturity level. I was there (holds hand over her head) and she’s like right here (holds hand lower). Because she is given the chance to be a typical teenager. She’s not facing the problems that we had to endure.

Describing themselves as “strict” with their daughter, the Hunters told me that Samantha always had a tight curfew and could not date until she turned sixteen. Donna laughed as she told me about their “family caucuses” to discuss important issues like the time when Samantha wanted to have her first date and her father felt she was too young.
Conversely, Garson told me: “When I turned 18, I was grown, When I finished high school and moved here, I was on my own, and making a lot of mistakes that way though.” Donna added: “I had Samantha when I was nineteen. I was very mature. Looking at Samantha’s life and my life, she doesn’t have the responsibility that I had. I had responsibility as a mother.” As the Hunters talked about the independence and responsibility they had at their daughter’s age, strong social rituals and familial expectations were central to their narratives, rituals and expectations that controlled their actions.

When Garson and Donna began dating, her parents were suspicious of this new man in her life. Donna’s father was especially concerned that Garson was a playboy. To assure Donna’s parents that Garson was not the type of man Donna’s father feared, Garson’s aunt traveled from another state to meet Donna’s parents and tell them about her nephew. Similarly, the Hunters use a modified version of this family story with their daughter, who could not go to the home of a friend until Donna and Garson met the friend’s parents. Donna said insistently: “We had to actually know the parents. You always need to know the family. Even when you’re dating a young man, get to know the family. Get to know who you’re going to be around.”

Although Garson felt “turned loose” at 18 by the aunt who raised him, he said she had strict rules for the children in her house and did not allow him to play basketball until he was in tenth or eleventh grade, and did not allow him to go to proms or parties. Donna told me that her parents had similar rules for their children, but at nineteen, she had a great deal of responsibility as a mother. Although Samantha recently finished her first year at a large state university where she lived on campus, the Hunters were still not
prepared for their daughter to have unlimited independence. Donna told me about her perceptions of life on campus and her ideas for how college campuses should be administered:

The drugs, the drinking, the parties. I know they’re young adults, but I still think that they need guidance. And I don’t think that they should have that much freedom. I really don’t. A lot of the colleges are too loose. And I think the boundaries should be set. And when I go to a university and they say, ‘Incoming freshmen, they have to be in at 12 [midnight].’ That is good. It makes me think that that school is looking after the best interest of my child. And you say: ‘Oh, well they’re adults,’ and I’m thinking, ‘Yeah, right. Old enough to get into trouble.’

“I won’t be able to get to you. Even on a plane”

When it was time for Samantha to choose a college, the selection was greatly debated by Samantha, Garson and Donna. Samantha was interested in attending an Historically Black College or University (HBCU), but her parents were opposed to her attending any school that did not offer racial diversity in its student body. Donna told me:

[Samantha] wanted to go to HBCU schools. This is her choice, but I was kind of like: “Mmm, Mmm” (meaning no). I just liked the melting pot. I wanted her to experience all the different nationalities and races. That’s what I wanted for Samantha. We visited DuBois Historically Black University in [names state] in her twelfth grade year. I was not impressed. And we visited In-State College. I liked In-State College. He [referring to Garson] did not. Because he didn’t want his little girl leaving home. The truth be known, he wanted Samantha right under his wing. DuBois Historically Black university fell through. In-State College fell through on his part. We visited Elite State University. Mmm, Mmm. [meaning no]. Too homogenous. We didn’t like that either.

In defense of his not wanting his daughter to select a college too far from home, Garson added of his daughter who he said was a bit spoiled:

I wanted her to go somewhere close to home. So if she would have any kind of problems, we could be there a little quicker. You know, help her deal with the
situation. Knowing her, there was going to be some situations. (Samantha laughs). There would be some situations. I knew that.

Samantha chose a large state university located in the city in which the Hunters live. Because of her high school achievements, Samantha received a full scholarship designated for racial and ethnic minority students. Samantha did not send her acceptance letter to the university until nearly the day on which it was due as she was still unconvinced the large school was the best place for her. Her mother encouraged her to attend the college on a trial basis, especially because of the scholarship:

I told Samantha: ‘If a person is going to pay your way, (pause) there’s nothing in life that is free. Why don’t you give them a shot for one year?’ ‘I don’t want to go to that school. It’s too big. I hate it. It’s too big. There’s too many people. I don’t want to go!’ (Samantha laughs as her mother impersonates her). I said: ‘Samantha, go for one year. And then we can you sit down and evaluate the school. You can’t evaluate it based on hearsay.’ None of her friends wanted to go to Local State University. They all went to schools where they had to pay twenty-four thousand or twenty-six thousand dollars a year.

Although Donna stressed the opportunity inherent within Samantha’s full scholarship, she also wanted her daughter close to home so Donna and Garson could provide advice and assistance when needed. Donna stressed the importance of a college near by telling Samantha: “I can’t get to you if something would happen. I don’t want to speak anything negative into your life, but if something does happen, I won’t be able to get to you. Even on a plane.” Samantha did have a difficult time adjusting to college her first year, and often called her parents crying, wanting to leave school. The Hunters would not allow her to leave after such a short time. Donna told her: “You’re not a quitter. You’re going to stay right in there.” Samantha recently finished her first year at college, and is looking forward to returning in the fall.
“This is a different world we live in”

The Hunters were both very committed to their daughter’s attending college, although they said that if Samantha told them she did not want to go, they would have accepted it, acknowledging: “Sometimes college is not for everyone.” It was clear that college was for their daughter, especially from Donna’s perspective. Donna told me they insistently sent the message to Samantha: “You’ll go to college.” Because of Samantha’s excellent grades in high school, the Hunters were certain she would receive financial assistance at the college of her choice, and were prepared to help with family savings, loans or a taking a second job if needed. For Donna, a college degree would provide Samantha a credential which society demands from its workers. Donna told me about the advice she provided to her daughter. It was in the form of her own experience:

This is a different world we live in. You used to be able to make it on a high school education. I think I did well, but I could have done better. That piece of paper validates you, according to them. You’re viewed differently having that piece of paper. I feel it opens up a whole new field of opportunities. With the degree, you can explore all of your options. Do you really need it? I’m not going to say you’ve just got to have it, but why not go for it all? The sky is the limit. So why not be comfortable? I always tell Samantha: ‘You have to work. Pick a job you’re going to like doing and pick a job that’s going to pay well.’ If you can make ten bucks an hour or fifty bucks an hour, and that piece of paper is the only thing that’s separating that salary, why not go for it? I sit back and think: ‘Ooh, boy. Just think if I’d of had a degree.’ But then the degree doesn’t make you. You make the degree. It’s what you bring to the table. That piece of paper. That’s your trump card.

Garson had a different perspective. He was excited about the opportunities college would provide his daughter, but he was not as emphatic as his wife about the importance of college. He told me: “I want more for her than what I had, as far as education. I think it’s good for everyone to have different options and opportunities, to travel more, see different things.” But he also added: “It’s the type of person you are
that’s going to make you do good things. I feel I’m a good person. I know right from wrong. I know how to treat people.” Garson advised his daughter:

You do the best that you can do. That’s all. As long as you do your best, good things are going to happen for you. I’m always going to be proud of you. You show me the effort, give me the effort, the best you can do. That’s all I can ask from anyone. Keep that in mind, and you’ll be fine.

The Campbells: Life in Tornado Alley

When I called to arrange an appointment to interview the Campbells, Cheryl told me that the interview would probably have to be late in the evening or on the weekend because her husband John often worked from early morning until “dark-thirty.” Because he worked in an industry dependent on weather, Cheryl said: “He has to make hay when the sun is shining.” We scheduled the interview for 7:30 on a Thursday evening and John arrived home from work only minutes before I arrived at their house.

Both John and Cheryl have lived most of their lives within seven-miles of Middletown, the county seat, although Cheryl was raised in an adjacent town. Middletown is roughly 1.5 hours by car from the state capitol. Both Cheryl and John’s parents lived less than 10 miles from where the couple resided. A town of roughly 27,000 residents, Middletown had the misfortune of having been hit with tornadoes in 1974, 1989, and 2000. When I asked the couple to talk about their town and their experiences living there, much of the conversation focused on what life was like in a community that had been damaged and rebuilt several times in their lives. John’s youngest brother Stewart also grew up in Middletown, and he also told me about the tornadoes as a way to understand life growing up: Oddly, [the tornadoes] have impacted me in many ways. Dark clouds still scare me and I’m 33 years old.” In 1974, 33 people
were killed and the Middletown high school was destroyed. Middletown students were bussed to another town where they shared a high school with that town’s residents, taking their classes in the late afternoon and evening. John remembered coming home from college and driving through town with his father in 1974. He said there was “stuff turned upside down. Everything was being lit with generators. You’ve got all these diesel engines running and there’s smoke hanging in the air. And we drove through town. It was really, devastating.” Because of tornado threats, Cheryl kept the couple’s wedding album and pictures of their children in the downstairs bathroom because this room served as their tornado shelter. She said: “Any time the weather gets a little bad or whatever, I’ve got everybody in the bathroom. We’ve got our flashlight. We’ve got our telephone.”

Although the 1989 and 2000 tornadoes were not as catastrophic as the first, John told me: “You know--you feel like you’re sitting in tornado alley.”

“I want my children to not be afraid of people”

The Campbells had two children, Barbara and Gary. Cheryl and John decided when they married that Cheryl would stay at home with their children until Barbara reached fifth grade, making what the couple called “sizable financial sacrifices.” Cheryl then worked at her children’s school to be close to them. Cheryl has been very involved in her children’s school lives, having been a “track mom,” a “band mom” and often a chaperone on school field trips. Their son Gary was less interested in having Cheryl be involved in his co-curricular activities because Cheryl said: “In sports, moms are not cool.” Gary’s wishes not withstanding, it was evident that Cheryl and John were highly involved in their son’s life. Our first interview began during baseball season and they told me that it would be at least a month before they could conduct a second interview, unless
I brought a tape recorder to the dugout, where John sat. Within that month Gary played and John and Cheryl Campbell attended 30 baseball games.

John and Cheryl chose to live in Middletown because it is more racially, ethnically and economically diverse than surrounding towns in which they might have lived. The Campbells are White and told me that after they were married they asked themselves: “Where do [we] want to raise kids? I don’t want to raise them in [Cheryl’s hometown] because I want my children to be able to go out in the world and not be afraid of people.” But Middletown has not always been as ethnically or economically diverse as the couple believe it to be currently. John told me how the town was segregated by race and by class in the 1950’s and how vestiges of segregation remain:

There was a time when you could take Middletown and make a cross out of it, and you could tell just exactly where everybody lived. Professionals lived on the north end of town. The Blacks lived on the east end of town. The blue collars that commuted to [names town] and worked factories lived on the west end of town. And the south was kind of a mixed bag. We started out on the south end of town. It’s not that way anymore. But the majority of people that are doing blue collar work live on the west side of town. Here was the line and nobody crossed it. There were two high schools. Roosevelt High School was a Black high school. They had a Black elementary school, a Black junior high and a Black high school.

Although Middletown residents were still stratified by class, John and Cheryl believed the community has evolved into a more racially and economically mixed town. Cheryl was especially satisfied with Middletown when she compared contemporary Middletown to her hometown. Cheryl said proudly:

My kids aren’t afraid of anybody. My children have a diverse set of friends. They range from people who look just like them to different races, different cultures. They’re very comfortable with it, and they’re teaching me how to be comfortable with everything. Gary’s best friend is Black. I mean, his best buddy in the whole world, and he’s like one of my own sons. Now, if someone had told me in high school that I’d, I’d a laughed and said: “Yeah, right.” It’s not what I grew up with. And I wanted my children to be very comfortable with people. And I feel like you
can get that here in Middletown, because you will run across *everything*. From rich to poor, from Black to White. Anything. I like the community. My parents raised me to be comfortable with people. But when you don’t *grow up* with it, what can I say? It’s hard.

The couple’s commitment to the diversity of Middletown schools is important to note. Middletown schools are currently categorized as on “academic watch” according to standardized state assessment, but John and Cheryl felt comfortable with the school system partly because of the diversity of the student population. Cheryl said: “You can’t function in the world if you don’t know how to get along with people.”

“The dinosaur of the division”

John attended college for a year. He left home when he was 17 to study engineering at a small private college in an adjacent state, but a combination of John’s grades, finances and the 1974 tornado caused him to drop out. Once back in Middletown, John convinced a Middletown company to take him on as a co-op student, although he was no longer affiliated with a college. During the period of 28 years, he worked his way up to a senior management position. After “getting tired” of public sector work, he took a management position at a private company that contracts projects with the state. John described himself as professionally successful, but realized that his industry was moving to hire more staff with college degrees. In fact, several people that reported to John had degrees, and he told me that often people who know him professionally assume he has a technical degree. When I asked him if he thought his children could follow his professional path, John was doubtful:

I think the environment’s different. First of all, I’ve told both kids that if they followed me into [this] industry, I would be very disappointed. [This] industry is probably one of the last industries that more and more look to college-degreed people. I’m not talking about laborers and operators, but I’m talking about
management people. Everybody that works for me has got a degree. I just happened to hit the industry at the right time, before the emphasis was made. When I’m hiring project managers, I’m looking for a degree. I call myself the dinosaur of the division. I’ve just been fortunate. And I don’t think those opportunities are as available as they were thirty-years ago. I’ve been in [names industry] for 28-years.

During high school, Cheryl wanted to be a cosmetologist, but her parents encouraged her to attend secretarial school so she would have a means to support herself if she did not “find a husband,” and because Cosmetology school would take her out the high school environment to a vocational school setting. She told me about her mother’s reasoning:

She didn’t want me to get away from the high school to lose the atmosphere of the football games, the basketball games, the camaraderie of high school. When you went to the [vocational education center], you pretty much were dropped out of the loop. A lot of kids who went to vocational school just kind of dropped out of the social life of the high school.

Cheryl started a specialized track her junior year of high school that focused three periods a day on secretarial skills, with the option of doing a co-op in an office at some point during the year. Because this was her parents’ wish, she told me: “I went kicking and screaming down the secretarial path.” Cheryl worked as a secretary in a law firm, and later a different company. While at the latter job, her mother encouraged her to attend a college accounting class in an adjacent city. Cheryl was unwilling to attend because she felt uncomfortable with what the city offered: “I’m thinking, ‘downtown, big city.’ I didn’t know those kind of people. And they scared me.” The college offered the class at a satellite campus in the local high school, which Cheryl attended. After taking the final exam of her first college course, Cheryl met a group of high school students as she exited the building. The high school students commented that they thought it was nice that
Cheryl and her classmates had returned to school to take courses toward a GED. The fact that the students could not discern that Cheryl was a college student and not a high school drop out was a very negative experience for Cheryl and she ended her college career that day, a decision she said she regrets. She remembered thinking:

‘I’ll be danged if I’m getting my GED, dear. I am going to college. It’s a night class.’ And that was it. People did not know I was in college. They thought I was getting my GED and I was totally insulted by that. And I never went back to school.

“All we ask is that they do their best”

Barbara was majoring education at Regional College,¹ a college the Campbells told me is known regionally for the strength of its teacher training program. Cheryl told me: “You talk to anyone that’s in education, and they would like to go to Regional College, but they can’t afford it because it’s a private college.” They were especially pleased with Barbara’s curriculum because their daughter spent time each semester in public school class rooms, observing and working in a professional setting. Barbara made the dean’s list in her first year, a feat about which her parents were very proud. Cheryl said: “It was worth the extra money to send her to the smaller school and have a success story than spend less money. Maybe she would have continued, maybe she would have dropped out.” Regional College is located within an hour of the couple’s home, and their daughter often came home on the weekends. Proximity to home was an important part of Barbara’s thinking when she chose Regional College. Cheryl told me: “The criteria was—she wanted to be able to come home if she wanted to—but far enough away for that college experience.” John’s youngest brother Stewart was the first in his family to attend college, and Stewart was also interviewed for this project as a potential advisor to

¹ Tuition, fees and room and board at Regional College are $24,172 for the 2003-04 academic year.
his niece and nephew about college. Stewart told me about Barbara’s college selection process and his advice that she visit a wide range of colleges before making a choice: “[Barbara] applied to one school, and I’m not even sure when the first time was she was on that campus. It may have been at orientation was her first real time on campus.”

Gary was a high school scholar-athlete, playing both football and baseball, and graduating as one of his class’ eight valedictorians. Because of his athletic and academic schedules, Gary had never held a job. His father told me about Gary: “He’s not very employable.” Gary chose to attend a large, public university,\(^1\) Local State University in the fall. Cheryl told me that when their children were preparing for their freshman year of high school the couple told them: “They either have to have a trade or go to college. We preferred that they go to college.” From other stories the couple told me, it was evident that college conversations started much earlier. Cheryl said that Barbara dreamt of becoming a lawyer in third grade, and Cheryl told her that to be a lawyer she would have to go to college. Similarly, when Gary was a child he was fascinated with knowing how things worked, so Cheryl remembered thinking he might be well suited for a career in engineering. About K-12 and post-secondary education, Cheryl said:

> All we’ve ever asked our children to do is do their best. I don’t care if it’s a C or a D. If it’s your best effort, then I’ll celebrate that C or D. But we’ve never told them they have to get A’s. I’m not going to spend my life angry at my kids. If they’re not going to do it, they have to face it. And they both have given us their best effort. We just generally said: ‘We want your best. Accomplish it however you can accomplish it.’

When I asked the couple what they would have said or done if their youngest child Gary decided not to attend college this year, John told me: “I don’t know what we would have said. I guess it would have depended on what he wanted to do. Since we

---

\(^1\) Tuition, fees and room and board at Local State University are $13, 128 for the 2003-04 academic year.
haven’t dealt with it, I don’t want to answer it.” Cheryl answered with a story about Gary during which she became very animated:

He comes in about six weeks ago. He goes: ‘Mom, Dad. We’ve got to talk.’ I hate it when the kids say this. This is not good. When they want to talk to us, it’s never a good thing. He said: ‘I don’t know how to tell you this. I’m just going to tell you.’ I’m thinking: ‘Oh my God. He doesn’t want to go to school. What are we going to do? How are we going to handle it?’ I’m going off the deep end. And he goes: ‘I’ve changed my mind about going to school for Engineering.’ And I couldn’t breathe. I’m thinking: ‘How can you be this intelligent and not want to go onto school?’ That’s all I heard: ‘I don’t want to go on to school.’ I would probably be very disappointed, just because he is so intelligent. ‘Why would you waste that brain?’ You know, just to do, nothing wrong with menial work….

At this point, John challenged Cheryl’s statement that if Gary did not attend college he would be wasting his intellect:

How do you know he’s wasting his brain? Just because he doesn’t want to go to college? You’re making an assumption. There are lots of professions in this world that don’t require a college education, and people are successful. I guess you have to set your sight on what you think you want to do, and if you are driving a refuse truck, then drive a refuse truck. We have always hoped that that’s not exactly where the kids wanted to go.

John and Cheryl wanted their children’s attending college, but John was more willing to allow that their children might not finish college and he was skeptical that either Gary or Barbara could follow his career path without a college degree. Cheryl was emphatic that college was a route to escape from manual labor. She said:

I don’t want them to have to do physical, hard, backbreaking work. I want them to work hard. I just don’t want them to be where they physically break their bodies down by working. Like maybe our grandparents did, or our parents did. I don’t want that for my children. And if he had chosen not to go to college, then he would have pretty much said to himself that he was going to have to work hard. Now, if that happens to them, will I be disappointed and disown them? Oh, no. They’re still my kids. And I’ll love them for whatever. But, am I going to encourage them to do that? Oh, no. I’m going to encourage them to the easier of the physical work. I’m going to encourage them to go that way. And you look at the financial aspects of the world, and let’s face it. Things are getting unbelievably expensive. And working at McDonald’s, or digging ditches, or
working on a refuse truck. Not high paying jobs. And I would also like for my children, when they raise their family, to be able to opt that one parent can stay home. I don’t care which one stays home, but have one parent stay home.

John added with a sense of relief: “It’s not been an issue like: ‘By God, you are going to go to college and you’re going to do this.’ I think it’s something that they’ve both wanted to do.”

“There are an awful lot of ways of measuring success”

Cheryl and John were committed to helping their children pay for college. When they talked about helping their children with the financial aspect of college, they told me how their parents had helped them in the past and continued to help them. Cheryl said:

My parents will just surprisingly show up with a few different things, you know some groceries or whatever. [John’s] mom and dad will say: ‘We have a lot of extra dinner. Why don’t you guys come over and eat with us tonight?’ So we try to tell the kids: ‘no matter what--we’re here. Lean on us if you need to lean on us, and stand on your feet if you need to stand on your feet.’

Both Gary and Barbara received merit based financial aid from their colleges, and Cheryl and John have created guidelines about what type of direction and other assistance they would provide regarding the unmet financial need. John said:

I don’t think we really had parameters on where they went or what they studied. Really the one big parameter was living on campus. The rest is up to them. Barbara’s at a semester school so mom and dad are participating in eight semesters. She has loans. Gary gets twelve quarters. Gary will have loans when he starts. Because we wanted them to have a vested interest in their education. If he’s not done in twelve quarters and she’s not done in eight semesters, they’re going to have to finish it their own. Now that’s a tremendous threat that probably won’t be a reality. And it’s just like Barbara with loans. Her loan rate was a lot cheaper than what I could get. We have held her loans down, considerably. Compared to what we could have done. But I wanted them to understand that she had a vested interest, so she could get done, so that if she quit someplace in-between, she understood that six-months after she graduated or right after she quit, she’s going to have to start paying that back. There was probably a little threat to continue.
Although committed to helping their children with the costs of college, Cheryl and John were doubtful of the economic rewards of a degree. John said:

I shudder to think, that if you add up eight years of tuition, this house would be paid for. But, that’s a decision that we decided we wanted to make. If it helps them out, that’s fine. [Barbara’s] going to graduate with fifteen thousand dollars in loans and go take a twenty-three thousand dollar or twenty-four thousand dollar teaching job. Now, economically that makes absolutely no sense. Will mom and dad help? Sure. I haven’t told her that. And I don’t plan on telling her that either.

When I asked why a college degree was important for their children, especially since Barbara had chosen an expensive college and to enter a profession that was typically underpaid, John told me: “A college education is expanding your horizons, making you think, as far as the educational process goes. But there’s a there’s a big social aspect too. I think that maturity process is something that you can’t replace.” Cheryl added that parents always want their children to have a better life than they had. John agreed:

There are an awful lot of ways of measuring success, but if you’re going to measure it the way we’ve kind of done it, then you know, going beyond where Cheryl and I were educationally is going to be a measure of success.

The French Family: I Think the Smaller Town Keeps You More Yourself

Tammy and Donald French recently celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Both have lived their entire lives in Waynesville, a town roughly 40 miles from the state capitol. A drive through downtown Waynesville conveyed that it was once an important mid-western industrial town, with its enormous mansions-turned-apartment-buildings overlooking the town center of mostly empty, brick-factories. Charles, Tammy’s brother told me that contemporary Waynesville holds nothing for him:

It was an industrial town and then when a lot of the industry died out, Waynesville kind of died too. It’s very quiet now. It was featured in <names national publication>. Its fiftieth anniversary issue was all about Waynesville, because it’s the most average town in the U.S. But it’s a typical mid-western
town, it’s a nice place to grow up. But I wouldn’t want to live there, because there’s just not anything there.

Tammy raised her two sons Carl and Tommy, now 20 and 24 years old, in Waynesville, and she had a different perspective on the community. She talked at length about how she often sees familiar faces at the grocery store or at the mall and she especially liked that people she has known her entire life stop and say hello to her. Within the past year, another of Tammy’s brothers, Earl, died of a long-term illness and she told me proudly that there were people at the funeral she had not seen since childhood, but who came to pay their respects. When comparing her life in Waynesville to what she thinks life might be like in a bigger town or city she said:

I think you can get so far away from what life is about. Everyone’s trying to impress everyone else with their clothes, their cars. That’s what I see in the bigger towns. They don’t take the time to stop and say hello. I like a small town. You’ll see people and they stop and they talk. And the fact that you can stay kind of down to earth and in touch with reality. When I go to New York, it’s almost too much to imagine. You see these big Broadway plays and all these people, and it’s like: ‘Oh my gosh, do people really live like this?’ But I think that’s just more a show thing. Everybody can’t afford that all the time. They’re so afraid that everyone’s going to see that they don’t have a bunch of money. That doesn’t bother me. If they know I don’t have a lot of money, that’s the truth (laughs). I don’t care if anybody thinks that of me. I want Tommy and Carl (her sons) to be like that too. To just be themselves. I think the smaller town keeps you more yourself.

Tammy and Donald have both worked in factories their entire work lives. Donald has worked at his current company for more than 14 years, starting in the warehouse, and then moving to an office job. He worked primarily the night shift. Because of discrepant work schedules, the couple’s time together was greatly limited and, therefore, Donald did not participate in interviews. Tammy was very close to her brother Charles, the first in his generation to attend college. As a potential college advisor to the boys, Charles was also
interviewed for this project. Tammy was the Assistant Plant Manager of a factory and has worked at this locally owned, third-generation family business for 29 years. Several years after high school, Tammy started as a front-line worker and received promotions until she reached her current position. In a strong economy, this has meant supervising the work of as many as 150 people. She explained in detail that she planned how she would rise to the ranks of manager. At times she did not associate with other factory employees because she felt they were not serious about their responsibilities:

I wanted to move up in the company, so I did. I just kept doing different things, and learning different things and applying for different positions and I just kept moving up. Some people had worked there ten to fifteen years and [I] would ask them: ‘What style are you working on?’ They didn’t have the slightest idea what they were even doing because all they did was come in and do a job. But when I came in and did it, I came in and learned the job. And that’s what I wanted to do because to me, that was a career. That was a way to support my family by doing the best I could and hopefully, hopefully get in a better position.

Tammy told me about the day she was promoted to Assistant Plant Manager:

The President of the company called me in his office and said: ‘I just want you to promise me one thing.’ He really said this, he said: ‘I don’t want you to ever let this go to your head.’ And I said: ‘It never will.’ And then I went home and told my dad about it. And he was excited about it, but I’ve always remembered these words. It kind (pause) of knocked me back down to earth a little bit. Because you get kind of a big head when you think: ‘Oh [the owner] thinks I’m really something.’ And I told my dad: ‘They asked me take a supervisory position.’ He said: ‘That is so good. I’m really proud of you. But now you’re going to get a chance to see what it’s like on the other side.’

“On his own, by himself, and without much support”

Tammy’s father founded and owned a successful automotive repair company in Waynesville. His work ethic and what he accomplished greatly informed how Tammy lead her life and how she advised her sons about work, college and money management. Tammy’s grandfather died when her father was sixteen, forcing her father to quit high
school. He married at eighteen and Tammy was especially proud of her father’s ability to create a thriving business with little or no guidance. As she told me about him, she emphasized that he achieved remarkable things, “on his own,” “by himself,” or “without much support.”

I remember his first little shop actually had a dirt floor on it. And he just kept going up and going up. And he taught himself everything. There’s no doubt in my mind today he would probably have one of the biggest shops in Waynesville now if he were still alive. He was never afraid to do anything. He got his pilot’s license. Then he got a boat. He learned how to navigate and chart courses on the lakes. And I always thought that was so neat for somebody that really didn’t have very much family support growing up. Not at all. He did it all his own.

At one point during our interviews, Tammy told me a story involving her father, a man not prone to complimenting his children:

I was sitting there when I was little, playing with this little sewing machine. And I didn’t know how to get it together. And I sat there until I got that thing together. And he goes: ‘You know something, that took a lot of determination. You didn’t stop until you got it together.’ And that meant so much to me. It’s always made me think: ‘I’m not going to stop until I do it.’ And that’s always given me the drive. Even now, I’m going to do it. I’m going to go out and do it.

Although Tammy had very fond memories of her father who died when she was in her early thirties, she said that she received no parental encouragement to attend college until her father was very sick, when he offered to pay for her college costs. However, when the offer came, she had two children, a husband and a full-time job and felt that college could not fit into her life. She told me:

At that time I had two kids. I had responsibility. I couldn’t just say, ‘Oh, okay, I’m going to go off and go to college now.’ I felt my first priority should be taking care of them and I only felt like I could if I worked.

Tammy did tell me within the context of the same interview, however, that if she had her college decisions to make over again, she would have gone to college.
Tammy struggled with how to advise her sons about work and college. Although she constructed a career in an industrial town, this was less of a possibility for her sons Tommy and Carl. Tommy was enrolled at a local community college, taking business courses one or two classes at a time and working as a valet to pay his tuition and for his apartment. According to Tammy, he wanted to become involved in the music industry, but she didn’t know how to advise him in that arena, and she hoped that the classes he took would help him. Tammy described her other son Carl as somewhat confused when it came to career plans. He lived at home and worked delivering pizzas. She asked Carl about jobs: “Do you think you would be happy with that the rest of your life? Do you think that would make you happy? Will you find satisfaction in that?” But Tammy realized he might not select a job in which he will stay until retirement: “Maybe he might start into real estate and then once he gets into real estate that would expose him to something else.” It was very important to Tammy, as a mother, that she not control or force her sons into jobs or higher education, but guide them instead. She said:

I think if I control them, it limits them. They can’t get their feet wet. Not that I want them to make a mistake, but if they don’t, I don’t think they’re ever going to learn. I just want them to always know that I trust them.

“If they control you, that keeps you where they want you”

Tammy’s perspective about the importance of college for Carl and Tommy was deeply rooted in her own work experiences at a factory which has downsized its workforce by two-thirds in the past three years, having more of their products assembled abroad. The factory was in jeopardy of closing, leaving Tammy without a job. She said:

When I was growing up, it probably wasn’t as important to get a college degree because there was so much manufacturing in the United States, where all of that is disappearing now. I think it’s all like service-type thing now or people working on

97
computers or office jobs--much more so than I was growing up. There were so many big name companies. All those places were around for people to go to. They’ve pretty much dried up now. That’s all gone off shore. That’s pretty much what’s happening to our [company.]

Tammy often referred to the plant as a source of continuing frustration for her, and a negative example of how she wanted her boys to experience life. Tammy told me about her work:

People like to control you, and I think that’s a lack of respect or maybe a sense of fear that you’ll accomplish something more than they can. And if they control you, then that keeps you where they want you.

For Tammy a college degree allowed an individual job mobility. Although she was confident in her work abilities, she saw a degree as a credential, a critical component of success in the modern day workforce. Tammy told me how she and people at work view a degree:

Where I’m working now, they don’t really have a lot of appreciation or respect for what I do. I don’t think they do. I’ve even heard people make comments off in the distance: ‘What’s she going to do? She doesn’t have a college degree. She’s stuck here,’ is basically what they’re saying. I have the experience and I can do anything I want to do. Anything I set out to do, I think I can do it. But, if I had that degree, I think that would be better leverage for me to go in there and say: ‘I want a raise,’ and they would look at me and say: ‘You know, she’s got that degree. She can go somewhere else.’ That’s where I think that really helps you.

According to Tammy, this leverage allows a college graduate to negotiate with an employer for promotions and higher pay, presumably because the college graduate could leave one job and find another easily. Tammy was once told by her supervisors that she would receive a two thousand dollar raise to make her salary comparable with men working at her level. She recognized that sexism played a role in her being paid less than her male counterparts, and in her never receiving the two thousand dollars promised her. When she told me why she doesn’t confront her employers, she said: “I’m kind of afraid
Consequently, Tammy wanted her sons to realize more job mobility than she did. She told them:

I like my job, but I know that without a degree, there’s only a certain pay level I can get to, and that’s just the truth. Even though you have the talents and skills, and you can really do a good job, [employers] always hold that against you.

Tammy also believed a college degree would signal a sense of commitment to employers. When I asked her why a degree would be valued over her many years of service, she speculated:

I don’t know if maybe for the companies, when they hire these people it gives them better standing in the community if they have college graduates working for them? Maybe they think that does. That’s the only conclusion I can come to. I just know that the people they hire [at the factory], the ones that have the college degrees, they get enormous salaries. And the people that don’t have the degrees, they don’t.

Tammy also told me about an instance at Donald’s last place of employment when Donald was promoted. He received a small raise, and his company hired a college graduate to replace him in his former job. “And they hired him at much more than Donald was even making, but they had to have Donald train him.”

“You just have to let them learn”

At 53, Tammy received her first credit card and was committed to paying it off each month. Both she and Donald were adamant that they not incur or carry debt, except for the couple’s largest purchase to date, their home, which they paid off in ten years. She told me:

I just don’t think you should buy what you don’t need. If you need it, fine. We’ll get it. We’ve got a nice house. It’s very nice. But, I don’t go to extremes. I really think it over before I buy something. We just don’t like to feel that we owe anybody anything or that we’re indebted to anyone.
Knowing they wanted to help with college expenses, Tammy and Donald opened college-fund accounts for each of their sons when the boys were six and seven years old. The couple saved enough to give each boy what they thought would be the cost of one year of college, after which their sons would be responsible for paying their own tuition. Because the cash-out dates for the college funds coordinated loosely with the boys’ eighteenth birthdays, Tammy and Donald gave the money to their sons although neither boy was enrolled in college. Tommy and Carl were over the age of eighteen and Tammy felt that the money she and Donald had saved belonged to the boys to do with as they pleased. Tammy therefore gave her sons the money with few parameters. Although the boys “blew” the money from their college funds, Tammy saw this as a valuable life lesson. She told me the story of the college funds:

I took it out and I gave both of them their money. I told them: ‘You realize how hard I’ve worked to put this money away every single week?’ and they said, ‘Yeah.’ And they put it in the bank, and they left it in there for a while and then they started spending it on stupid things. I don’t even know what they spent all of it on. Well, it was only seven-thousand a piece. It was enough for one year of college. So I thought they could go [to college] and then they could save a little bit of money for the next year. That would help them. But, I think [Tommy] went on a couple of vacations. I don’t know what he did with all of his, but they both kind of blew it. And then when they were done, they were like: ‘Boy, that was stupid.’ But I guess you just have to let them learn.

The college fund story sat in stark contrast to more strict parameters Tammy applied to other family situations regarding money. She told me that Tommy and Carl asked her to co-sign with them for cars or apartments, a request she denied more than once. The money she gave her sons for their college educations was money she had in
her possession, not credit. This was an important distinction, as she told me about requests for her to serve as co-signer:

I said: ‘No. I refuse. Because if I sign for you that means I’m taking on the responsibility if you cannot make this payment, that I will pay for it for you.’ And I said: ‘I can’t afford it. I already know ahead of time that I cannot afford it, so I will not do it for you.’ I’ve never allowed myself to spend what I don’t have.

Although she would not co-sign for cars or apartments for her sons, Tammy often offered them financial help on a smaller scale. Tammy told me about the time she loaned Tommy $2300. It was a hard decision to loan him the money because he would be indebted to her, but Tammy ultimately saw it as a learning opportunity for Tommy. After missing several deadlines to repay her, Tammy called her son to tell him: “That money had better be on the table when I get home from work, tonight.” She worried as she drove home from work whether the money would be there, but told me:

I got home and it was sitting there. Every penny of it. But, the little stinker left it all in one-dollar bills. His tips. Twenty-three hundred dollars in one-dollar bills. He gets tips and I looked at the way he did it. He saved [the money] and he was doing it from the start. He had every intention of paying me. I was really happy with that. Every penny was there--in ones.

Tammy’s pride was evident as she told me about the one-dollar bills because she learned that in addition to being able to pay off debts, Tommy was able to make a financial plan and carry it out one-dollar at a time. She worked hard to instill in her sons her distaste for debt and the familial norms about money and debt guided the family’s approach to paying for college. Tommy worked as a valet, paid his rent and took and paid for classes at a local community college\(^1\) one or two at a time. Although Tammy understood that college loans were available, she viewed loans in the same category as a

\(^1\) The community college that Tommy attends lists tuition for in-state residents in the 2003-2004 academic year as $69 per credit hour. Thus two three-credit courses would cost Tommy $414. per quarter. Online
car payment or credit card debt. Tammy told me that she didn’t like the idea of her sons
owing anyone after they finish college, and preferred they graduate with no debt. When I
asked Tammy what they would have done as a family if Tommy had chosen a
significantly more expensive college she remained adamantly opposed to loans. She said:

I would tell [Tommy] that he would have to find a way to do it--that we would
support him, but I doubt that we would take out loans. I might even think about
getting a second job rather than taking out a loan.

Tammy’s brother, Charles, was the first in his generation to attend college. He
earned an advanced degree, worked in K-12 education and disagreed with the family’s
approach to paying for college. Uncle Charles told me about Tommy’s decisions
regarding college loans:

I think he’s held captive by the way his parents believe, and the way they do
things. I’ve mentioned to [Tommy] ‘Just take out the student loan and go to
school full time and finish it.’ He’s trying to work now and pay off his classes as
he goes. He’s using up his best earning years right now.

Tammy knew that her brother Charles talked to Tommy about using loans to pay
for college. She said of Tommy’s unwillingness to take his uncle’s advice: “I don’t know
if maybe that part of me is sticking with Tommy now. He just doesn’t want to do it. I
don’t know why.”

“He’s not a money-person”

Tammy did not talk about college as important for her sons because it would
allow them to make more money. In fact, Tammy was suspicious of people who made a
lot of money, and her advice to her sons was drawn directly from her own experience at
the plant, and she told them: “Just remember you need to think how you’re getting the
money. If it’s going to be stepping on somebody, then don’t do it.” When I asked her
who she knew with a college degree and asked her to describe those people, her views on
those she called “money people” surfaced. She told me about Donald’s brother:

[He] is a CPA of a big insurance company. He’s got a very, very, good job and
they make a lot of money, but he doesn’t act like a money person. A money
person to me is someone that doesn’t care what they have to do to get it, just as
long as they’ve got money. I’ve seen people hurt over that, and I don’t know how
people can go to sleep at night when they know the money they got they got by
hurting other people. Or not thinking of someone else’s feelings. To me that’s a
money person.

Within the same conversation about what people with degrees were like, Tammy
told me about her brother Charles, who has an advanced degree in education. She was
visibly proud of his academic work, often reminding me that he did it “on his own.”

Within much of her narrative, Tammy told me about when she, her father, her children or
her brother were able to accomplish great tasks with little help or training, and each story
somehow supported the norms of the family. When Tammy told me why she was proud
of her brother Charles for attending college she was emphatic that “It’s not all about
money,” or his increased earnings because of his degrees, but about his ability to do
something different and challenging. She compared her brother’s degrees with her work
life:

I think life would be pretty dull if you didn’t strive for something else, to see if
you could do it--like my brother going to college. [Donald and I] started out in
this tiny little house and I would hate to think that I would just live in that house
and thought: ‘Well, you know, this is good enough and live here the rest of our
lives.’ I want to see if I can do something just a little bit better. Just a little better
neighborhood.

Tammy also believed that college helps people have more direction in their lives.

When she told me about what it is that college provides for those who attend, she
mentioned the ability to provide for one’s family, to have a career, to purchase a home—in much the same way she has done. She told me about college graduates:

I think people that have a higher education seem to have a certain direction and they know what they want to do. They want to have a house. They want their family to be provided for. They know that [their kids] have got to go to school. They’ve got to have clothes. They’ve got to have insurance. They’ve got to have food. They’ve got to have a roof over their head. They seem to have a direction that they’re going, things that they want to accomplish.

Tammy’s own experiences indicated that college is not the only route to achieving greater direction in life, evident in her having a career, a home and the ability to support her family. When I reminded her of what she has been able to accomplish without college experience, she said she realized that college might not be the sole route to a focused, committed life: “I don’t know whether it’s college, or just the person themselves. Sometimes I think it has to be inside that person to want to do that.”

However, Tammy firmly believed that potential employers equate college-going with dedication to work:

You have to be committed to finish that four-year degree, or Master’s or PhD and I think [employers] see that in a person when they hire them. If you come in and you’ve been to college, [they] think: ‘Well you know this guy, or lady might stick it out because they’re committed. They went through college. They can stick to it.’

“I feel like sometimes I’m in this little box”

Throughout our interviews, Tammy referred to what she calls living in a “little box,” a restrictive space in which she was unable to experience more than what she already has experienced, which includes education, work, or broader life experiences like the ones she hopes her sons will have at college. When discussing her hopes for her sons, Tammy used her brother Charles’ life as a reference:
[College] can expose you to so many things. Languages, different languages. People. There’s so much to learn. I feel like sometimes I’m in this little box because I didn’t expose myself to anything, and just being around Charles and watching the things he does. He’s just so aware of everything. Like jobs. He’s not afraid to go after any job he wants.

When I asked her what a college degree would have provided her, she told me:

I think I could be at the top of any field I chose now, because I’ve got the determination. Where I’m at now, you have to have a lot of determination to get where you’re going. You have to really prove yourself and I think that as a woman you have to prove yourself even more. But I really regret not having gone to college. Going to college, I could have done anything or been anything if I just would have done it. And I know I could have. I could have done anything. I just think that’s what I could have accomplished. Nothing would have been impossible if I would have gone to college.

The Bradshaws: It Was Different Back Then

Sam and Charlotte Bradshaw recently celebrated their twenty-seventh wedding anniversary. Their first date was a tenth grade Sadie Hawkins dance for which Charlotte was required to ask a boy, and she asked Sam. They married soon after graduation and saved enough money to purchase their first home before either turned 23. In fact, Sam bought the large lot on which their current house sits while still in high school, but the young couple could not afford to build to the specifications of the development until later in their marriage. Thus, our interviews took place in a home that the two planned while they were in high school.

Charlotte described Charlesburgh as a village, and it sits roughly 20 miles from the state capitol, where the family business, a service-related company, was located. Charlotte and Sam told me they always knew they wanted to raise their children in this community, and never considered living elsewhere. Both hoped their village never grew to the size of some of the larger, surrounding communities that they named. Charlotte
said: “People tell our kids, ‘Oh, I know your mother, or I knew your father,’ because there are quite a few graduates that stick around. For whatever reason, a lot of them tend to stay around here.” The couple graduated in a class of 117, the same number of students who graduated in their daughter’s class at the same high school--30 years later.

Charlotte and Sam had 2 children, a son and a daughter, Robert and Mary. Robert was in his 3rd year of college. Out of high school, Robert attended a regional, private college and after one year transferred to a community college where he pursued a degree that was directly related to the family business. Mary was a first year student at a mid-size, regional state university. Although the Bradshaw’s children were both in college, the couple continued to lobby for levies to improve the school system in which they and their children were educated. Sam told me that not only is a good school good for property values but: “It makes for a good community. We still attend almost every basketball game, and football games.” Charlotte added: “We don’t have a lot of money to pay our teachers, but I think the kids get a good education for the money.” Both Charlotte and Sam believed the high school provided solid guidance about post-secondary options, noting that the guidance counselor hosted admissions counselors, sponsored college fairs and coordinated college visits.

Both Sam and Charlotte worked for several years before having children. Neither attended college, although they told different stories to explain why. Charlotte told me why college was not important to her after high school:

I liked school, but I loved doing secretarial work, and I knew that’s what I wanted to do. I didn’t think it was that important for [the female] to get an education as it was the male. Because I knew I was going to be staying home and taking care of my kids. I got a pretty good job at a company. I was kind of a Girl Friday starting out. I worked my way up to a marketing secretary until I got pregnant and quit.
Although Charlotte was certain about her decision to pursue a secretarial career and then become a stay-at-home mother, she said she sees what opportunities her children have because of education, and wondered if she might now do things differently. She told me: “Looking back, I probably should have gone to school. At least like a two-year college.” Sam had college aspirations, but said he felt obligated to join the family business out of high school, a company that his grandfather founded, from which his father retired and for which his children work on school breaks. Sam was the co-owner of the business with his brother, and often worked as an important set of hands in the day-to-day labor the company provides. He told me about his educational decisions with a sense of regret:

My grandfather who started the business always had plans for me. He said ‘Oh, you’re going to go to Local Prestigious College.’ And that was always the thing. Well, it never happened. My grandfather retired the year I graduated, and so then I just stepped right in and I filled out one of the positions, and that’s how it went from there. 27 years later. I have a lot more responsibility of course now. It was different back then. You had stuff that was put on your shoulders that you learned when you were younger that you had to do it. I don’t know. It just fell down where you had to be mature, I guess. We just thought we knew what we wanted, and apparently we did. It seemed to work for 27 years.

The business was financially successful, due in large part to the amount of time Sam spent at work and to its niche market. The company catered to residents of a wealthy suburb of the capitol. Some of Sam’s clients were from families that have been clients for several generations, and most expected a high degree of service and familiarity with the owner. Sam proudly told me that hard work is at the core of their success, but that strong social networks also insured the longevity of the company:

I have some clients, well, one guy, he knows Robert (Sam’s son), and he said, ‘You know, that’s something to have four generations working for you.’ And of
course, I’ve worked for three generations of the [names founders of department store chain] family. And actually his son, I’m watching him grow up. I think that’s pretty neat.

However, the fact that the company was service-related has at times been uncomfortable for Sam. He told me about working for a local family that owns a successful corporation. Sam worked for the company’s founder, and then worked for two of his children. Sam told me that the founder’s daughter-in-law introduced him to one of her friends and said of Sam: “This guy is the hardest working guy you’ll ever meet.” Sam’s wife Charlotte agreed: “Well you are the hardest working guy.” For Sam, the introduction was not a compliment. He told me: “That’s all she knew about me to introduce me, that I was a hard worker.”

Charlotte reiterated what a hard worker Sam is, and he illustrated the point: “You know how many sick days I probably had in my life? I think I took off one time I had an inner ear infection, and I took off when both of my kids were born. That was it.” Charlotte told me: “That’s one of the downsides of the business. He did spend a lot of time away from the kids. You have to. It’s weather related. If it rains one day, you’ve got to play catch-up the next day.” But the couple worked hard to ensure Sam stayed close to his children. During busy work times Charlotte took pizza to Sam’s work-sites so the family could have supper together. Charlotte said: “We would take their bikes up to some big place he was working and let them ride in the parking lot just to spend some time with him.”

The couple’s son Robert has worked for the company for many years and even when in college he continued to work with and for the family. Charlotte described Robert and his participation in the business:
He likes working, I mean, he’s done it. He’s good at it. He helped on Saturdays, and has worked steadily ever since then in summers, and he does a nice job. He’s dependable. He’s a hard worker, because he’s (refers to Sam) instilled in him what was instilled in him from his father.

Sam added that his son works hard both at school and at the family business:

During the springtime, if he gets out at like 2:30 or 3 o’clock there are several days he’d get out, he’d come out and find us, because he’d know we’d be behind and he’d work until like 7, 7:30 at night. And then, of course he’d come right home, take a shower, eat and then he’d be up hitting the books again.

At twenty-one and a college student, Robert considered purchasing a house in Charlestown, when he would be the same age as his parents were when they purchased their first home. Charlotte said of Robert’s thought process:

I think he realizes he’s 21 now; he probably should be on his own. But he likes it [at home]. I don’t have a problem with him staying here. I don’t have a problem with it if he finds something else and wants to move out.

Charlotte told me this is a decision Robert was making with his father’s advice and the two may jointly buy a duplex, one side of which would serve as a rental, and Robert would live in the other. Sam said: “I think that’s smart. I really like to see him doing that. That’s not a waste of money. So, it’s probably what I’m going to do. He’s looking at probably next year.”

“Our families have been very good to us”

Whether the conversation was about work, school or community, family was a central theme in the Bradshaws’ narrative. Charlotte volunteered at the children’s school when the younger child entered kindergarten, and substituted as a kindergarten aide to get her “foot in the door” for employment which would allow her to be close to their children during school days and to be home with them in the summer. Because both Sam and
Charlotte’s families lived nearby, extended family members were able to help out with childcare. She told me about their families’ involvement:

We’re lucky because both of our families live (points) five miles this way, five miles that way. And any time I did have the opportunity to sub, my mom or my mother-in-law would watch my kids. So I could get my foot in the door. They knew I wanted to do that. I was lucky--that they would baby-sit for them.

When the school-aide positions were cut because of budget problems, Charlotte took a job in the school cafeteria, again to be near the children and be at home with them when school was not in session. At the time of the interviews, Charlotte was the secretary in the high school from which her entire family graduated.

Charlotte suggested Sam’s parents consider buying a house just three doors down from their home. Although the elder Bradshaws enjoyed good health, Sam and Charlotte wanted to have Sam’s parents close-by as they began to need more assistance as they aged. Charlotte said:

They’re still healthy enough that they can get out and do things. They’ve always been good to the kids. And our kids have always been close to them, living here. That’s nice too. We’ve been fortunate. Our families have been very good to us.

“It was too far away. For him”

Although their daughter Mary was interested in colleges that were several hours by car from her parents, this was not an option for the Bradshaws. Charlotte told me about several college visits, saying that Sam took their daughter Mary to look at a college several hours from their home and joked: “It was too far away. For him,” referring to Sam. The family decided on a state-university\(^1\) one-hour away by car, important because Sam or Charlotte could drive and pick up Mary on Friday afternoons and drive her back.

---

\(^1\) The University that Mary attends lists tuition and room and board for the academic year 2003-2004 at $14,448.
to school on Sunday. Mary studied education, and the Bradshaws were pleased with her college selection and the college curriculum for preparing teachers. Mary’s academic content area was History, which her parents and her high school guidance counselor saw as a potentially difficult choice, due to sexism in high schools. Sam told me: “Most schools, when they look for a history teacher, it’s usually a male. And they also happen to be a coach.”

Robert chose to attend Local Liberal Arts College, a private school\(^1\) within a twenty-minute drive of the family’s home, which kept him well within the geographical parameters suggested by his parents for selecting a college and allowed him to work with his father on weekends and school holidays. In his first year at Local Liberal Arts College, Robert enrolled in a business program. Charlotte told me that Robert’s grades at this college weren’t good because he had “too much fun.” Because the Bradshaws paid for both of their children’s college without the aid of loans or financial aid, the family decided Local Liberal Arts College was not a good fit. The Bradshaws told me about their decisions with Robert:

> As long as they put forth the effort in school and did the grades, I guess is the whole thing. When you work hard for your money, if they’re going to waste it, is another thing. I felt like I wasted a lot of money one year at Local Liberal Arts College. It’s just that he didn’t put forth the effort. And that’s when we had the talk. We said: ‘Look, if you’re not going to put forth the effort, we’re not going to put the money up.’ And that’s when he started thinking about something else.

Robert transferred to Local Community College,\(^2\) and chose an academic major that was more aligned with the family business. Sam spent time studying with his son. He told me: “This is great. It’s teaching the old dogs new tricks. It’s been a lot of fun, and

---

\(^1\) Local Liberal Arts College lists tuition and room and board for academic year 2003-04 at $26,565.
\(^2\) Local Community College lists tuition for in-state residents in the 2003-2004 academic year as $69 per credit hour. Thus a student taking four classes at three credits each would pay $828.00 per quarter.
I’ve learned a lot with it, too. I’m getting my money’s worth from Local Community College.” Sam was also happy that Robert’s education could help the business in the long term as well. Sam said: “There’s so many easier ways to run the business other than trial and error. That’s the stuff that I think that you will learn from college.”

Both of the Bradshaws talked about the importance of college, especially for their son Robert as a way to achieve job mobility and flexibility, although Robert had the opportunity to work for and perhaps one day take over the successful family business. Their hope for Robert was that he would work hard, but not physically hard like his father has worked. Charlotte said: “A physical job like what [Sam] does, it takes its toll on you.” Sam elaborated:

When I say I want them to have what we have, but in a different path, I don’t want them to be out doing the labor. When you’re fifty years old and you can’t walk upright, you know, and all the pains. I see a lot of friends that are my age that still look like they’re in their twenties the way they get around. And I have trouble with different things. There’s just an easier way to have a good life. And that’s what I hope [Robert and Mary] find, at least find it easier. I mean, not to be lazy, but that you don’t have to be the blue collar, pounding, worker.

Charlotte was intensely proud of the life she and Sam created through their hard, physical labor, and was emphatic that physical labor was one of several options for her children:

I don’t have a problem with blue-collar workers. They’re the backbone of this country. I just want [Robert and Mary] to be happy. I want them to find a job that they will want to get up every morning and go to work. Blue-collar or white-collar. It’s what you put into it.

Sam told me that although he could do many different types of things in the work world: “Unless you have a degree, a lot of people won’t talk to you anymore.” But Sam was emphatic that a college degree did not contribute to increased earnings over time:

I don’t truly think that what they’re going after, I mean if it was like a doctor, lawyer, where they would be making major money, but the fields that they’re in--
I never really thought that college was a way of making more money. It’s probably a way of making easier money.

He continued:

It doesn’t matter what you can do your first ten years out of school, your first twenty years, but as you get older and you’re not able to do the things you could do when you’re young, it’s nice to have something to fall back on. Especially my son, I mean even though he’s in the [field related to the business], he’ll still have that degree. If 15 years down the road he doesn’t like what he’s doing right now at that job, he can always back up and he can go back into design, and [do] the creative work that he may want to do.

For Charlotte, a college degree would provide her children with options to live and work where they choose. She said:

I want them to know that they don’t have to [join the family business]. The day Robert decides that he wants to go work for a firm in [names city 2 hours away], I want him to be able to do that, because we didn’t do that. I want him to be able to at least try it. Because [Robert] knows he can always come back and work in this business if he doesn’t like them (referring to the firm in another city). But I want him to be able to go out in the world if he wants to, and try something, (pauses) different. I want that for both of them.

This willingness for Robert and Mary to explore their options in a job and city other than what the family business offers was contrasted by Sam and Charlotte’s discussion of Charlotte’s sister, who lived out of state. Charlotte told me:

We both have families that lived away. You realize what all you miss. And we told the kids that too. Think about that. With my sister living in [another state], she just can’t come home when my parents have been sick a little bit. It’s not that easy.

Charlotte framed her sister’s living away as a series of lost family opportunities for the sister. Sam interpreted a family member’s living away differently, as inconvenient to those who remain in Charlesburgh. The Bradshaws returned from a visit with Charlotte’s sister, and Sam found the amount of travel time difficult, especially given his demanding work schedule in the summer. Her living far away presents other
difficulties for the Bradshaws like during holidays, when Sam’s side of the family remains in Charlesburgh, and there is pressure from Charlotte’s side of the family to travel. Sam made his feelings on this issue clear:

You hear a lot of whining because, ‘People don’t come out,’ or ‘People don’t do this,’ or ‘My kids didn’t get to spend Christmas at home.’ I’m sorry. That was your choice. I mean it wouldn’t be fair for all of us to pack up and go there when I have a sister-in-law that has her family [in Charlesburgh] just like I do. I made that perfectly clear this past week.

Themes Running Through Family Perceptions on College

Although the participants in this study presumably did not know each other, it at times seemed like they must because their stories were often very similar. Charlotte Bradshaw and Cheryl Campbell both stayed at home with their young children until they took jobs working at their children’s schools. When they described the importance of one parent staying at home and talked about the “financial sacrifices” their families made for that to happen, both used similar language to discuss their hopes that one day their children could also be stay at home parents. Although Tammy French and Donna Hunter worked outside the home, they often told me how they strived to stay involved in their children’s lives at home and at school.

All parents sent their children to local public schools, with the exception of the French family, who sent their sons to parochial school through the eighth grade. Garson and Donna Hunter were hesitant to send their daughter Samantha to a public school, but relented when Samantha pleaded. Other parents had great faith in the public schools their children attended, and trusted that teachers and staff at the schools would assist and advise their children about college. Tommy French stopped going to high school six weeks before he would have graduated, and the school failed to contact his family.
Although a guidance counselor offered to help him complete his requirements, he declined and he later completed a GED. Although Tommy did not graduate with his high school class, his mother continued to trust the school for her second son, Carl. She told me:

[Staff at the school] would send information home about when they were going to test for college, or they would have someone come into the counselor’s office to talk to the students about enrolling. They’re very good about letting the kids know about college. And stressing the importance of college.

Similarly, John and Cheryl Campbell said they have been told that the schools in their district, “aren’t up to par.” According to the Campbells, the schools have been labeled by the state as “Continuing Improvement.” John described how well the high school helped their children with college selection, and Cheryl corrected him to help make clear the convenience of college fairs. John began: “I think that the school system has done a good job of explaining, I mean, they have job fairs in eighth grade. They have (pause) it’s not so much, it’s almost like, not career fairs, but…” and Cheryl interrupted: “The college fairs, where the colleges come in. It’s amazing that the kids don’t even have to go someplace else. They just bring it in to the kids.” Charlotte and Sam Bradshaw were also satisfied with their school district, and told me that the school’s student test scores were competitive with scores at other high schools, but that their district was struggling financially. Although Charlotte told me she thought kids in their district, “get a good education for the money,” the district is “in desperate need of new buildings. We’re running out of room. Buildings are old.”

Hossler et al.(1999) found parents’ involvement to be very important in students’ predisposition stage, but for the parents in this study, they did not see their role as central
to their students’ predisposing toward college. Although parents were engaged in their students’ education and in several cases helped make

Without question, the strongest thread that ran through each interview was the love each parent showed for his or her children. Parents often described how they care for their children, discussed a desire for their students to stay clear of physically difficult work and, some parental regret about college in the same discussion. Tammy told me how her feelings for her sons who are 20 and 24 years old evolved over time:

I always felt you have your kids, then they grow up and they go away. I didn’t know what to expect when I had them. I knew I loved them, but I didn’t know how much that grows as they get older. It never disappears. It just gets stronger and stronger. I see myself in them. I see how much I could have done so I’m trying to make them see how much is there, how much they can achieve.

The parents had significant responsibilities when they were 19-24 years old, the age range of the students whose parents participated in this study. Each parent worked full-time after high school graduation; Sam and Charlotte Bradshaw owned a home and had purchased the property for their dream home at 21; Donna Hunter cared for a baby daughter at 19, her daughter Samantha’s current age. Samantha is in her first year of college. Donna told me about raising Samantha:

I had to be mature to raise her. It was a different set of circumstances than she deals with. She’s really traditional. At 19, this time (refers to the clock which reads 9 p.m.), I was probably giving her a bath, putting her down for her bedtime. She’s going out.

Parents were very committed to their children attending college and they provided their students with parameters about which college students could attend. No parent in this study had a student attending college more than one hour by car from her parents. Additionally, participants had guidelines about what form their support would
take. John Campbell told me about his and his wife Cheryl’s financial support which
would not allow for a fifth year of college because: “We wanted them to have a vested
interest in their education.” Charlotte Bradshaw told me how she was reluctant to pay for
all of their children’s college expenses: “I had mixed feelings. I was wanting to pay
some, or give them some, but have them work some too, so they’d appreciate a little bit
more.” Tammy’s actions with her sons’ college funds painted a similar familial picture
of strong yet defined financial support.

In addition to wanting students to have a vested interest in their education, parents
struggled with how their help might be interpreted by their son or daughter. John and
Cheryl Campbell told me that their children have friends who work full-time and attend
college. By helping their children financially, they wondered what life lessons their
children would learn from an easier collegiate experience. John said: “We’ve tried to
lessen that burden. Hopefully, it was the right decision-- that they won’t think it’s always
going to be that way--that somebody’s always going to help them out to do things.”
Tammy also struggled with the tension of wanting her sons to be independent and learn
from their mistakes, and with supporting them financially in college. Although Doretta
and Garson Hunter referred to their daughter Samantha as “spoiled,” Doretta explained:
“But she’s not a ruined- spoiled. I mean some kids are not appreciative.” Sam Bradshaw
was clearly proud of his son Robert when he joined his father at the family business after
school to work until the early evening. Robert then ate dinner, showered and studied. His
father told me of his son’s rigorous work schedule: “I guess that’s the best he can do.”

This tension between what is enough assistance and what is too much assistance
was evident for three of the four families. When do parents consider their children adults?
Cheryl Campbell said of her relationship with daughter Barbara: “I saw where I was too much of her life, and she needed to stand on her own. We said wherever she goes, she will live on campus because she’s got to learn to stand on her own feet.” Donna Hunter said of her daughter: “We really do believe she’s ready to go out into the world and be productive. But, I still wanted her close to home. Just for, the maturing process.” And Tammy told her 24 year old son Tommy she would not co-sign for his apartment. She was pleased with her decision and the results: “He hasn’t asked me for anything yet. Not a thing. So he’s doing pretty good. I kind of cut the strings a little, didn’t I? The apron strings.” And Charlotte Bradshaw interprets her son Robert’s thoughts about living at home: “I think he realizes he’s 21 now, he probably should be on his own.”

The parents in this study were in close geographic proximity to their parents and with the exception of Tammy, had strong familial bonds with their own siblings and parents. The Bradshaws recently helped Sam’s parents move in next door to them and Sam co-owned a business with his brother. Eight of Donna Hunter’s nine siblings live in the same city as she and her husband Garson live. Cheryl Campbell told me she speaks to her mother every day on the phone and both Cheryl and Donna Hunter speak to their daughters on the phone at least once each day. Conversely, Tammy French lived near her mother, but Tammy did not mention her mother as important to her achievements. In fact, she implies the opposite. And although Garson Hunter lived far away from his small extended family, he adopted his wife Donna’s family as his own. No parent in this study had a child who attended a college more than 1.5 hours away from his or her parents.

Within each family, there was also one parent who expressed some regret at not having attended college after high school. Often this regret informed parents’ advice to
their children about the importance of college. Garson Hunter was the only parent-participant who told me without hesitation that college was not for him. Other parents like Charlotte Bradshaw and Cheryl Campbell told me they sometimes wonder how their lives would be different if they had attended college. Tammy French, Sam Campbell and Donna Hunter viewed not attending college as a mistake, and Sam talked about the potential to obtain a college degree later in life, perhaps after his children finished their degree. Tammy French and Donna Hunter each enrolled for one class at different local colleges at the end of this study, and both are committed to finishing a specific degree program. I spoke to both Tammy and Donna after their midterm exams, and both of them had A averages.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the data collected through interviews with nine research participants, seven parents and two adult brothers. These nine participants represented four families. Family narratives were organized and presented using participants’ references to social, human, economic and cultural capital. Additionally, participants’ references to family and community norms were highlighted to explicate the importance of norms to how families came to form their perceptions on college for their student.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine first-generation college students’ parents’ perceptions about college attendance, and how they came to form these perceptions. Why did parents think that college was important for their children, if they thought college was important at all? Two primary research questions guided the study:

1. How do parents view the role and significance of college attendance?

2. How do families define and exhibit “support” for their first-generation college student in the college selection process and once the student is enrolled?

Without exception, the parent-participants in this study were emphatic that college was important for their children. Parents were highly engaged in their children’s lives and worked to provide opportunities for their son or daughter that had not been available to them. Individual participants often talked about the great personal and financial sacrifices they made for their children. Some mothers quit their jobs for pay to stay at home with young children as many of their mothers had done. Later, when they returned to the workforce, these mothers took jobs as school secretaries, teachers aides, or cafeteria workers in order to be close to their students during the school year and to have time off with them during vacations. Several mothers who worked outside the home told me that they made their children the center of attention in every possible non-working
hour. Some parents worked side by side with their children in a family business; some cheered from the sidelines or chaperoned high school trips to Disney World. And all parents used their own lives to guide their children towards a college education as a way to have an easier life than the parents had led up to that point.

The findings of this study indicated that some parents of first-generation college students perceive college to be a way for their son or daughter to gain human and/or economic capital. A college degree could increase a student’s human capital in that it could allow him or her more vertical and horizontal job mobility, and allow the student to work with his or her head, rather than his or her back. The benefits of economic capital were less evident to most parents, especially as they considered the large financial investment to pay for college, in relation to the relatively low salaried professions that their children chose. Although one participant in particular viewed a diploma as a validating credential in the workforce, two others were unsure of what the degree conferred. Stated differently, they viewed the diploma as a credential, and not as representing a set of skills or knowledge.

Participants were greatly concerned about how college could affect the social capital of the family and this concern was manifested in students’ college options. Nearly all parents encouraged their students to attend college within 1.5 hours of their home. Beyond wanting their children nearby, parents relied heavily on the social norms of the family to guide their children to “stand on their own,” an event that occurred for the parents when they turned 18 or graduated from high school.
Social Capital

Social capital was the prevailing form of capital found in the participants’ narratives. It was not, however, the social capital the college experience could provide, but the social capital of the family and the community that was referenced most often. Several participants were concerned about how college could negatively affect the social capital of their families. Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) wrote that for students in their study, college was “the transition point at which students might separate themselves from working-class families and peers” (p. 94). This separation could prove a difficult feat for the children of participants in this study. Nearly all of the parent-participants lived within a 15-minute drive from the homes in which they were raised, and from any of their living parents. Each of the participants talked about the benefits of living in their current community and told me about the conscious decisions they made to raise their children in these communities. Often the attraction of these towns was that people knew each other over a long period of time, having gone to grade school or high school together, and participants enjoyed watching the children of high school friends grow up. Nearby grandparents or other relatives babysat, or helped in difficult financial times. Parents were very satisfied with their communities and each of them indicated to me that their towns were good places to raise children.

Parent-participants sometimes described their towns as historical places that provided a context for their lives. Often these points of pride were quirky: One community was the site of one of the first prisons in the state; another town had been decimated by tornadoes three times; a third, former industrial town was home to a dilapidated mansion designed by an internationally renowned architect and the mansion
overlooked abandoned warehouses. These communities also hosted high school alumni basketball games or allowed acquaintances the social networks to know, as in Tammy’s case, when a high school friend’s brother dies unexpectedly.

**College-going as Norm Departure**

The lives of each of the four families in this study were guided by reliable and often implicit norms. These norms helped define the family within their communities, as several parents told me about the importance of being well known in their towns. Some norms guided parents about money management. Other norms about hard work were steadfast. Families were insistent that their children attend college, and several parents strongly encouraged their children to live on campus. But, no student seriously considered or attended a college more than 1.5 hours by car from his or her parents. And, contrary to parents’ telling me about the importance of college, some familial norms directed students away from college. Coleman (1997) wrote that norms within communities could reduce deviant activity. Although deviancy has primarily a negative connotation, Coleman wrote about deviant activities that could potentially be of benefit to families and students as well, college attendance, for example. Viewing college-going as departing from normative behavior, that is, as a deviation from familial patterns, helped with data analysis from a social capital perspective.

All parent-participants had a great deal of responsibility at 19 or 20 years of age. And although college had not been required for their maturation process, several parents talked about how college could contribute to their children’s maturation. When I asked parents to compare their lives with their children’s lives at the same age, all acted similarly surprised at the vast differences. Some parents told me that times were different
for them, that life was set up in such a way that after high school graduation there was a job, a husband or wife, and children. For most parents, the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood was high school graduation or turning 18. So, when Tammy gave her sons their college fund money, to her they were adults capable of making adult decisions. As Tammy said: “When we were growing up, it was pretty much get through school, get out of school, and get a job.” This was becoming an adult. Because this was normative behavior in their communities and families, few parent-participants departed from these norms. Although three participants did attend some college, they did not complete a degree. Instead, they complied with the norms described by Tammy. For participants, their children’s normative rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood were complicated by college attendance. Unable to use their own lives as a map for understanding their children, several mothers mentioned a desire to cut the “apron strings,” to help a child in the maturity process. The apron strings metaphor signaled a parental struggle to find their son or daughter’s rite of passage into adulthood. If their child was a high school graduate and over 18 years of age but still “in school,” was that child an adult? How could this new hybrid of not-child but not-yet-adult fit into the familial and community norms?

In a struggle to answer these questions, parents at times created contradictory expectations for their children by encouraging them to comply with familial norms while simultaneously encouraging them to deviate from those norms by attending college. I refer to this as a struggle between norm-compliance and norm-departure. The Bradshaw’s story that follows is particularly illustrative of this struggle.
Strong Familial Norms

Several times Sam and Charlotte Bradshaw talked about wanting their children to have the option to live and work away from their hometown, but their actions tended to encourage the children to stay within established familial norms and their town’s borders. Although Robert lived on campus at a liberal arts college 20-minutes from their home, when he transferred to a community college, he moved back home with his parents. Robert worked with his father in the family business during busy times and on school holidays. Although Charlotte said she had no problem with Robert living at home, she told me her son realized that at 21 he probably should be on his own. In fact, Robert and his father discussed co-purchasing a house in their hometown of Charlesburgh, in which Robert would live.

Robert’s entry into adulthood was similar to his father’s, although the time of the events differed. When Sam and Charlotte were 21, they purchased a house in Charlesburgh, close to both of their parents, and Sam was already an integral part of the family business. The economic and social norms of the Bradshaw family would be reinforced by Robert’s buying a house, norms that include hard work and wise investing, in addition to living and working near family members. This encouragement towards homeownership as a rite of passage into adulthood and “being on his own” directly contradicted what Sam and Charlotte told me about wanting their children to be geographically mobile if they wished. And, although Charlotte said she wanted her son to be able to live in another town and work for another firm if he wanted to, both Sam and Charlotte identified Charlotte’s sister as an example of departing too far from the established norms of the family by choosing to live in another state.
The Bradshaws told me their daughter Mary is a lot like her aunt and that Mary was interested in attending a college far from home. Her parents, however, did not consider distant colleges as viable options, and Mary attended a university 60 miles from them. Foucault (1977/1995) wrote that: “the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialities and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another” (p. 184). For the Bradshaws, Charlotte’s sister served as a fixed point against which familial normative behavior was measured. Charlotte said: “We both have families that lived away. You realize what all you miss. And we told the kids that too. Think about that.” Sam was more emphatic in holding his sister-in-law up as too distant from the norms of the family:

You hear a lot of whining because ‘people don’t come out’ or ‘people don’t do this’ or ‘my kids didn’t get to spend Christmas at home.’ I’m sorry that was your choice. It wouldn’t be fair for all of us to pack up and go there. I made that perfectly clear this past week.

Charlotte’s sister was situated as the point too far from the Bradshaw family norm in this example, and Sam and Charlotte are norm-compliant. In fact, proximity to family is valued in the Bradshaw family that Sam and Charlotte helped Sam’s parents buy a house on their block. Viewing their actions on a continuum of norm-compliance and norm-departure, Robert was more norm-compliant, both geographically and metaphorically nearer his parents. By attending college 60 minutes away, Mary departed from familial norms and was situated closer to her aunt. Here, specific family members were used to measure the gaps between what was considered norm-compliant and norm-departing, or too far from the established norms of the Bradshaw family.
Other parent-participants also discussed people who departed from familial or community norms. When Tammy talked about her in-laws who had been to college, she said that her brother-in-law earned a lot of money, but that he was not a money person. Her description indicated that although he had been to college and was wealthy, his wealth did not make him too distasteful to her, or too far from the familial norm of economic frugality. Similarly, Tammy’s sister-in-law attended college, and Tammy told me she was set in her ways and she did not have children-- departures from the French family norms. “But she’s a very nice person” Tammy told me.

I also interviewed two uncles from two different families because parent-participants had mentioned these uncles as helpful to students in the college selection processes. Both uncles held advanced degrees in education, so could presumably have been helpful as their nieces and nephews prepared for college. These uncle-advisors were somewhat frustrated, however, that their advice had gone unheeded. Charles French encouraged his nephews to take out loans and attend college full-time so the boys would not waste their best earning years in low paying jobs. Charles said about the way his nephew Tommy paid for school one class at a time: “I think he’s held captive by the way his parents believe, and the way they do things.” Similarly, John Campbell’s brother Stewart felt that his advice to his niece to visit a range of colleges before making a choice went unheeded: “[Barbara] applied to one school, and I’m not even sure when she was on that campus. It may have been at orientation.” By attending college, these uncles departed from familial normative behavior, and although they were not described by their families as departing too far from the familial norms, or described as “nice” in spite of their
education, their advice was unheeded because it was too far from the norms of their respective families.

Several participants also talked about the tension between the family’s norm of working in manual labor jobs and the potential that their student would become a white-collar worker because of college attendance. Sam and Charlotte Bradshaw discussed whether they preferred their children to have blue or white-collar jobs. Sam said he did not want his children to be lazy, but preferred that they not be the “blue collar, pounding worker.” Charlotte defended the blue-collar worker as the “backbone of this country” and said her children’s happiness was more important than the type of work they chose.

The Campbells had a similar discussion about manual and non-manual labor, and although Cheryl said she would love her children if they chose to drive a refuse truck, she encouraged them to take jobs in which they did not perform backbreaking labor. John did not believe that their children would “waste” their intellect or skills if they did not go to college: “I guess you have to set your sight on what you think you want to do, and if you are driving a refuse truck, then drive a refuse truck,” although he added that he hoped this was not the job he hoped his children would choose. These families found respectability in manual labor, the normative family type of work and questioned the values of white-collar workers. Sam said: “I don’t want them to be lazy, but….” when he talked about their taking white-collar jobs, and he did not see the potential for laziness in blue-collar positions.

Although parents found respectability in manual labor, they wanted their children to have the option to work in white-collar positions, an option not always available to them. All parents but Garson Hunter looked back at their own lives with some regret that
they had not completed a college degree. Garson attended college for two years, but said it was not for him. He therefore focused his energy on his daughter and her educational plans with no regrets. Other parents felt regret at not going to college after they graduated high school, and used these feelings to encourage their children to enroll. Tammy said: “I’m looking at them now, when I see myself in them, and I see how much I could have done. I’m trying to make them see how much is there, how much they can achieve.” In some ways parents’ regret fuels their willingness to adjust the norms of the family to make room for college attendance, because the student’s successes are connected to what the parents feel would have been their potential, had they completed a college degree.

**What is Support?**

Parent-participants wanted to help their students be successful at college, but they were also worried about being too permissive, or creating an environment in which their students would grow to expect an easy life, which the parents did not have. Many of the participants struggled with how to support their students so they would not become overly reliant on their parents. This struggle was referred to several times as “cutting the apron strings.”

Tammy drew clear lines with her sons about what she would and would not pay for them, and she told several stories about family members who accomplished a great deal “on their own.” John and Cheryl Campbell planned to help their children repay student loans but they did not tell them. The Campbells also discussed their children’s friends who did not have the benefits of parental support they could provide, and worried that their son and daughter could grow to expect their on-going financial assistance, or not appreciate it. Each family created parameters that guided how they supported their
children, often related to finances, and parents wondered what effect too much support would have on their children’s maturation processes. As they discussed their worries, Cheryl said: “I don’t feel like we’ve been taken advantage of.” The Bradshaws held similar concerns and Charlotte Bradshaw echoed about her children: “I don’t think they expected us to pay for their college.” This concern over whether students might grow to expect money without earning it, is a concern that students will depart from familial financial norms. But, it also signals that parents worried that they were privileging their children in a way that the students would come to take the support for granted (Ochberg & Comeau, 2002).

Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) found that first-generation students were more likely to select colleges based on their ability to live at home. In this study, however, three of the four participant families encouraged their students to live on campus and felt that this could facilitate their son’s or daughter’s maturation. Donna Hunter, however, felt that living on campus allowed a permissiveness into her daughter Samantha’s life that Donna and Garson did not appreciate and Donna wished for stricter rules at college. The Hunters were also worried about Samantha because of several highly publicized incidents of campus violence at her university. That year, there had been a serial rapist, an arsonist and campus riots in the university vicinity. Sam and Charlotte Bradshaw also suggested that living on campus was a mistake for their son, Robert, because he had too much fun and had performed poorly academically. Proving their point, his grades improved when he moved home. Tammy French did not discuss whether her sons would live on campus, perhaps because the family was opposed to loans, and her sons lived at home off and on while attending college one class at a time. Their sons living at home also
allowed Tammy and Donald to help their sons financially without a cash investment for housing costs.

In addition to financial support, parents also used the family’s social capital to support their student. At times, this social capital came in conflict with their children becoming socially integrated into their college communities. Geographic proximity to home was the most important criterion for college selection for nearly all of the parent-participants. When they talked about the importance of their children attending colleges close to home, several parents framed the argument in terms of being able to “get to” their son or daughter in case something happened. That “something” could have been a tornado (in the case of the Campbells), a family celebration, or a weekend at home, all examples of the social capital, or social networks of the family guiding the college decision making process. This geographic proximity to home ensured the students continued to keep family and community as an important part of their lives while at college. It also kept in check any family conflicts, like those that arose for the Bradshaws when Charlotte’s sister moved to another state.

Additionally, Hossler et al. (1999) included within their definition of family support parents saving for college, taking students on college visits, or attending a financial aid workshop as a family. Several parents took their students to college fairs and to visit colleges, both in and out of state. Most of the parents, however, had great faith in their community school systems and guidance counselors that the schools would assist their son or daughter in preparing for and selecting a college. This faith in public school systems was often in spite of incidents that might suggest the schools were experience tough financial or academic times. One school district had difficult financial
problems. Another was on a state imposed academic warning. And Tammy French’s son dropped out of school just weeks before graduation without his parents’ knowledge. Thus, although some parents in this study exhibited support for their student’s college enrollment as defined by Hossler et al., parents also had great faith in and expectations of their school districts to help their son or daughter predispose towards college.

The “Benefits” of Norm-Departure

When Hossler et al. (1999) wrote that a college education is often considered a “social escalator” (p. 5) for many disadvantaged groups in American society, they implied that the escalator was moving towards a higher floor and that because of college, disadvantaged people would be going up toward something better—more money, a “better” job or quality of life. Roberts and Rosenwald (2001) implied that when students stepped onto the social escalator going up, someone or something remained immobile: “Upwardly mobile individuals often leave their hometown without turning back” (p. 105). Although Levine and Nidiffer’s (1996) use of war metaphors to describe life in poverty created an imperative for students to leave their communities, it is important to work through who is left behind when students “escape” poor neighborhoods or take the social escalator up.

If the children of the parents who participated in this study left their birth communities, they and their children would be less likely to grow up in close geographical proximity to their grandparents and other extended family members. They would not, as their parents did, see high school friends at the mall who stop and talk, which parents said made living in these towns more satisfying. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote that: “Even though college-educated individuals clearly rank higher on a
broad array of quality of life indicators, they do not, on the average, express appreciably greater satisfaction with their lives than do those with less education” (p. 586). This finding is rarely cited, perhaps because the potential for life-satisfaction within poverty or without higher education is rarely considered. Pascarella and Terenzini suggested that higher education might cause individuals to develop a more critical approach to life: “College men and women may be more sophisticated, skeptical, analytical, and critical in their judgments of some facets of job satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and overall sense of well-being,” (p. 586). No room was left for happiness or contentment without post-secondary education, or for unhappiness or discontentment within education. Inherent in Pascarella and Terenzini’s assertion was that those without college experience are less sophisticated, less analytical and less critical. In short, when they are compared to college men and women, first-generation college students are deficient.

A critical interrogation of Pascarella and Terenzini’s (1991) findings would question how college might negatively affect students. Could the college-educated be less satisfied with their lives because college has the potential to sever important family and community social networks? Could leaving a hometown “without turning back” cause students to get far away from what life is about, as Tammy explained happens in larger towns?

Everyone’s trying to impress everyone else with their clothes, their cars. That’s what I see in the bigger towns. They don’t take the time to stop and say hello. I like a small town. You’ll see people and they stop and they talk.

hooks (2000) wrote that the mass media never celebrates the lives of those who live simply and the lives of those poor and underprivileged who live happy and meaningful lives are never considered as viable. The social capital of the family has rarely been a
focus in research on the merits of college attendance for first-generation college students. Instead, families have been essentialized as unwilling or unable to support their student at college and therefore treated as obstacles to be overcome. The parents in this study were rich in social capital. They knew their neighbors. They lived near their parents and their siblings. They received help from their family and community to raise their children and they hoped to help their children in return. But this form of capital is seldom recognized as critical to a student’s success at college.

Human Capital

Human Capital and a “Good Job”

For several families, a college education would allow their son or daughter to obtain what parents considered a “good” job. Only one participant described a good job as one that paid a lot of money. More often, good jobs were those that would allow students to work in white-collar jobs and not in physical or manual labor jobs as their parents had. Cheryl said: “I don’t want my kids to have to be hard workers. I just want them to work hard.” Because each of the parents had worked on the front lines of their industries as cashiers or manual or floor workers, they were well aware of the differences between the type of work they performed and the type of work managers performed. Several participants worked their way up over many years from these front line positions to become managers. Unsure that their children would have similar opportunities to work their way up through the ranks, parents hoped that a college degree would allow this vertical career mobility without the backbreaking physical work.

Several families saw college as integral to their students’ ability to find work, whether that work was close to home or in another city or state, although their
willingness to recommend finding work far away wavered. Participants recognized that many American companies were moving their factories “off shore” leaving fewer jobs within driving distance of their homes. Parents also realized that available jobs often required a college degree, although they were unsure why this requirement was necessary.

**Human Capital and the “Melting Pot”**

Some parents also viewed college as an opportunity to gain exposure to people different than themselves. This was discussed primarily in racial and ethnic terms, with some references to socio-economic diversity. Several parents made decisions about where they would live because they wanted their children to experience what one mother called the “melting pot environment.” These parents could have chosen to live in racially homogenous communities, in which their children would have gone to school with mostly children of their same race. Instead, these parents decided that exposure to people from other races or ethnicities was an important component of preparing their child for success beyond their towns. One mother felt fettered by being raised in a racially homogenous environment, and consequently she was afraid of people different than her, a fear her children helped her overcome. Cheryl said: “You can’t function in the world if you can’t get along with people.” Coleman (1997) wrote that “human capital is created by changes in persons that bring about skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways” (p. 83). These two families recognized that their children would or could someday work in a racially mixed environment, and that they would need a level of comfort in a racially or ethnically diverse environment to succeed in the workforce.
Human Capital and Career Choice

Several parents also saw the importance of college as training for a specific career. Two of the college students, both women, were enrolled in Education programs. For the Campbell family, the college their daughter attended was a good choice because she spent part of her school week in public school classrooms early in her curriculum. Her mother, Cheryl, told me that on one of Barbara’s first days in a public school, the teacher made her present a short lesson, telling her: “Honey, if you’re going to teach, you’re going to get your feet wet quick.” The Campbells recognized this as an apprentice program similar to those in which they had enrolled when they were roughly their daughter’s age, Cheryl as a secretary and John in construction.

The Bradshaws’ daughter also studied Education, and they also spoke highly of the college Mary attended as an institution that prepared teachers well for the workforce. They were, however, uncertain that Mary’s curricular choices would help her get a job. Sam and Charlotte questioned why Mary chose to become a history teacher, because they and Mary’s guidance counselor recognized that most history teachers were men who also coached. Because she was not interested in coaching, the Bradshaws believed that studying History could pose a barrier to Mary’s job prospects as a teacher.

Economic Capital

Unsure of the Economic Benefits of College

Research often suggested college-going could be viewed as an important avenue for increasing a student’s economic capital by raising earning potential (Duggan, 2001; Hossler et al., 1999; Terenzini, et al., 2001), but participants in this study did not cite increased earnings as the best argument for their children to attend college, with one
exception. In fact, for several families the economic rewards of a college degree were questionable, because their children chose to enter lower paid professions.

The Campbells saw a certain economic investment in sending their daughter to a small, private school only because it was an environment in which she could be academically successful. They did, however, question the logic of her choosing such an expensive college only to join the teaching profession upon graduation. John supported his daughter’s college and professional choices, but he said emphatically of these decisions: “Now, economically that makes absolutely no sense.”

Similarly, Sam and Charlotte Bradshaw questioned the economic rewards of a college degree, perhaps because their family business provided them a comfortable living. When their son Robert enrolled in a business program at a private college, that decision seemed like a good one to them because he could potentially use his degree to run the family business. But when his first year grades were poor, the family did a cost-benefit analysis and Sam and Charlotte decided that it was not worth their “hard earned money” to pay for such an expensive college when Robert “didn’t put forth the effort.” In fact, Sam said he felt like he “wasted a lot of money” that year. The Bradshaws were much happier with Robert’s grades at the local community college and his living at home, thereby saving money. Although committed to helping his children with the costs of higher education, because neither of them chose professions in which they would make more money than their parents, Sam said: “I never really thought that college was a way of making more money.”

Donna Hunter was the only parent who emphatically said that college was an important way for her child to increase her income. Donna knew from experience
working in human resources that people with college degrees earned more money than those without degrees. She told me that in the eyes of employers, the college degree or “that piece of paper” served as a type of validation, and to Donna it was clear that the validation could lead to increased earnings. Several other parents told me that they had seen college graduates hired at wages higher than those earned by people without a college degree. But neither of these parents advised their children about the importance of a degree as a means to make more money. Conversely, Donna Hunter’s work experiences directly translated into advice for her daughter. She told Samantha about going to college: “If you can make ten bucks an hour or fifty bucks an hour, and that piece of paper is the only thing that’s separating that salary, why not go for it?”

Cultural Capital

Prohibited Embodied Cultural Capital

From a Bourdieuvian perspective, there are very few examples of cultural capital in participants’ narratives. Tammy’s interaction with the owner of the plant provides one of the few important cultural capital exemplars. When Tammy was told that she should not let her promotion go to her head, she was warned against embodying cultural capital, of attempting to alter her way of being. Tammy had already proven herself a skilled and valuable worker, and therefore the owner did not advise her on the duties of her new job. Instead, he focused on how she might view herself in this new role. With the promotion, Tammy could have had access to elite cultural capital, in that she would control other workers’ time and energies, like the factory owner. By asking her to promise she wouldn’t let the promotion go to her head, he made it clear she should not work to become like him, a cultural elite. Although Tammy’s father told her of his pride, he also
reminded Tammy of her role in the workplace as she moved from supervisee to supervisor, what her father called crossing to “the other side.”

Similarly, when a client introduced Sam to her friend as a hard worker, he was taken aback that within the introduction she reminded him that he worked for her. In much the same way Tammy’s supervisor told her, Sam was told not to let this social interaction “go to his head.” This brief introduction reminded Sam that he did not and would not know what life was like “on the other side,” as a cultural elite.

Ochberg and Comeau (2002) wondered if parents might not support their first-generation children at college because to them “the privileged, it appears, are different—not just because they have more money but because they take for granted a way of being that offends those less privileged” (p. 123). Both Tammy and Sam left these interactions cognizant of a deep social and cultural divide between them and the people with whom they spoke. Although Tammy and Sam had access to elite cultural capital by her controlling the work of hundreds of workers, and his physical presence at the elite woman’s home, they are told by elites that their current positions do not guarantee increased cultural capital. When Tammy told me about “money people” she made a distinction between those who had money and those who used their money in an offensive way. Although Sam had economic capital, he specifically is reminded that that economic capital is a weak form of capital and not transferable to cultural capital within elite networks.

The Validation of Institutionalized Cultural Capital

To better help her sons “be themselves,” Tammy held herself up as an example of how one could be treated in the workforce without a college degree. She told them:
“Even though you have the talents and skills and you can really do a good job, they always hold that against you,” referring to her lack of degree, institutionalized cultural capital. Tammy also distanced herself from those who do the hiring, as “they” hold the college degree in higher esteem than one’s ability to do a good job. Similarly, Donna Hunter discussed a college degree as way to gain validation with potential employers. Donna did not talk about a diploma as an avenue to gain more skills or training, but instead talked about how that piece of paper “validates you in their eyes.” Tammy worked to understand why companies preferred to hire college graduates: “Maybe when they hire these people it gives them better standing in the community if they have college graduates working for them? I don’t know. That’s the only conclusion I can come to.” Here both Tammy and Donna distinguished between the degree as an example of human capital and the degree as institutionalized cultural capital because the college diploma somehow indicated a “standing” in the community or a way of being that was different from a set of skills learned at college.

Implications for Practice

Researchers often recommended institutional strategies for students and their parents when working to enroll and retain first-generation college students in post-secondary education. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) suggested orientation programs “aimed directly at the parents of incoming first-generation college students to aid them in understanding the new environment” (p. 121). Riehl (1994) suggested colleges “develop a systematic way of communicating with parents, such as orientation sessions and regular newsletters, that would help them gain a clearer understanding of the benefits of a college education and the important role parents can play in a student’s
success” (p. 19). Terenzini et al. (1995) called on “institutions to provide more ways to ‘validate’ first-generation students as competent learners who deserve a place in their college or university” (p. 18).

The findings of this study suggest practitioners take a different approach, one that centers parents as very knowledgeable about their children, and about the values and norms of their communities. Often parent-participants were able to articulate the “benefits” of a college degree as increased earnings and job mobility. But at the same time, they were highly suspicious of the economic benefits and of the potential social losses the family could sustain when a child left for college. Although I worked to preclude generalizability, or the ability to explain some phenomenon across a variety of instances or cases (Schwandt, 1997), I offer up as generalizable that many first-generation college students have parents or other family members who are willing to discuss how and why they support their student at college, or what they do or do not know about college with researchers, faculty or professionals who will listen. Enrollment and retention strategies for first-generation college students could come from parents’ advice, and could vary by race, ethnicity or geography. For example, the social networks and community norms that influence parents’ perspectives on college-going could be significantly different in a southern, Appalachian community than in a northern New England fishing village.

This is not to suggest that the parents of first-generation college students have nothing to learn about what life at college could be like for their children, and how college attendance could affect their family. But the same could be said for parents who have attended college. Treating parents of first-generation college students as deficient,
however, positions them as obstacles for their students to overcome. What if practitioners viewed colleges, rather than parents, as the obstacles for students’ success? St. John et al. (2002) found a reduction in state and federal grants to poor students contributed to the inaccessibility of post-secondary education. What institutional structures might exist on college campuses that preclude first-generation college students from enrolling and persevering? And how might practitioners alter those obstacles?

Choy (2001) wrote that “while the data indicates that post-secondary enrollment is linked to parents’ education, increasing access to post-secondary education for these students by changing their parents’ education is not feasible” (p. 8). Using a critical framework to help first-generation college students enroll and persevere at college, why not work to change parents’ education? What if practitioners viewed parents as potential students who could also contribute to and benefit from a better-educated citizenry? Nearly all of the parents in this study expressed some regret at not attending college, and several discussed whether college could fit into their lives after their children were more established as adults. Like their students, these parents had what might be considered “barriers” to their enrollment, such as full-time jobs or significant financial responsibilities, or they simply felt they were too old. Practitioners might focus on eliminating these real or perceived barriers to higher education for this potential student pool.

In fact, two parents in this study enrolled in college classes toward the end of the interview process. One mother, Tammy wrote me a letter in which she explained how things were difficult at work due to recent layoffs and about her decision to take courses at a community college close to her home to set an example for her sons:
Talking to you about how important I think it is for both of my boys to attend college has made me realize it is just as important for me to take some control of my life. All of the different topics we discussed made me realize this is another chance I have to set an example for both of my boys. I want them to see that even though this is a very upsetting time in my life, I’m not going to crawl into a corner and give up.

Implications for Future Research

This study brings attention to parents of first-generation college students as important research participants in an effort to learn more about their sons’ and daughters’ successes and failures in post-secondary education. Additional research might consider different theoretical and methodological approaches than the ones used in this study, and build on the results presented here.

For example, I did not analyze data using a feminist theoretical approach that would have put gender at the center of analysis (Lather, 1991). Of the three female students whose parents participated in this study, two were enrolled in teacher preparation programs. A feminist approach would have produced different, intriguing results, especially when considering teaching as a historically female profession. Similarly, a queer theoretical approach might have presented significant findings about the heteronormativity of small, socially interconnected communities. An ethnographic approach could have focused more on the daily life in communities and how children’s college-going could affect more than family members, from multiple, community-based perspectives.

Further research might also consider how immigration into the United States could significantly alter who is considered first-generation and what types of capital recent immigrants do or do not bring to college from home. For example, specific ethnic
communities might bring very distinct and compelling social networks and norms from East Asian, Eastern European, Central or South American regions or countries other than those researched in North American educational systems to date. If college can play the role of “the great equalizer” (Serra Hagedorn and Tierney, 2002) in the United States, then it would be critical to learn how to help recent immigrants enroll and graduate from post-secondary institutions.

I also advocate for additional research that might build on the results of this study. I used a stringent interpretation of Pierre Bourdieu’s work and did not critique his assertion that cultural capital is a domain of the elite class. Scholars like McDonough (1997) allow for cultural capital within cultures not considered elite. For example, Sam Bradshaw lacked cultural capital when he was introduced as a hard worker at the home of one of his clients. But Sam might possess cultural capital within the tight knit community in which he was raised and in which he now lives using McDonough’s interpretation of Bourdieu. If so, what is elite cultural capital in Sam’s community and how is that affected by college-going?

Also, this study presented a very specific point in time in the lives of parent-participants. Longitudinal research would allow for an evolving perspective on college-going developed over time, from a student’s point of enrollment through his or her graduation. Specifically, a follow-up study with could contribute to the research on first-generation college students. This follow-up could better assess how parents’ support either did or did not help children persevere through graduation.

Additionally, it is important to increase the variation within subsequent studies. I recruited parent-participants who were similar to each other in that they were
heterosexual, married and had the economic means to support their student at college. Participants who were single parents, or perhaps family members other than parents who raised children would provide important information about first-generation college students’ lives. Additionally, poor or rich participants, or those who live in rural or urban areas, could also add significantly to the existing research.

A similar study from a discipline more closely aligned with family social systems or dynamics might also provide provocative results. In this particular study, parents’ views on college attendance was the focus and I did not work to discern parenting practices from how children were supported by parents at college. Put differently, was parents’ support of their children an extension of their parenting patterns, or was the type of support specific to college-going? Other social science approaches might help researchers and practitioners alike better understand the college perseverance of first-generation college students. This would also allow a different perspective on the social capital of the families beyond how the norms of their lives influence their decisions about college (McDonough, 1997).

It is also important to find those first-generation college students who did not persevere at college. What were their parents’ perceptions on college-going, and how were those perceptions affected by their students failing, or by the institutions failing their student?

Limitations of the Study

One of the limitations of this study is grounded in the purposefulness of the sampling procedures. Each of the participants in this study was heterosexual and in his or her first marriage. The lack of representation of gay or lesbian families or divorced
parents was not intended to be an endorsement of heterosexual, dual parenting families over any other configuration of family. Additionally, this study was conducted in a Midwestern state that has few private, elite institutions. In fact, state-funded education is the dominant model of post-secondary education. A similar study conducted in a state with a better balance in the number of private and public institutions could provide different, important results.

Also, although each family discussed the great financial sacrifices they made to help their children attend college, the fact remains that they did possess the economic means to help pay college expenses, and several had moved up into managerial positions. This study was not designed to present another set of “bootstraps narratives” in which the findings suggest that if one works hard enough, she or he can make it in America (e.g. Suskind, 1998). A 2002 report by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance found that financial barriers prevented 48 percent of college qualified, low-income high school graduates from attending four-year colleges and 22 percent from attending any college at all within two years of high school graduation. That meant 170,000 students were unable to enroll in college because they were too poor. Poverty is an obstacle to higher education for many students. This study did not consider low SES as a central factor in participant selection.

Other sampling limitations include participant demographics. No blended families, or those in which one or both parents have been divorced or remarried and bring children to the new familial configuration were interviewed. Also, no single parents were included here, nor were unemployed participants, or families who rented rather than owned the homes in which they lived, also an economic variable.
A study that utilized mixed-methods could also contribute greatly to the research base on first-generation college students. Compelling questions such as how researches define first-generation college students, or the conflation of first-generation status and poverty could be teased out using a mixed method approach.

Despite the relationships that developed between the participants and me, I only interviewed parents on several occasions. Each parent and the two brothers were incredibly generous and gracious with me and my questions, but there were recognizable limits on how much could be accomplished in our time together, which also might have dictated how comfortable parents could feel sharing important, intimate details of their family with me.

**Strengths of the Study**

Olesen (1994) encouraged those doing work in the name of feminism to explore the potential within biases: “If the researcher is sufficiently reflexive about her project, she can use biases to guide data gathering or create an understanding of her own interpretations and behavior in the research” (p. 164). As a first-generation college student, I was able to use my own experiences and biases to inform my work in a way that allowed me to be researcher and insider at different points in the research project. My being the first in my family to attend college also provided me an important connection with parent-participants, who often had questions about what my parents did for work, how many siblings I had and how often I returned “home” to see them.

My selection of a broad range of peer debriefers and campus professionals also was an important strength of this study. By relying on the guidance of this group of practitioners and scholars, I was able to check my emerging coding schemes, my biases
and my analyses with people who have great professional experience in this arena, several of whom are nationally recognized for their work in issues of college access.

But perhaps the greatest strength of this study was the use of parents as participants to learn more about the college-going processes of first-generation college students. Very few research projects have centered parents as key informants in learning more about their children, and no study I found worked exclusively with the parents.

Summary

The results of this study suggest that some parents of first-generation college students consider familial and community based social capital such as living in close geographic proximity to family, or complying with strong familial norms as important or more important than the economic, human or cultural capital conferred on their student by obtaining a college degree. Parents were not unaware of the wide array of benefits available to college graduates, that include increased earnings, access to jobs that are less physically demanding than those held by parents, and both a lateral and vertical job mobility that could allow movement between companies, types of jobs and perhaps, towns and cities.

Without exception, however, the strong social networks of the family were the most compelling form of capital found in parents’ narratives. Social capital was discussed in two forms. First, parents talked about the networks of relationships that were available by living near their parents and extended family members. Second, familial norms served as foundational guide posts in several components of child-rearing and in the college selection and enrollment processes. Parents had strong family and community examples that indicated when they became adults and what responsibilities came with
adulthood. Because college complicated these indicators of adulthood, parent-participants grappled with how to treat their children who were over 18 years old and high school graduates, but who were still in school.

This could be the point at which parental support appears to be lack of support to students and to researchers. Several parent-participants were concerned that their students might take for granted their parents’ financial assistance and fail to consider that their parents had worked hard to earn the tuition money. Parents working to guard against “spoiling” their children, what they called “cutting the apron strings” could potentially look like they were withholding support for college. For parents, this was a way to help move students into adulthood, and into a relationship in which they could rely on but not expect financial support from their parents.

Additionally, several students knew of people who had both complied and who had departed with familial norms. Those who departed from norms were at times held up by parents as negative examples. They made life difficult by living too far away, or were described in a way that indicated they were acceptable in spite of their norm-departing behaviors. Above all, participants were not barriers, but contributors to their children’s successes. It was a matter of discerning how the families defined success, and as John reminded me when he told me about what he hoped his children would do after high school: “There are an awful lot of ways of measuring success.”
Appendix A

Email to Faculty and Staff to Solicit Participants

January 2003

Dear (Faculty or Staff member’s name),

I am writing to solicit your advice in identifying individuals to participate in a research project for my Ph.D. dissertation. I’m interested in learning about the lives of the family members of first-generation college students. This might include but not be limited to parents, brothers or sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents or more extended family members, or friends of family. I am interested in family members’ perceptions of how their student’s attending college has affected the student and his or her family. Although I use the term, “first-generation college student,” I also hope to include people in my study who have had some college experience. This might mean that family members attended some college, or obtained a degree from a technical college. Broadly defined, I would like to talk to family members whose college experience is significantly different than their student’s experience. I am hoping that through your work with students and their families, you might recommend families who might be interested in participating.

Family members’ involvement will include participating in three interviews with me, each approximately one hour. We’ll do the interviews between February and April of 2003. I hope that participants will also review summaries of interviews and help me think about what we’re learning from the study. Doing so should take about three hours, and we’ll do that after April.

By participating in this study, I hope family members will find this to be a rewarding experience that allows them to better understand how a student’s attending college might affect the student and the larger family. Family member’s participation will also help educators and counselors better understand important issues for both family members and first-generation college students.

I know that discussing perceptions on how college affects one’s family can be a very personal and sensitive subject. Family members will only need to discuss with me topics that they are comfortable discussing. It is not my intention to force them to talk about anything that makes them uncomfortable. Also, please be assured that I will take great care to treat all information confidentially and that whenever I write or talk about this study, I will not use names or descriptions which would allow families or family members to be recognized. Participation is voluntary and family members may discontinue at any time without penalty.
If you know of a family that might be interested in being part of this study please contact me via email or regular mail. I have included a sample invitation form which I will then either email or mail to the family to invite their participation. I can be reached via campus mail at 301 Ramseyer Hall; 29 W. Woodruff Ave, Columbus, OH 43210 via e-mail at delong.76@osu.edu or at home at 424-9126.

Also, please call or e-mail me if you have any questions. I am excited about this study and am eager to get started, so I hope to hear from you soon. Thank you for your time!

Allen W. Delong  
Ph.D Student  
Educational Policy & Leadership

Mary Ann Danowitz Sagaria, Ed.D  
Associate Professor/Advisor  
Educational Policy & Leadership
Appendix B

U.S. Mail letter to Invite Participation

January 2003

Dear (insert name of potential participant):

I am writing to invite you to consider participating in a research project for my Ph.D. dissertation. For my degree, I am required to conduct an original research project, and I am interested in learning about the lives of family members of first-generation college students. This might include parents, brothers or sisters (who for this study must be over the age of 18), aunts, uncles, grandparents or more extended family members, or friends of family. Rather than having you fill out a survey or answer a few short questions, I want to learn by listening to the stories that you tell about your lives. Your stories will be the focus of the research. I am interested in your perspectives on higher education, and about how your family member’s attending college does or does not affect you and your family. Although I use the term, “first-generation college student,” please know that I hope to include people in my study who may have had some college experience. This might mean that you attended some college, or obtained a degree from a technical college. Broadly defined, I would like to talk to family members whose college experience is significantly different than their child’s experience. _____ suggested that I contact you as he/she thought you would make a valuable contribution to this study.

I am asking you to be involved by participating in three interviews with me, each approximately one hour. We’ll do the interviews between February and April of 2003. I hope that you will also be willing to review summaries of your interviews and help me think about what we’re learning from the study. Doing so should take about three hours, and we’ll do that after April.

By participating in this study, you will have the opportunity to share with me, a non-judgmental listener, stories from your life. I hope you will find this to be a rewarding experience that allows you to better understand how your family member’s attending college might affect you and your family. Your participation will also help educators and counselors better understand important issues for both family members and first-generation college students. After the study is finished I will send you a summary of my results.
I know that discussing how college affects your family can be a very personal and sensitive subject. You only need to discuss with me topics that you are comfortable discussing. It is not my intention to force you to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable. Also, please be assured that I will take great care to treat all information confidentially and that whenever I write or talk about this study, I will not use your name or describe you in a way that others can recognize you. Your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue at any time without penalty to either you or your student.

If you are interested in participating please complete and e-mail/send to me (in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope) the Interest Form included with this message to delong.76@osu.edu. I will contact you within a few weeks to schedule our initial meeting.

If you have any questions, please e-mail or call me at home (424-9126). I have voice mail and am the only person with access to my messages. I look forward to hearing from you soon, and to meeting you in person.

Sincerely,

Allen W. Delong
Ph.D. Student
Educational Policy & Leadership

Mary Ann Danowitz Sagaria, Ed.D
Associate Professor/Advisor
Educational Policy & Leadership
Appendix C

List of Interview Questions

As you know, what I am interested in learning about stories from your life. The questions are very open-ended and I want you to tell me only what you are comfortable sharing. It is not my intention to pressure you into telling me anything that you are not comfortable telling me. Please let me know if at any time during the interview you become uncomfortable, and we can stop the interview or change the nature of some of the questions so that you are less uncomfortable. Do you have any questions before we start?

(1) Please tell me about your family. Who is included in this definition? Are there extended family members or other people who are important to your family?

(2) Would you please describe the community in which you live?

(3) How many people in your family, at work, etc...have completed a college degree? Will you describe some of those people to me and maybe describe some or your interactions with them?
*What is that person’s relationship to you and your family?

(4) What influenced your own decisions about education?
*Why did you attend or not attend some college?

(5) Have you noticed a change in your family since your student entered college?
* How has your student changed?
*How is your student the same or different than s/he was before he attended college?
*Tell me about a time when you recognized a change in your family you attributed to your student’s attending college.

*In this next area, work to find examples.
(6) What advice did you provide your student as s/he thought about applying to colleges?
*What advice did you provide your student as s/he chose a college?
*What advice did you provide your student as s/he “left” for college?
*What types of things did you and your student do when s/he was thinking about or applying to colleges? (e.g. read applications, go on college visits, etc…)

(7) Now that your student is enrolled in college, how do you support him or her?
(8) What experiences in your own life have helped you give advice for your student?
(9) How important do you think a college education is to your student’s success in his or her life?
   *How important do you think a college education is to your student’s happiness in life?
(10) How does your student’s attending college affect you and your family? Would you talk about that?

(11) What do you talk to your student about when she or he comes home from college? What types of things does s/he talk about?
(12) Do you feel as if you have told me the most important stories about how your student’s college attendance has affected your family? If not, what other stories from your life should I know?

Note: If I sense during the interview that the participant is uncomfortable, I will check in with her to see if she is doing all-right and ask whether or not she wants to continue.

*asterisks indicated probing or follow-up questions
Appendix D

Statement of Informed Consent

I agree to participate in the research project entitled The Impact of College on the Family Members of First-generation College Students conducted by Allen Delong, Ph.D student in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership, The Ohio State University. The purpose of the research is to study family members’ perceptions of how college attendance affects their student, and their family.

I understand that my participation in this project will involve three interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. The interviews will be recorded on audiotape and transcribed verbatim. I understand that I will also be asked to review a summary of the interviews and help think about what can be learned from them.

I am aware that some people are uncomfortable talking about themselves, and that any discomfort I might experience should be no more than that normally experienced during a small group discussion. I understand that I do not have to discuss anything that I am not comfortable discussing. If I wish to discontinue participation in the study, I will be free to leave without penalty. All audiotapes and transcripts that were already created will be destroyed if I withdraw from the study.

I understand that participating in this study might help me better understand how my student's going to college affects my student, my family and me. My participation will also help educators and counselors better understand how college attendance affects first-generation college students and their families.

I also understand that my participation in this project is strictly voluntary and that information will be treated confidentially. My name will not be connected with any materials produced for this study. Only Allen Delong, Dr. Mary Ann Danowitz Sagaria (a professor in the Educational Policy & Leadership and Allen’s advisor), and an inquiry auditor to be named at a later date will have access to individual data. Tapes will be kept in a locked file.

I am aware that if I have any questions about my participation in the project I may contact Allen Delong (424-9126; delong.76@osu.edu) or Dr. Mary Ann Danowitz Sagaria (sagaria.1@osu.edu). I may also contact the Chair, Behavioral and Social Sciences Institutional Review Board, The Ohio State University, 614-292-6950, if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

Participant Name (please print) ____________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________  ____________
Signature     Date

___________________________________________________  ____________
Principal Investigator Signature     Date

___________________________________________________  ____________
Co-Investigator Signature     Date
References


College Board (2003, August 26). *SAT® verbal and math scores up significantly as a record-breaking number of students take the test.* Retrieved January 3, 2003 from http://www.collegeboard.com


159


