“Secret Ingredients” in Postsecondary Educational Attainment: Challenges Faced by Students Attending High Poverty High Schools

Dissertation

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Abstract

The importance of college enrollment has surged as degrees have increasingly become prerequisites for employment. While enrollment numbers have risen, rates of attendance among all populations have not been equal. Low income and first-generation students enroll and complete college at lower rates than their counterparts.

Conducted during a psychology-based high school curriculum intervention, designed to increase underrepresented students’ likelihood of successful college completion, this qualitative inquiry used methods of grounded theory to provide insights into persisting inequalities in educational attainment. The study focused on potentially college-bound students’ aspirations, perceptions and views of their educational landscape with the aim to increase understanding of the academic attainment challenges some students from high poverty high schools face.

Two themes, emerging from grounded theory methods of analysis, combined together to form students’ view of college: students’ home context and resource scarcity during the college enrollment process. Central to students’ views of postsecondary education was the perception of college as risky. Risk was the product of college being perceived as unfamiliar, academically hard, and expensive when confronted with resource scarcity. College-bound students became involved in
numerous strategies designed to reduce the risk college attendance presented. These strategies, while helping students in the short term, involved activities associated with non-completion of four-year degrees, such as beginning their postsecondary pursuits at two-year colleges and for-profit institutions. Not all students attempted risk minimizing strategies. Other plans included forgoing college altogether. Among other reasons, students may not pursue four-year degrees because they do not share the belief in the promise of economic security a college degree claims to afford.

Findings revealed that there are six “secret ingredients” to postsecondary baccalaureate attainment, which go beyond the traditionally viewed requirements of “skill and will.” Academic attainment depends upon resources of wealth, time, knowledge, courage and the abilities to make sacrifices and to take risks. Better understanding of hidden ingredients to college success viewed from students’ perspectives has the potential to improve policy decisions aimed at increasing access to educational opportunities.
Dedication

To my son

&

To the students I met during the evaluation,
who shared their lives and thoughts.
I wish them much success in their future academic endeavors.
Acknowledgements

Thanks to The Ohio State University
for supporting me as a student,
offering me assistantships to make my studies possible
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I first met Dr. Lawson in 2000
when I was hunting for a graduate program
which matched my eclectic interests. I found a home in comparative education.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Educational Policy and Leadership/Comparative Education
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication .............................................................................................................................. iv
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................................ v
Vita ........................................................................................................................................ vi
List of Tables ....................................................................................................................... viii
List of Figures ...................................................................................................................... ix
Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................ 15
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods ............................................................................. 38
Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings ..................................................................................... 64
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications .......................................................................... 117
References ............................................................................................................................ 143
Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Script .................................... 157
Appendix B: Theme/Code Table ....................................................................................... 159
Appendix C: School Environment ..................................................................................... 164
List of Tables

Table 1: Districts and Schools ................................................................. 42
Table 2: School Report Cards ............................................................... 44
Table 3: Economically Disadvantaged Population .................................. 45
Table 4: Graduate Rates ..................................................................... 46
Table 5: Enrollment and Attendance Rates .......................................... 46
Table 6: Data Collection Dates ............................................................. 47
Table 7: Fall and Spring Visits .............................................................. 48
Table 8: Observation Dates ................................................................. 49
Table 9: Interview Dates ................................................................... 52
Table 10: Coding Stages .................................................................... 54
Table 11: (Voiced) Household Makeup ............................................... 70
Table 12: Working Students ................................................................. 72
Table 13: College Enrollment Process Needs ...................................... 75
Table 14: Postsecondary Aspirations .................................................. 90
Table 15: Significance of College ....................................................... 91
Table 16: Postsecondary Concerns ...................................................... 94
Table 17: Theme and Code Table ...................................................... 163
List of Figures

Figure 1: Primacy of Power, Agent vs. Structure ................................................................. 24
Figure 2: Data Analysis Process .......................................................................................... 54
Figure 3: Theme Cluster One: Students’ Home Context ....................................................... 68
Figure 4: Theme Cluster Two: Resource Scarcity during the College Enrollment Process .... 75
Figure 5: Time Depletion Cycle ......................................................................................... 87
Figure 6: College Enrollment Funnel .................................................................................. 88
Figure 7: Competition for Resources .................................................................................. 89
Figure 8: Reasons to Attend College ................................................................................... 90
Figure 9: Theme Cluster Three: Student View of College: Risky ........................................... 100
Figure 10: Theme Cluster Four: Risk Minimizing Strategies ............................................... 102
Figure 11: Theme Cluster Five: College as Heavy Burden .................................................... 107
Figure 12: Theme Cluster Six: Opt Out or Shut Out? .......................................................... 109
Figure 13: Diagram of Postsecondary Planning: ................................................................. 116
Figure 14: “Secret Ingredients” in Academic Attainment: Recipe for Success ................. 121
Chapter 1: Introduction

A. Overview and Objectives

In 2018, approximately 63 percent of jobs in the United States are projected to require postsecondary education (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). This is up from 28 percent in 1974. Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl believe that America’s current recession is accelerating this trend, as jobs requiring less training are being permanently eliminated by being exported overseas or automated to save money.

As more and more jobs require postsecondary degrees, the importance of college enrollment has increased. Currently, almost 70 percent of high school graduates enroll in college within two years of completing high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). While the college enrollment rate has increased since the 1970s, enrollment rates have not been equal among all populations. Inequality in college enrollment rates by parents' education, family income, and racial/ethnic group has been reproduced with every generation. Enrollment rates of high school graduates from low-
income families trail the rates of those from high-income families by 20 percentage points. Potential first generation college graduates also consistently have lower rates of enrollment than their counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). First generation and low income students are less likely to earn bachelors and graduate degrees even though their early academic aspirations are similar to others (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Choy, 2001; Chen & Carroll, 2005).

In addition to students failing to enroll in college, approximately 43 percent of first-time students seeking a bachelor's degree fail to graduate within six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). These students are also more likely to attend less selective colleges, which have lower graduation rates (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Low socioeconomic status and first-generation students face greater risks of non-completion and are almost four times more likely to leave higher education after the first year than those with wealthier, more educated parents (Lehmann, 2007b; Walpole, 2003; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

As both high schools and colleges attempt to ameliorate unequal educational access and outcomes, developmental education courses aimed at increasing college readiness have surged. More than one million students nationwide (approximately 42% of those attending college for the first time) enroll in remedial courses annually (McCabe, 2000).

Many of the curricula used for these remedial courses are based on social-cognitive theories borrowed from educational psychology to encourage achievement.
motivation, self-regulation and teach study skills (Tuckman, Abry, & Smith, 2002; Downing, 2008; Van der Stoep & Pintrich, 2008; Wong & Downing, 2009, Tuckman, 2007). The content of many interventions assume both the desirability and possibility of social mobility. The course texts emphasize academic effort as the main ingredient for success and instruct students that a college degree will pay off.

The text of one acclaimed course provided the following instructions on achieving academic success. “What you need to do is focus on effort as the most important cause of your outcomes, realize that effort is a factor you can do something about, and then increase the amount of effort you apply” (Tuckman, Abry, & Smith, 2002, back cover). Downing’s On Course Facilitator’s Manual (2008) states, “At the center of the success skills...is the students’ ability to make wise choices....Students benefit because they learn more effective ways to fashion the positive futures they have come to college to create” (viii). “Grounded in up-to-date research on cognitive and motivational psychology,” Learning to Learn: The Skill and Will of College Success by Van der Stoep and Pintrich (2008) states, “It takes two things to be successful in life: skill and will” (xiii).

While these texts place emphasis on encouraging motivation and decision-making skills, students’ lack of academic effort or inability to make calculated decisions did not appear to encapsulate the totality of challenges faced by the high school students filling classrooms in the high poverty, urban schools where this inquiry took place. A discrepancy seemed to exist between views of the causes of attainment
inequality. While the curriculum intervention which led to this inquiry implied a lack of effort and poor decision-making, students revealed circumstances which presented formidable challenges to achievement.

The college success course was created through a center within a neighboring university. Implemented in several high poverty population high schools within the metropolitan area, the curriculum was designed to make higher education more accessible for underrepresented students. The course was carefully designed to meet the needs of “at risk” high school students who were planning to attend college.

Several quasi-experimental matched control group studies conducted by the center had concluded that students who took the class had a greater increase in GPA than did matched students who did not take the course. I was employed by the center during the 2006-2007 school year to add a qualitative evaluation of the course to complement the quantitative analyses and to include qualitative information in the final report issued to the agency funding the intervention. I conducted 39 observational visits to ten classrooms in six different schools in the metropolitan area and followed up with 20 additional visits to interview 76 of the students. The qualitative data were used to report areas of the curriculum found most helpful to students, the degree to which the curriculum was being implemented as intended by the original creators, and the overall satisfaction students had with the course. However, the qualitative data gathered had the potential to respond to further questions about the students’ conceptualization of
their educational landscape and the alignment of the intervention to the recipients’ circumstances.

For example, while much of the curriculum intervention focused on fixing problems located within the thought processes of students, many students shared circumstantial trials and tribulations with me, which illustrated many not easily surmountable societal factors impeding their educational attainment. Educational program evaluations, in addition to other less formal reviews of educational interventions, which focus only on final outcomes, may fail to uncover the structural barriers students individually face. While those who achieve are counted in routine program evaluations, in-depth understanding of the reasons why some are less successful may be silenced and left uninvestigated (Becker, Krodel, & Tucker, 2009; Fine, 1991; Levinson, 2007).

During this study, I analyzed the qualitative data gathered as part of the evaluation of the intervention to research previously uninvestigated questions. In so doing, I provide insight into persisting inequalities in educational achievement, especially among potential first generation students and those from low socioeconomic households. After investigating students’ views, aspirations, and educational landscape, I share an emerging theory on why students leave college or fail to enroll in the first place and why first-generation and lower income students are more likely to forego getting a college degree.
B. Background and Rationale

Much talk in American public education is centered on the idea of college attendance as being a route to success (Allen, 1992; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, Hayek, 2007; Walpole, 2007). The main purpose stated in the textbook for the intervention\(^1\) was to promote “ultimate life success,” (i.e., college attendance), because college attendance can “change who you are, what you can become” and “help you to have a comfortable, rewarding life.”

However, in parts of American life outside of the middle class\(^2\), college attendance may not be “normal” nor a requirement for those to consider themselves successful (Smith 2008, 2009; MacLeod, 1987; Willis 1977; McDonough, 1997; Watkins, 2005; Bergerson, 2009); moreover, there are many factors that influence a student’s decision, readiness, and ability to enter and graduate from college. These factors besides success strategies are prevalent determinants of college attendance of urban public school students.

\(^1\) I omit the name of the textbook to avoid possible identification of schools and students.

\(^2\) It must be noted that “class” is a complex notion. See Swartzman (1999) and Lindelow and Yazbech (2004) for detailed discussions about the challenges of statistical measurement of poverty and SES. What makes a person or family “middle class” is up for debate, and certainly the definition has changed over time. While many associate class definitions with buying power and/or life chances, three prominent scholars (Thompson and Hickey, 2005; Gilbert, 2002; Beegley, 2004) have defined middle class based on earnings, occupation and educational attainment. But questions about the details abound. For example, when households contain more than one wage earner, should their salaries be combined when determining class? Does cost of living or income to debt ratio impact one’s class membership? C. Wright Mills (2002) has argued that the middle class wealth is an illusion, as much of middle class possessions are bought using credit and, thus, owned by banks. One recent study (Taylor, 2008) attempted to avoid the issue of assigning class by asking participants to declare their class affiliation. (Most said they were middle class). Researchers seeking a more substantive definition of class have studied “standard of living” or “quality of life” measures, which examine comfort and happiness indicators, such as enough savings to cover emergencies (Weller & Logan, 2009), home ownership, discretionary income, or the use of status symbols (Moskowitz, 2004; Avitts, 2010). Despite the shortcomings of defining class, this research does find class relevant and defines the middle class as generally being college educated and having a middle tier salary which affords a comfortable standard of living.
C. Statement of Researcher’s Perspective

Researcher Lens

To articulate my own analytic lens, I highlight two important experiences, which have molded my identity and the perspectives I bring to this study: being an experienced classroom teacher and a first-generation college graduate.

Researcher as Experienced Classroom Teacher

Having taught in economically distressed schools and districts for over ten years, including teaching refugees and undocumented immigrants, I have had many meaningful interactions with economically disadvantaged students. Prior to the study, I had worked as a full-time high school teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages, ESOL, for several years in the same district where my research was conducted. In addition to that experience, I had also taught abroad in developing countries. I have taught middle school in high poverty schools in the United States and at a community college.

Having experience as a teacher practitioner gives me an “inside track,” so to speak, about what goes on in classrooms, which at times can provide guidance toward interesting areas for probing, but on other occasions it can be limiting. As an experienced teacher, I must strive to see past the “taken-for-grantedness” (Goffman, 1959) of a classroom from my teachers’ eyes and instead view the classroom through a researcher’s lens.
Researchers as First Generation College Graduate

Secondly, as a first generation college graduate from a rural town, I can identify with some of the challenges faced by students attempting to navigate an academic route with few prior family examples. I grew up in a rural Midwestern town, where approximately two percent of residents older than 25 (37 out of a total population of 1854) hold a graduate or professional degree (compared to 10.1% nationwide)³ (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008). As a person who spent the first 18 years of her life living in a town where few college graduates return, I have personal experience on the ways that college attendance impacts family cohesion and other tolls extracted by education, many of which are not felt by those from economically growing communities.

First-generation students who continue to university are asked to navigate a new culture which presents challenges (Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991; Lehmann, 2007a; Aronson 2008; Allen, 1992; Goodwin, 2006). My parents both grew up in families with economic and other hardships. Both graduated from high school, but neither completed college. My father enrolled in college and then dropped out, citing several reasons, but most importantly, he did not feel he fit in. My mother felt she was never expected to go on to higher education. I was the first in my family to persist in higher education and recall the difficulty of leaving home to go away to college. I left the

³ From the town, 10.7% hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), compared to 27.4% nationwide (U. S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008).
farming village where I had grown up to merge into a different culture with a diverse student body.

For those from first generation homes, parents do not always understand educational pursuits (Kleinfeld 2009; Goodwin, 2006; Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998; Billson & Terry, 1982). After finishing my bachelors, I elected to return to my alma mater for one summer to complete graduate coursework leading to an additional area of teacher certification, now called licensure—unfortunately without the full support of my parents, who wished I would focus more on “earning a living.” Instead of praising their children for educational pursuits, many first generation students find themselves criticized by family members. For those who did not pursue a postsecondary degree, higher education may seem unnecessary and costly, a luxury, or even an irresponsible choice. While many public schools promote the necessity of a college degree, for some first generation students this is not an obvious assumption.

First-generation students are more likely than their counterparts to lack knowledge about the college application process. (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Walpole et al., 2005; Terenzini et al., 1994). Because I was a top student, it was assumed that I would go to college, but no one placed any emphasis on which college. Getting a college degree, from any college, was enough. I had little knowledge about different careers and eventually chose to become a teacher, because I knew what teachers did, having sat in classrooms for 13 years.
I faced some challenges as the first in my family to complete college. However, in contrast to many of the students I encountered during my study, I had access to many advantages which aided my academic pursuits, including relatively supportive and involved parents, a stable home environment, and parents with some financial means. Students from lower socioeconomic status homes receive less financial support from their parents (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). They also may lack basic facilities for studying in the home, and the necessity of work may impact the amount of study time they have. Poverty can also contribute to higher levels of uncertainty (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Lehmann 2004, 2007; Quinn, 2004) which can impact future career planning.

D. Research Questions

Two sets of questions were investigated in this secondary analysis of the data gathered during the program evaluation:

First, students’ views and aspirations were examined by asking the below questions:

1. What were the participants’ future academic and career aspirations? How did the students define success in life?
2. What did “college” mean to them?
3. What was the educational terrain, or path, students saw in front of them?

Secondly, challenges or barriers to academic attainment were analyzed.

1. What other “secret ingredients” are there to success (besides effort) from the view of the participants?
2. What challenges were they facing? Did they see the same urgent problems the implementers saw or different ones?
E. Significance of the Study

There exists an extensive body of literature on students who are deemed “at risk.” A quick search of the ERIC database revealed 10,460 articles in journals with the descriptor “at risk students”.

“At risk” has been defined by Slavin (1989) as “one who is in danger of failing to complete his or her education with an adequate level of skills” (4). Much of this literature is devoted to the identification of characteristics or qualities which contribute to making a student “at risk.” These studies begin with traits or behaviors believed to be risk factors and attempt to find relationships between the factors and failure or success, depending on the focus of the study. Many of these studies draw solely on databases of statistical information about students and schools, such as dropout rates, attendance rates, number of suspensions, etc. Few of these studies involve extended time observing classrooms or interacting with students. Rarely do they attempt to provide descriptions of how identified factors impede educational pursuits.

While this study discusses some of the challenges students face, it also provides insight into students’ educational decision-making processes. Explanations for choices urban public school students make may be found in descriptions and analysis of the educational landscape viewed from the eyes of students who may have different ideas of what “ultimate life success” means and/or limited resources available for the pursuit of academic achievement.
Through an analysis of my year-long experience interacting with students, curriculum developers, policy makers, school administrators and representatives from aid organizations will benefit from having a better understanding of the circumstances, beliefs and individual concerns of the students served by the intervention. By examining what the students see as relevant, it is hoped that future policy might design interventions to fit their needs, incorporating their views.

F. Limitations

Because this study is an extension of a program evaluation, it was not originally designed for scientific research purposes. Contact data was not gathered from students or teachers. All students were not interviewed. Detailed background information on student demographics was not compiled. The gathering of documents was shaped by the needs of the program evaluation.

Data was gathered over the course of a group of students’ senior or junior school year. It did not continue to discover whether students, in the end, actually went on to attend college (or complete college). Therefore, this study is only able to point at possible challenges for students. It is not able to offer confirmation.

Data analysis and theorizing did not begin until after all the data were collected, therefore the ideal emergent design of a grounded theory study did not occur.

On the other hand, the program evaluation was important in foregrounding issues related to students’ aspirations and providing a context for me to converse with students about these issues. Despite the fact that this study is an extension of a
program evaluation rather than an originally planned systematic scientific investigation, the documents produced during the evaluation had value which exceeded the program evaluation and were worthy of further analysis.

G. Definitions of Terms

**Economically Disadvantaged**

Economically disadvantaged students include those who are eligible for free or reduced price lunch from their schools or those who receive public assistance outside the school. Families can qualify for reduced priced meals if their income is 185% of the poverty rate. (USDA Food and Nutrition, 2009)

**Equality of Opportunity**

In contrast to the concept of equality of outcome, equality of opportunity in education refers to fair access to educational pursuits. Once they have gained access, participants are then left to compete and achieve according to merit. Equality of opportunity has been described as “leveling the playing field.”

**Equality of Outcome**

Equality of outcome in education refers to equal distribution of educational rewards and/or attainment. For example, this may be achieved through the use of quota systems. Proponents generally claim that it is impossible to “level the playing field” and thus such quota systems are warranted.

**First-generation college student**

Refers to a student whose parents have not obtained a four-year college degree.

**Agency & Structure**

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to make their own free choices independent of societal influences. Structure refers to societal forces and institutions which influence or limit the choices and opportunities that individuals possess. While the ideas of structure and agency are useful in understanding human action, there are also limits to their use, especially when examining the role individual agency has in the creation and promulgation of structures.
Habitus

The routine, unconscious dispositions and taken-for-granted preferences which influence one’s choices and thought patterns. These inclinations originate through an individual’s interaction with his or her environment. Attempting to avoid the perception of determinism, Errante (2009) prefers the word “orientation.” She believes this word includes “the unconscious/structural aspect of habitus, but also conveys the sense of ‘tending toward’ rather than ‘fixed in,’ allowing creativity and innovation in practice that Bourdieu believed were possible over time” (136).

Cultural capital

The cultural knowledge, dispositions, and skills which are passed from one generation to the next and can be used to gain recognition, access or other rewards. Examples of types of cultural capital may be linguistic, material possessions, past achievements and credentials.

Social capital

Profitable social networks. Having access to others (including parents) with cultural capital valued by those guarding the educational selection process.

Fit

Refers to the extent a student feels socially and culturally comfortable in a setting.

Meritocracy

A system in which advancement and rewards are based on individual ability or achievement.

Social Reproduction

The intergenerational continuation of social class
Chapter 2: Literature Review

I. Introduction
   a. Special Considerations for Grounded Theory Literature Review

II. Education, Social Mobility, and Access
   a. Education’s Role in Education Differentials
      i. Education as a tool for Mobility and Equality
         1. Successes: Education Pay-Off
         2. Limitations
      ii. Explaining why
          1. Structure vs. Agency
          2. Social Reproduction Theory
          3. Rational Choice Theory
          4. Other theories
             a. psychological,
             b. sociological,
             c. cultural,
             d. organizational, and
             e. economic
      iii. Solutions
          1. Increasing Access
          2. Equalizing Outcomes
Introduction

Special Considerations for Grounded Theory Literature Review

Grounded theory methods encourage the discovery of new theories by focusing the researcher’s analysis on making sense of gathered data, rather than testing previous theories. This changes the use and role of the literature review. In fact, the originators of grounded theory methods caution against early reviews of existing literature for two main reasons. First, knowledge of other studies can unduly influence the current study, constraining or stifling the researcher’s imagination. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) state, “Perhaps we should warn that the discovery of a cache [of literature] can actually restrict the development of a researcher’s theorizing” (p. 168). Becker (1986) calls this threat “ideological hegemony.” Second, knowing the exact focus or salient issues of the study prior to analysis is unlikely due to the emergent nature of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 49). Because theory is to be grounded in the new data, the relevant literature in which the results are to be situated will be unknown until late in the study.

As suggested by Strauss and Corbin, this literature review focuses, not on an exhaustive list of former research directly related to my final theory, but instead on approaches to the role of education in society, specifically as they relate to the conditions of the population I studied. The chapter serves as a theoretical frame for challenges to educational attainment faced by economically disadvantaged students. A
more comprehensive review of literature on academic challenges faced by first-generation, economically disadvantaged students is interwoven into chapter five.

**Education, Social Mobility, and Access**

The aim of this inquiry was to contribute to existing dialogue on social mobility, equality, and American education. Research questions included: *What challenges and barriers to educational pursuits are faced by low socioeconomic students? What meanings do students attribute to “college” and “success?” What are the “secret ingredients” in academic success?* To successfully meet the goal of contributing to the discussion, an understanding of the existing literature regarding social mobility, social reproduction and education’s role is necessary.

**Education’s Role: Great Equalizer**

Education has been viewed in America as a great equalizer. One of the original aims of public education was to promote equality and to mitigate the situation of the poor. Instrumental in promoting public education, Horace Mann wrote in his 12th annual report (1848), “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men,—the balance wheel of the social machinery.... It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich: it prevents being poor.” Also, education has been seen as playing a key role in poverty amelioration between nations. As Noah & Eckstein (1969) explain, "International provision of teams of education experts, planners, administrators, and teachers has become one of the
characteristic ways in which a well-off nation can show its practical concern for the plight of less fortunate people” (p. 38).

Educational Pay-Off

American schooling does seem to provide a payoff to individuals who pursue it. Those with more education earn more, are less likely to be unemployed, are more satisfied with their work and leisure time, enjoy better health, are less likely to be incarcerated, are more likely to volunteer and vote in elections (Baum & Payea, 2004). Recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2008) show that those with less than a high school diploma earn less and have a higher unemployment rate (nine percent) than those with higher levels of education (5.7 percent of those who are high school graduates and two percent of those who earned doctoral degrees).

The average salary of those with college degrees is increasing much faster than the salaries of those with only a high school diploma (Cheeseman Day & Newburger, 2002). The gap between earnings between high school graduates and those with advanced degrees has been widening since the 1980s. In 2005, the average income for those with a bachelor’s degree was near $60,000, while high school graduates earned on average around $30,000, a $30,000 difference between the two. In 1983, there was a much smaller difference in the power of a college degree, as high school graduates could expect $12,000 a year and four-year college graduates made $20,000 on average. The more education one receives, the greater salary one can expect.
Education as a Tool for Mobility and Equality

Despite the fact that furthering one’s education does indeed seem to provide a payoff, schooling in America has had limited success in its utilization in poverty eradication. Beginning with Horace Mann, public schooling in the United States has been promoted based on two very popular goals. First, investigation into educational access is encouraged by the belief that increased access to opportunity (especially those in postsecondary education) will lead to more equal wealth distribution. Second, formal education is assumed to be a tool of economic and social mobility, to better the living conditions of those who pursue it, and promote individual advancement for all who pursue it.

America reveals dismal progress toward the first goal of encouraging wealth equality. The current situation in the United States reveals enormous wealth disparity. Several studies show inequality in the United States to be one of the highest of the developed nations (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Blanden, Gregg, & Machin, 2005; Mishel, Bernstein & Shierholz, 2009).

In the United States, progress towards equalization reached a high during the 1980s. (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2006). However, since the 1980s, rising inequality has been documented by economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez (2006). They showed that between 1979 and 2005, income for the wealthiest one percent increased by 176%. The wealthiest 20% increased 69%. However, the income of
the poorest 20% only rose six percent. In 2007, the top one percent in the United States received 23% of the nation’s income.

Key findings from the *State of Working America* (Mishel, Bernstein, & Shierholz, 2009) also showed that the rich are getting richer at a much faster rate than others. About 91% of all income growth in the U.S. from 1979-2006 went to the wealthiest 10% — leaving just over nine percent to be shared among the remaining 90%. Another indication of this trend is the CEO to worker pay ratio, which reveals widening salary gaps. In 1973, the average CEO was paid $27 for every dollar paid to a typical worker. By 2005, the ratio had grown to $262 to $1 (Mishel, Bernstein & Shierholz, 2009). The CEO of Wal-Mart in 2005 received 900 times the pay and benefits of the typical Wal-Mart employee (Reich, 2009, p. vi).

Not only are the rich in America getting richer, but the poor are getting poorer. The *State of Working America* (Mishel, Bernstein & Shierholz, 2009) found that after inflation adjustment, new male high school graduates earned $2.55 less per hour in 2007 than did their predecessors in 1973. Surprisingly, actual (non-inflation adjusted) hourly pay for young women fell $1.05 per hour over the same period. Hourly pay for young college graduates has also declined. Real wages were $.69 lower for men and $.32 lower for women in 2007 than in 2000.

While some claim that inequality is necessary in a competition-based economic system, large disparities between classes may provoke social disharmony. Wilkinson and Pickett’s (2009) international study, documented in *The Spirit Level*, found a correlation
between unequal societies and social ills. They discovered that the greater the inequality within a nation, the more prisons, mental illness, obesity, and illiteracy were present, in addition to other social ills. An analysis of inequality within U.S. states showed that more children drop out of high school in more unequal U.S. states. Brosnan and de Waal (2003) believe inequality may cause social disharmony through built-in biological responses of “inequality aversion.” Their study of chimpanzees revealed angry reactions when peers were treated unequally in food reward distribution.

Citizens may be happier when they see neighbors faring financially the same as themselves. Several studies on happiness have shown relative wealth, rather than absolute wealth, to be more important (Easterlin, 1974, 1995; Kasser & Ryan 1993; Diener, Kahneman, and Helliwell, 2010). In fact, there are benefits to the whole society when there is less inequality. In more equal societies, there are fewer people suffering from anxiety disorders and addiction and lower death rates for all social classes. Literacy rates are higher and the impact of parental education on reading scores is less powerful in more equal countries (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Regarding education’s second goal of increasing an individual’s economic mobility, schooling has had limited success; although, the level of improvement has not been the same for all. First, not everyone participates in educational advancement. Attainment levels have historically showed variance by race, ethnicity, gender, economic class, and social status. Second, the rates of return on educational attainment
have also not been equal. While educational investment does show a payoff in terms of future earnings and other benefits, the rate of return is not the same for all.

All populations within the United States do not share the same level of educational attainment. Examinations of income, wealth, or occupation from one generation to the next show that social class membership remains a powerful predictor of future occupation, income, and educational attainment (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009; Jencks, 1972; Coleman, 1966). So, while some are able to continue educational pursuits of their forefathers, not all have this educational momentum in place. The benefits of education, therefore, are not the enjoyed by everyone. The likelihood of obtaining educational credentials and gaining access to educational opportunities is lower for some people, so any benefits from upward mobility may not be realized at all.

In fact, a recent report from The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, OECD, (2010) states that it is rarer to climb the social ladder in the United States than in many other OCED nations. The report reveals low levels of mobility in earnings, wages and education in France, southern European countries, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Educational attainment in the United States also varies by race and gender, with White males being more likely to obtain bachelor’s and graduate degrees than females or African-Americans of either gender (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Also, those from low-income families and families with no parent with a college degree are less likely to earn college degrees. The percentage of these students beginning college immediately after
high school is 54%, compared to 81% of those from high-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The baccalaureate attainment rate in the former group is only 12%, as compared to 73% for those from high income homes (Mortenson, 2007).

In addition to differences in levels of educational attainment, the rates of return are not equal for all races and genders. Asian Americans and non-Hispanic Whites are reaping a greater rate of return on their educational investments in terms of earnings than are African Americans or Latinos (Baum & Payea, 2004). The average salary of an African American with a Masters earns $40,000, while a non-Hispanic White earns $41,700 and an Asian-American averages $50,400. The median annual income for males with a Bachelor’s degree is $59,079, while the female median was $39,571 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008).

Why do social class and the parents’ occupational backgrounds hold such predictive power regarding their children’s future path? Why are students from low income families and those with parents without college degrees least likely to successfully navigate a path toward college completion?

**Structure or Agentic Explanations**

Theories of the causes of educational differentials have placed varying emphasis on structural constraints and individual agency. There has been an ongoing discussion in social theory concerning the primacy of either structure or agency on reproducing class inequality in educational attainment.
Research focusing on the primacy of structural constraints to bring about educational outcomes have explained differences in terms of overt racial and gender discrimination (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) or hidden curricula (Giroux & Purpel, 1983) which promote a particular set of values leading to social control. Those supporting the high primacy of structure believe students are pushed into certain educational and career directions, leaving them with little choice in their own destinies. Others have criticized research focusing on the primacy of structure as too deterministic, leaving individual agents as “cultural dopes,” passive societal recipients with no ability to choose their own futures (Garfinkel, 1967).

A critique of a dichotomous view of structure as an object has also emerged, problematizing simplistic notions of structure and agency. The critique argues that structural constraints are fluid co-constructions continuously molded by social interaction between individuals. Giddens (1979) believes structure is less “product” and more a process. Individuals may be acted upon by structures but their actions are also what create structures. While Archer (2003) agrees that structure is created by
individual acts, she sees structure as a process which later becomes a product with the ability to constrain. She points out that actions creating and reproducing structures and individual actions which react to structural constraints are occurring in different timescales. Structures have been created in the past, while their reproduction and individual reactions are happening in the present.

Debates between structure and agency raise questions about the degree of choice individuals have in their educational futures and when to hold individuals accountable for their choices, if they do, indeed, have the ability to choose.

**Cultural Explanation**

One popular theory to explain educational differentials gives considerable attention to the power structures regulating educational access. Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) theory of social reproduction as it relates to education emphasizes both structural barriers and agent action within those barriers. They provide a theory which leans heavily on a structural explanation, but avoids producing cultural dopes, as it gives agents a role to play through their “habitus,” an embodied way of thinking and doing⁴. Instead of promoting social change or being a neutral factor, Bourdieu and Passeron believe schooling may be a vehicle for reproducing existing social relations and inequalities through the use of cultural capital.

**Cultural Capital and the Selection Process**

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⁴ However, there is some disagreement on whether Bourdieu’s theory does indeed bestow an over-determined view. (Lovell, 2000)
Cultural capital, described by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction" (1973), refers to cultural assets which might promote social mobility beyond economic means. Attempting to explain differences in educational outcomes in France during the 1960s, they believed that cultural knowledge, like money, served to open or close doors to educational opportunity (1986). Those from economically disadvantaged families tend to lack cultural capital of the type valued in schools. Bourdieu believed that during multiple selection points, those lacking the right cultural currency are excluded. This reproduces class differences from generation to generation.

While current financial status does not determine the amount of cultural capital a person possesses, social class does. Freire (1996) shares his middle class family’s experience going through an economic crisis. Although temporarily poor, Freire’s family still held on to their “cultural capital.”

In spite of our difficulties, we did not get rid of the piano, nor did my father do away with his necktie. Both piano and the necktie were, in the end, symbols that helped us remain in the class to which we belonged. They implied a certain lifestyle, a certain way of being, a certain way of speaking, a certain way of walking, a special way of greeting people that involve bowing slightly and tipping your hat, as I had often seen my father do (p. 198-199).
Bourdieu accepts the idea that educational achievements bring upward mobility. He believes schools reward those with middle and upper class “cultural capital” and devalue lower class capital. Through the use of an extensive filtering system, lower class students are either denied access or self-eliminated as they react to the situation. Those who do meet the cut at various stages in their educational careers, pay a price by trading in their prior cultural norms for more valued ones.

...at every stage in their school career, individuals of the same social class who survive in the system exhibit less and less the career characteristics which have eliminated the selection to which their class is subject and the level of education at which the synchronic cross-section is taken (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 82).

As Harker (1984) explains, “This legitimate cultural capital allows students who possess it to gain educational capital in the form of qualifications. Those lower-class students are therefore disadvantaged. To gain qualifications they must acquire legitimate cultural capital, by exchanging their own (usually working-class) cultural capital.”

Bourdieu’s explanation is powerful, in that it emphasizes power structures, acknowledges the role that agents sometimes play in their own victimization, and highlights hard to observe cultural aspects. However, it has also been criticized as being overly deterministic, not offering an explanation for agent resiliency or innovation, and
for over-emphasizing the complicity of agents with their oppressors (McCall, 1992, Lovell, 2000).

Another appealing theory, which gives a greater role to the power of agents to choose their future, is Breen and Goldthorpe’s (1997) Rational Action Theory. This theory explains educational differences in terms of individual choices based upon rational assessment of economic advantages and disadvantages. Criticizing Rational Action Theory for not recognizing that student choices are often fortuitous and pragmatic than instrumentally rational, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) modify the original theory to offer another which they call “pragmatically rational decision-making.”

**Five Paradigms**

Social Reproduction Theory and Rational Action Theory are two specific theories housed within five different theoretical approaches to student achievement related to college attainment offered by Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007). The different perspectives find the cause for educational failures in five different areas; sociological, organizational, psychological, cultural, and economic. The sociological perspective emphasizes peer and faculty interactions and the process of college transition and shifting of identity as students merge into the new setting of college. An organizational view seeks explanations in institutional structures and processes that are thought to affect performance, such as institutional size, selectivity, resources, and faculty-student ratios. Psychological accounts focus on student personality traits as the most important factor. Expectancy theory, self-efficacy theory, and motivational theory
are used to explain student success or failure when they are in college. Cultural perspectives focus on the tensions first-generation students or other historically underrepresented students face when adjusting to a new cultural setting. The economic view examines the costs and benefits of further education. Psychological, sociological, organizational, cultural, economic, and other perspectives, including historical, offer different insights into challenges in student achievement. These insights are impacted by field and researcher beliefs regarding the power of agents and structures. Beliefs about the primacy of agency or structure impact where blame is placed for societal problems and who is responsible for solutions. Kuh et. al concludes by stating:

No one theoretical perspective is comprehensive enough to account for all the factors that influence student success in college. Taken together, the different theoretical perspectives on student success and departure provide a holistic accounting of many of the key factors that come into play to shape what students are prepared to do when they get to college and influence the meanings they make of their experiences (p. 16).

**Solutions: Increasing Educational Access or Equalizing Educational Outcomes?**

The limitations of the efficiency of American schooling to eradicate poverty, equalize wealth distribution, or promote social and economic mobility have caused some who view this as a problem to seek solutions. However, erasing limitations in education is challenging and complicated. Some espouse the “liberal theory,” as documented by Goldthorpe (1996) believing that equality will emerge naturally during
the course of development in industrial societies. Liberal theorists believe “class formation gives way to class decomposition as mobility between classes increases and class-linked inequalities of opportunity are steadily reduced...from the demand imposed by the logic of industrialism for an ever more efficient utilization of human resources” (482). However, this equality has not happened. For those who believe intervention is necessary to encourage equality, two different philosophical approaches to improving educational equality are appealing. One argues for increased access to educational opportunities, while the other believes mandating equal outcomes is necessary.

Those in support of focusing efforts on increasing access for everyone support a meritocratic system which rewards those who excel. By rewarding those who excel, incentive to do well is provided. The challenge is to “level the playing field” so that all will have access to the arena where they may be given the chance to compete. The implementation of curriculum interventions is one policy choice which has been designed precisely to do just that.

Three noteworthy issues spur questions regarding the approach of increasing access. First, what is “excellence” and who decides? Second, in a competitive society based on meritocratic principles, to what extent is equality of outcome even desirable? Third, is it really possible to “level the playing field” and, if so, how much money and other resources would be required?

First, who gets to decide what quality means? Should it be based on perceived intelligence, effort or actual results? As the lead character, a college English professor
reveals, in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1974), quality is not easy
to define. If access to educational opportunities are based upon merit, who decides
what is merit-worthy? (And when is the decision made—when is the so-called “playing
field” level *enough* to begin the competition?)

Should IQ scores be used to guide merit decisions? The history of human
intelligence measurement has been dotted with attempts to support racist notions
(Allard, 2002). Some researchers, such as Yerkes and Herrnstein & Murray, believe that
intelligence is mostly inherited and distributed according to ethnicity (as cited in Gould,
1996). Others refute this finding, claiming that while some level of intelligence may be
inherited, environment and nurture play a large role in the development of mental
acuity. In the past several decades, the superiority of intelligence quotient has been
eroded as researchers have argued the biological, mathematical and cultural problems
with the complex concept of intelligence utilized as a single, measurable entity (Allard,
2002; Gould, 1996; Gladwell, 2008). The multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1993)
indicates that intelligence reveals itself in various domains, such as spatial, musical, and
interpersonal, and a single measure of intelligence does not capture its complexity.

While college entrance exams, such as the ACT or SAT, attempt to predict
aptitude by measuring students’ responses on exam content modeled after high school
and college curricula, complaints about the limits of testing to measure future
performance have been made. Also, using these texts to distribute meritorious rewards,
such as access to education, may unfairly give rewards only to those with the resources
to develop the skills and cultural understandings measured on such tests.

Despite the limitations of measurement, some people do seem “smarter” than others. However, arguments can be made that only a small portion of these smarts are inherited. Gladwell (2008), in his book *Outliers: the Story of Success*, gives multiple examples of how “genius” has been achieved by having access to 10,000 hours of practice time. In other words, those labeled brilliant received this designation after intense study of a particular task, which is facilitated by having both the means to devote such time and having access to necessary tools. Cultural arguments declare that measuring intelligence does no more than measure the cultural capital one holds which has been acquired through schooling and family experiences. Is it fair then to utilize public funds to award scholarships, for example, to those who by fortune or parents’ hard labor were given early access to opportunities not shared by all?

Bestowing rewards based on effort and results are two additional areas which entail debate. No Child Left Behind attempts to increase educational standards by focusing attention on testing results. However, this becomes problematic when students from an early age are so far behind that they cannot hope to attain the grade-level standard. For example, I taught an English Language Learner who arrived in the United States with no English ability and little literacy in his home language. He enrolled in a school which had few services to help him with the transition. Originally, when he arrived, the school did not have a licensed English as a Second Language teacher to help him. Despite this, the student was working hard to improve. The state-wide quarterly
administered assessment tests showed that the student was progressing beyond that which would be expected.

Eventually, in an effort to rectify an enrollment error which had placed the student three grades below the level for which his age required, he was advanced a grade level, midyear, where he struggled to score above a D in a one subject area. The teacher of that subject area believed that any student who was not performing at grade level deserved Ds or Fs, regardless of the students’ level of origin, individual progress, or level of effort. And, indeed, much of the accountability rhetoric across the school district and state dictated as much. The student eventually dropped out of school.

An alternative to rigid measurement of grade level standards is to measure students’ effort by noting individual progress. If the aforementioned English Language Learner had had teachers who had been willing to tailor assignments to make them possible to complete and to validate his extraordinary efforts to improve, I believe the student, like many other new arrivals, would have persisted and eventually achieved at grade level.

Rewarding individual progress, while noble, is also a challenge in a competitive

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5 During my undergraduate program in teacher education, a big distinction was made between the two words "equal" and "fair", in classroom practices. In fact, in one hiring interview in 2001, I was asked to explain the difference between the two. "Equal" is when the teacher gives every student the same amount of everything, the same punishment when bad, the same amount of teacher attention, etc. "Fair" is when the teacher attempts to match responses to the needs of the student. If a student needs more help in math, in being "fair", the teacher is free to give more help and less to others. There is a possibility for discrimination in both systems. "Fair" is built on the teacher's subjective perception (built on his/her beliefs) of the needs; "equal" does not take into account different needs.

6 It is not unusual for new arrivals without strong schooling experience to take five or more years to score equal to their American-born classmates on standardized tests (Cummins, 2003).
environment. While acknowledging and grading effort is more encouraging for the individual student, others may feel unfairly treated as they see students who do meet standards given the same grade, or other reward, as others who do not meet standards.

Newfield (2008), in his historical examination of access in higher education, reveals how, originally, merit, which he calls “Meritocracy I,” was bestowed on those believed to have a high intelligence quotient. However, with challenges to the limits of measuring intelligence and a desire for more inclusivity, a reconceptualization of what is merit worthy ensued. Newfield notes a period in the history of American higher education where meritocratic aims were more inclusive than they are now. He believes this inclusive form of meritocracy, which he calls Meritocracy II, was in place in American universities for much of the 1970s. By throwing out a “bell curve” view of human intelligence which was based largely on IQ scores, a new more inclusive definition of what constituted “excellence” emerged.

The core idea of Meritocracy II had been around forever: intelligence is spread widely rather than narrowly in human societies.... When meritocracy became more open, more cultural, more developmental, and indeed more accurately reflective of society’s capacities, it excluded fewer people and advanced more (p. 99-100).

Core features of Meritocracy II included a “‘democratization of intelligence,’ a determination to develop intellectual capacity within an inclusive educational system; and a belief that education was better served by equality than by stratification” (p. 100).
No matter what one’s definition of merit entails, hidden processes contribute to the accumulation of factors conspiring to make one “merit-worthy.” As both Bourdieu (1986) and Lareau (2000) note, there are vast amounts of time and labor which parents (mainly mothers) devote to the augmentation of knowledge and skills which lead to success for their children. As Wrigley explains in the foreword of Home Advantage (Lareau, 2000):

Middle-class parents tap their social advantages—high status jobs, educational sophistication, and organizational skills—to help their children succeed in school...[T]here is nothing passive about the transmission of cultural capital. The most dedicated parents “invest” their capital to help their children with achievements ranging from early master of reading to securing high scores on the SAT’s....Ultimately, it yields a social system in which merit appears to be an attribute of individuals (vii-viii).

In a competitive society, is equality desirable? This second issue warrants a philosophical examination of egalitarianism in a meritocratic society. In order for someone to excel in an achievement based system, there must be others who do not excel. Motivation to achieve is urged through the use of negative examples and rewards for achievers. Without this contrast, meritocracy cannot exist. Newfield (2008) problematizes the notions of egalitarianism (as equal distribution of wealth) and meritocracy (merit-based economic rewards), pointing out that they may be mutually
exclusive. He states, “If a society is roughly equal, it is not meritocratic. The reverse is equally true: if a society is meritocratic, it cannot possibly be egalitarian” (p. 97). This issue clearly needs to be examined more closely by educational decision-makers.

Third, to what extent is it even possible to level the playing field? While curriculum interventions and other efforts to increase access may be effective for many, they are not effective for everyone. The deeply permeating effects of disadvantage caused by systemic poverty and other social issues have such left some so far behind and ill equipped that a semester-long curriculum intervention would not even begin to offer enough tools to allow one to compete against those raised with advantage. A curriculum intervention might be a low cost solution; however, it may not be effective. Other interventions such as increasing financial aid or providing free year-round schooling might have a stronger impact but be too costly and therefore prohibitive. If one believes the playing field cannot be leveled, requiring equal outcomes through a quota system, for example, might be the only way to ensure equal distribution of educational rewards.

Summary:

Despite its limitations, schooling in America does provide the best hope for individual advancement and economic equality for disadvantaged youth. Thus, aims to increase educational access and “level the playing field” have led to curriculum and other interventions delivered to students who have historically been underrepresented in areas of higher education degree completion. Additional interventions target policy
makers and teachers aiming to teach cultural sensitivity and eliminate financial and other barriers faced by students. Given the various theories on educational differentials in levels of attainment of college education, this study aims to produce an increased understanding of student perspectives on access and educational attainment, besides the cognitive and motivational view on which the intervention these students were given was based. Increased understandings of student perspectives may result in improvement of ideas for interventions.
Chapter 3: Methodology & Methods

1. Introduction and Research Design
2. Research Questions
3. Setting
   a. Districts
   b. Schools
4. Participant Selection
5. Data Collection
   a. Field observation
   b. Unstructured Interviews
   c. Semi-Structured Interviews
6. Data Analysis
   a. Methodology: Grounded Theory
   b. Open Coding
   c. Axial Coding
   d. Selective Coding
7. Researcher
   a. Subjectivity
   b. Positionality
8. Ethical Considerations
9. Validity
Introduction and Research Design

Investigating public high school students’ perspectives on their education, this inquiry was based on the data gathered by the same researcher during a previous program evaluation.

Program evaluations frequently provide policy guidance in the field of education. A look at the “What Works Clearinghouse” (Institute of Education Sciences, 2007) will reveal that many educational studies have been conducted to measure the effectiveness of interventions. While the Clearinghouse aims to create a list of studies scientifically proven to work, it does not add to the knowledge about students who were not helped by the interventions.

This study aimed to give insight into the lives and educational views of economically disadvantaged students in order to better understand the perceptions and conditions that underlie their decisions about college attendance. Through greater understanding, educators and policy makers can design more student-tailored interventions. Rather than investigate “what works” in the classroom, this study examined the views students have of their educational landscape and the challenges they faced while pursuing academic success. By understanding the way students experience their education, we may be able to gain a richer comprehension of barriers to academic “success,” which can then mold and improve educational policy.
Research Questions

Two groups of questions were investigated in this secondary analysis of the prior data gathered during a program evaluation:

First, student views and postsecondary aspirations were examined:

1. What were the participants’ future academic and career aspirations? How do the students define success?
2. What does “college” mean to them?

Secondly, challenges and barriers faced by students were analyzed:

1. What other “secret ingredients” are there to success (in addition to effort) from the view of the participants?
2. What challenges were they facing? What was the educational terrain, or path, students saw in front of them?
3. Did they see the same urgent problems the implementers saw or different ones?

The original data analyzed in this study were gathered using various methods of qualitative fieldwork, including naturalistic ones, which are not frequently a core component of policy investigations. However, as Erickson (1986) states, fieldwork research can be invaluable to policy audiences:

to inform the generation of options by pointing to aspects of the practical work situation that may have been overlooked...This is why fieldwork studies of implementation have been useful; they identify unintended consequences of implementation, unanticipated barriers to it (p. 153).
This study used field research to gain insight into the context of the intervention, by examining the students’ school environment, their family lives, their activities and responsibilities and their beliefs about their futures.

Naturalistic research is conducted in a natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Guba and Lincoln (1999) argue that while the rationalist assumptions undoubtedly have validity in the hard sciences, naturalist assumptions are more meaningful in studying human behavior. Naturalists do not deny the reality of the objects, events, or processes with which people interact, but suggest that it is the meanings given to or interpretations made of these objects, events, or processes that constitute the arena of interest to investigators of social and behavioral phenomena (Lincoln, 1985, Mishler, 1979).

Investigations using naturalistic assumptions do not generate statistical facts, but rather conclusions are based on descriptions and/or explanations of observations. Using a qualitative, interpretivist lens allowed the researcher to lessen the importance of operational definitions, in favor of examining the data for nuances in meaning constructed by the students themselves.

The goal of this study was not to test hypotheses but rather to illuminate the academic world students find themselves immersed in, especially those who are economically disadvantaged. This study took a middle ground between modernism’s quest for scientific proof and postmodernism’s repudiation of the endeavor. The
researcher recognizes the social constructedness of ideas (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1994) and the impossibility of finding one-size-fits-all proof, while at the same time believing that certain perspectives hold more weight in certain situations, and we are better off for understanding those different perspectives.

I. Setting

The Course

During the 2006-2007 school year, I was hired as the P-12 Program Coordinator to assist classroom teachers and then evaluate a semester-long curriculum intervention which had been installed in 12 classrooms in eight schools within three different school districts located in or near a large Midwestern city. High school juniors and seniors were enrolled in the course, the majority of whom had been placed involuntarily in the class by school administrators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capital City Schools</td>
<td>Red High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orange High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yellow High School</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blue High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indigo Middle School (excluded from this study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nearby City Schools</td>
<td>Purple High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban Public Schools</td>
<td>Fuchsia High School (excluded from this study)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Districts and Schools

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7 Two schools were included in the program evaluation, but excluded from this study because the school population did not match the ages or wealth demographics of interest in this study. (One excluded school was a middle school, while the other was a wealthier suburban high school.)
The course was designed to increase academic success and promote college attendance and completion for “at risk” students. The primarily computer-delivered course was a “study skills” program grounded in educational psychology. Students were taught four success strategies, including: taking reasonable risk, taking responsibility, searching their environment, and using feedback. Sub-strategies included instruction on overcoming procrastination, building self-confidence and responsibility, managing their daily lives, learning from lecture and textbooks, and preparing for exams.

Quality ratings and other indicators (from State Department of Education’s School Report Card data) showed that the schools in the study suffered from poverty related issues, including having lower than average graduation and attendance rates and higher rates of “economically disadvantaged students.” Two of the schools had not met Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. One was in Academic Watch, which meant the school had not met AYP for two or more years in a row. The schools in the study would be considered “high poverty” schools, with the majority of the student body receiving free or reduced price lunches.

Due to mandates, originating from the Federal government’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, schools are graded based on their quality. A reworking of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, NCLB mandates require all schools receiving federal funding to implement grade level testing in order to increase accountability and “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education” (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). This funding, sometimes referred to
as “Title I” from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is the single largest federal funding source for the states.

Schools must also show “Adequate Yearly Progress” and teachers must be “Highly Qualified” or sanctions must follow. Schools are rated based on their yearly improvement and must be designated as one of the following: excellent, effective, in continuous improvement, academic watch or academic emergency. This mandate requires parents to be notified if their child’s school has not met “Adequate Yearly Progress” and parents have the option of choosing a different school (Public School Choice) or receiving free tutoring (Supplemental Education Services) for their child. The following table shows how schools in the study were graded at the time of the program intervention (State Report Cards 2006-2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>AYP</th>
<th>Designation</th>
<th>Improvement Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>Academic Watch</td>
<td>At Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Not Met</td>
<td>Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>At Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>At Risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>OK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: School Report Cards

Two of the schools had not met Adequate Yearly Progress. Three schools held an “At Risk” status which entitled students to Public School Choice and Supplemental Services.
The participants in the study all attended schools with at least 52% of the student body designated as “economically disadvantaged” (State Report Cards, 2006-2007). Three of the classrooms I observed were located in two schools participating in Project GRAD, “a non-profit organization which works with the most disadvantaged public schools in each city where it operates” (ProjectGRAD, 2007). Partnering with schools in low-income neighborhoods, Project GRAD works to help increase the graduation rate and help prepare students to be successful in college. Students attending the Project GRAD schools for all four years could become eligible for a $4000 scholarship towards their college education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>94.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>83.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>76.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Economically Disadvantaged Population*

In addition to the percentage of economically disadvantaged population, graduation rates and attendance rates are also other quality indicators. The graduation rates of schools included in the study ranged from 65% to 90.9%, with four of the schools graduating fewer than the state average of 86.1%. 
School | Graduation Rate
---|---
Red | 65.0
Yellow | 67.0
Green | 69.5
Orange | 78.7
State Average | 86.1
Purple | 90.9
Blue | 95.6

*Table 4: Graduate Rates*

All had a daily attendance rate lower than the state average.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Average Daily Enrollment</th>
<th>Attendance Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>663</td>
<td>90.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>91.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>1025</td>
<td>91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>93.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Average</td>
<td></td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5: Enrollment and Attendance Rates*

**II. Participant Selection**

Out of over 170 high school students enrolled in the course, 76 were individually interviewed about their postsecondary plans and their feelings about the effectiveness of the course. The selection of students for semi-structured interviews was based on convenience—all those who could be accessed were interviewed. Time limitations, high absenteeism, and scheduling conflicts precluded some from participation in the interviews. A concerted effort was made to interview students from each classroom, which resulted in four to ten students being interviewed from each of the classrooms.
Seniors were favored over juniors when time constraints caused a choice to be made. Seniors were favored because I believed that they would be among those most immediately affected by the curriculum which aimed to prepare them for college. Fifty-two seniors and 24 juniors were interviewed.

III. Data Collection

Document collection for this study was undertaken during a program evaluation for a curriculum intervention implemented during the 2006-2007 school year. The extant data was gathered during weekly observational visits to ten classrooms in six different schools in or near one Midwestern city during the 2006-2007 school year. Data and documents were collected and analyzed to evaluate the intervention at the end of the school year and the results were included in a final report to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, FIPSE, the funding agency.

Data from the study were gathered using four methods. These included Field Observations, Unstructured Interviews, Semi-structured Interviews (Kvale, 1996), and gathering student classwork samples. These strategies yielded the following documents:

- field notes from 39 observational classroom visits, (generally 45-55 minutes long) conducted during the program evaluation
- interview transcripts of 76 students collected during an additional 20 school visits
- eight samples of student essays from Orange High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Field Observations &amp; Unstructured Interviews</th>
<th>Semi-Structured Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall Semester</td>
<td>September 25 – December 4</td>
<td>November 1 – December 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring Semester</td>
<td>January 11 - May 22</td>
<td>April 2 – May 16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Data Collection Dates
A) Field Observations

The program evaluation involved visits to all classrooms where the curriculum intervention was in place. Schools offered the intervention for one semester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fall Visits</th>
<th>Spring Visits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange High School</td>
<td>Red High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yellow High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Green High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blue High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purple High School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Fall and Spring Visits

Bi-weekly (or sometimes weekly) visits took place both during the first semester from September 2006 through December 2006 and the second semester from January through May 2007.

During the course of the school year, I detailed in field notes 39 observational classroom visits, each lasting for about 45 minutes. As a classroom observer, I would arrive at the beginning of a class period and circulate around the room, spending 5-10 minutes with each student until the period was over. I observed the students’ work, their interactions with their peers and teachers, the teachers’ role in the classroom, and the school and classroom facilities. Observations helped me to better understand the extent to which the intervention guidelines were being adhered and the school environment in which students were immersed. The repetition of visits also aided in gaining student and teacher trust.
B) Unstructured Interviews (within the context of classroom observation)

Spontaneous interactions with over 170 high school students and nine teachers also took place during pre-planned classroom visits during both the fall semester and spring semesters of the 2006-2007 school year. These interviews, not having preset questions, were unstructured. I interacted with students who I was able to connect with and who were willing to share their thoughts about their environment and their academic futures. While all participants did not receive equal time to share their thoughts, I made an attempt to find “key informants” who were willing to share their views of the class and their personal lives.

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It was discovered late in the program evaluation that Green High School was indeed offering the course. Due to time constraints, student interviews began during one visit.

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Classes</th>
<th>Dates of Observations</th>
<th>Number of Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9/25, 9/28, 10/12, 10/19, 11/2, 11/9, 11/16, 12/1, 12/4, 5/18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/27, 3/6, 3/26,</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue High School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1/11, 2/1, 2/2, 2/20 (8:30), 2/20 (12:00), 2/20 (12:45), 2/20 (1:45), 3/9 (8:15), 3/9 (12:00), 3/9 (1:00), 3/9 (1:45)</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple High School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1/26 (8:00), 1/26 (9:40), 2/27 (8:15), 2/27 (9:40)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8: Observation Dates*
Spontaneous interactions typically began with a greeting to the teacher. I would ask how the course was going and or inquire about the status of previously reported technological issues with the software component of the program. Then, I would sit with one student at his/her computer station. Sometimes I would inquire about the work he/she was doing for the class. Other times I would ask students about their lives and activities outside the classroom. Many of my informal questions dealt with their future plans and the logic behind their choices. Many students spoke about limited finances being an important factor in their decision making process concerning their future, and I began to probe further about the impact of limited resources on their ability to graduate from high school. I asked students how they selected a college to attend or why some did not want to go to college. Because teachers and students frequently mentioned the impact of mandated testing, I began asking about how the high stakes graduation test was affecting both their future decisions and their current daily schedules.

I would leave after the bell rang, signaling the end of class. After each visit, I recorded my observations from the visit in my car in the school parking lot. This was absolutely necessary in order to maximize my memory about the conversations and observations during the visits. From memory, I described my observations of students,

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9 One school was less than three miles from my home. After visits to this school, I would usually return home to record notes, especially after a shooting occurred just off school grounds within a half hour after I had finished one observation.

10 I did make an attempt during my first couple of visits to schools to take notes during the observation, but I felt it was an impediment as I noticed students and teachers straining to look at what I was writing down. I did not make audio recordings of visits as I felt these would be viewed as an invasion of privacy and would result in less candid responses. Also a recording was not necessary within the aims of the original program evaluation.
teachers, classrooms, and schools and, more importantly, captured verbatim conversations I had had with students and teachers. My notes resulted in 82 single-spaced pages of field notes.

C) Semi-structured Interviews

After several weeks of visits and after I’d established a level of trust between the students and me, I began more formal interviews. The short (15-20 minute) interviews\(^1\) were semi-structured, meaning that the interview began with a list of the same questions asked of each student but later the discussion varied as follow-up questions were asked. Four to ten students from each classroom were interviewed, resulting in a total of 76 interviews. I attempted to learn more about students’ individual concerns which led to variety in the direction of the interviews. In congruence with the aims of the program evaluation, I asked students for their opinions about the course, descriptions of their study habits, and assessments of their own academic weaknesses. While the main goal of the interviews was to reveal the impact the course had on students’ lives, I also took the opportunity to ask additional questions regarding students’ future plans, fears, and family educational background\(^2\).

The list of pre-determined interview questions was modified after the first semester. Modifications were based upon new areas surfacing which warranted further

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11 It should also be noted that a 15-20 minute interview can in no way capture the totality of a student’s high school experience.

12 See appendix for the full list of questions.
exploration as well as improvement in gaining a more in-depth evaluation of the course from students. Interviews were conducted semi-privately, one-on-one either in the hallway or in a neighboring classroom. I recorded students’ responses on a separate worksheet for each person during the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Classrooms</th>
<th>Interview Dates</th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red High School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4/2, 4/18, 4/19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11/2, 11/9, 12/1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4/2, 4/20, 4/30, 5/16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green High School</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5/9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue High School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4/03, 4/05, 5/01, 5/03, 5/14</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple High School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4/2, 4/3, 5/14, 5/16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Interview Dates

**IV. Data Analysis**

This study submitted the previously gathered documents to a second analysis, focusing on a new set of research questions. Rather than aim to determine whether the intervention “worked” or not, this second round of analysis asked about students’ perspectives on their education and what challenges they faced.

**Grounded Theory Methodology**

The data were analyzed using methods of Grounded Theory, found by Guba and Lincoln (1985) to be a fitting option for analysis of naturalistic data. Grounded theory provides a methodology for investigating deeper analytic questions through further study of previously gathered data (Charmaz, 2000). Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe
the method as both “science and art” (p. 13). They claim that, within the assumptions of Grounded Theory, “the urge to avoid uncertainty and to get quick closure on one’s research is tempered with the realization that phenomena are complex and their meanings are not easily fathomed or just taken for granted” (p. 6). Grounded theory’s focus on generating theory “puts a premium on emergent conceptualizations,” (p. 37) and provides an ideal mechanism to encourage the development of new theory rather than testing a priori theory.

The method is influenced by beliefs, which fit well within a naturalistic paradigm. Grounded Theory stresses the centrality of fieldwork and mandates that the final theory emerge from the particular case of study (not from external theory). It also recognizes the complexity of human action and that words and deeds have various meanings for different persons in different contexts. The naturalistic paradigm holds that human connection and understanding is a negotiated, interactive social process and, therefore, expects people to take an active role in responding to their environment. Circumstances, actions, and consequences are understood to be interrelated (Lincoln & Guba, 1998, p. 9-10).

Upon completion of the qualitative program evaluation, questions not addressed by the evaluation begged to be explored. Grounded Theory methods provided a meaningful and systematic way to re-analyze the documents with different questions in mind. Using techniques of memo writing, coding, and comparison helped provide a systematic route to analyze large volumes of data and, in this case, to explore the range
of views and identify relationships between important themes regarding students’ perceptions of their challenges to postsecondary academic pursuits.

The analysis of pre-existing data required conscious reflection, review, and revision. Several stages of coding, including open, axial, and selective, helped identify meaningful concepts and relationships between them. In gaining meaning from all stages of analysis, this qualitative investigation is understood to be an integration of the analysis of collected data, the researcher’s past experiences and views and insights from other relevant research.

Figure 2: Data Analysis Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>Axial Coding</th>
<th>Selective Coding for Theory Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>Axial</td>
<td>Selective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used line-by-line coding to identify concepts found in the documents</td>
<td>Identified key themes and found relationships between them</td>
<td>Chose core codes and themes and related theme clusters to themes and codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merged similar items</td>
<td>Examined boundaries of themes and organized categories</td>
<td>Refined relationships and descriptions between categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Coding Stages
Open Coding

The first step in data analysis, open coding, afforded the researcher a manner to systematically identify themes throughout the research documents. First, open coding dictated that documents gathered during field observations and interviews be reread and analyzed using line-by-line coding to gain a more accurate understanding of student perceptions and begin to identify important concepts. As codes were developed to label emerging concepts, I examined other data for patterns and began grouping related ideas.

NVIVO and Ethnograph software were used to assist in the coding process. Field notes from visits, samples of student work from one school, and all interview transcriptions were typed and then imported into the software for coding. The documents were then subjected to line-by-line coding. During coding, both theoretical and methodological memos were created.

Axial Coding

During axial coding, the research questions were reviewed and open codes were sorted under overarching categories most relevant to the inquiry. Source documents of the core codes were re-examined to find meaningful insight into each concept found through open coding. Through an examination of the parameters of student views, axial coding helped better describe the category and illustrate the dimensions and boundaries of each theme found in this particular research setting. This information

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13 In my case, open coding was done multiple times with the aid of both NVIVO and Ethnograph software. After an unrecoverable system crash, I opted not to purchase a new license for NVIVO and changed my analysis software to the less costly, Ethnograph, and redid the coding.
provided density which gave insight into the ways the different themes interacted with each other.

*Selective Coding*

Lastly, axial relationships were analyzed to develop a theory grounded in the data during selective coding\(^\text{14}\). Themes which had sufficient support were included in the final theory, which best explained the parts found within the existing documents in relation to the research questions. This entailed working back and forth between themes and their relationships to generate a theory grounded in the data. This theory was then compared to findings from other research in a post-analysis literature review.

**Researcher Subjectivity and Positionality**

**Subjectivity**

Traditional beliefs that social scientists can remain “unbiased” have been challenged, as reflective practice among qualitative researchers reveals that this may be an impossible goal. Rather than attempt the impossible, contemporary research practice encourages disclosure of researcher experiences and bias “up front”. Locke (2000), in *Proposals that Work*, states:

...it is accepted that the investigator must be the primary instrument for data collection, and thus part of rather than separate from whatever is

\(^{14}\) It may be that these “stages” are not necessarily sequential. In my case, I found it necessary to move back and forth several times between the theory, original codes and axial relationships while constructing a theory grounded in the data. Conclusions bring re-evaluation of original themes, as some grow in significance and others lose their significance. Likewise, emerging themes help guide the theory. This interplay was vital to the final theory generation.
investigated. In turn, that requires the assumption that the researcher’s own perspectives and values inevitably will become part of the research process and, ultimately, the findings and conclusions (p. 98).

Lather (1986) makes the case that all research is biased and based on an ideology. She believes that researchers, who strive for self-awareness (p. 66) and reveal their biases, embark on more honest research.

Chapter 1 includes a summary of my background and experiences which impact my view of this research, including being a first generation college graduate and experienced classroom teacher in schools with high levels of students living in poverty.

Positionality

Gaining the trust of the students in this study was imperative. I was introduced to the students using my first name. Students saw me as the college student who wanted to find out what they thought of the course. Somewhat a representative of the university, I was placed in a pseudo role model position. However, I tried to minimize that role and emphasize that I was a financially struggling student.

Ethical Considerations

During this inquiry, ethical issues were of utmost importance. Several steps were taken to ensure the study was done in an ethical manner. No students were coerced into answering my questions or interviewing. Nor was deception used. Students and teachers knew that I was a representative from the university who was evaluating the intervention. Steps were also taken to encourage honest results from the research. For
the utilization of the data for this study, exemption was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. Also, techniques for increasing validity were also in part ethical decisions. Building trust, promoting an equal relationship, and efforts to increase credibility in the interview responses all were ethical choices which promote fair and honest research.

**Validity**

Standards for qualitative inquiry have been under debate both from within and outside qualitative circles (Anafara 2002). From outside qualitative circles, calls for greater scientific rigor often result in attempts to align qualitative standards more closely with quantitative measures of evaluation. In contrast, within the qualitative camp, some researchers accuse qualitative reporting of devoting too much effort toward appeasing a traditional positivist contingency.

Measures of validity, as evaluative tools, have been contentious philosophical topics when applied to qualitative research. Some researchers believe “validity” is a lingering positivist notion which should be discarded (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). In place of validity, Wolcott (1990) urges for a move toward “increasing credibility.” Lincoln and Guba believe research should focus on “establishing trustworthiness” of findings. Creswell (1998) describes the debate on qualitative validity as “constantly evolving” and believes “it is impossible to reach consensus” (p. 216-217).

While some wish to direct research toward increasing credibility and trustworthiness, both, in addition to more traditional methods of pursuing validity, provide a manner in which to judge the relevance and value of qualitative research.
Techniques to address both traditional and alternative notions of validity utilized in this study follow Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) recommendations, including prolonged engagement and trust-building efforts, persistent observation, research process transparency, promoting reciprocal relationships with participants, and triangulation of sources.

**Prolonged Engagement and Other Trust-Building Efforts**

Prolonged engagement means spending sufficient time in the research setting in order to understand the social setting, culture, and phenomenon of interest. It provides time for the researcher to better grasp the context of the phenomenon, challenge initial biases, and also become aware of possible distortions in the data, such as participants who respond based on peer pressure and not their own personal views. This involves spending adequate time conversing with participants, encountering multiple views, and developing relationships and rapport with the participants. Rapport building exercises included efforts toward egalitarian relationships with participants and providing a statement delivered before interviews designed to increase open and honest responses.

The 39 classroom visits afforded me an opportunity to get to know the students and teachers before conducting more formal interviews. Without extended time observing students and the intervention, it would be hard to lend an informed interpretation of students’ comments made during unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Interview responses are never devoid of context; answers to questions (and the questions themselves) are not unambiguous. Mishler (1986) stresses the need to
realize that verbal exchanges are enacted in their setting and are tailored to the time, place, and orientation of previous utterances, who is in the room, the position of those to whom they are speaking, etc. By delaying one-on-one interviews until after several weeks of observational visits had taken place, I was able to gain more of the trust of the students and more open responses to interview questions.

Another effort to increase credibility in interview responses was undertaken through the use of a script encouraging honest answers\textsuperscript{15}. Before each one-on-one interview, I gave an informal verbal script designed to encourage openness and dissuade the possibility of students overrating the course because they did not want to hurt my feelings.

**Persistent Observation**

Persistent observation allows the analyst to identify those themes important to the study and to illuminate relevant details (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Delamont (1979) says, to really understand the context of classroom behavior, information needs to be collected through anthropological methods which include interpreted interviews and more unstructured observation (p. 7). By recording extensive field notes based on observations, details were documented and available for further analysis using Grounded Theory methods. Data were collected with the intention of transcribing and reporting all findings to represent the participants’ meanings as closely as possible.

\textsuperscript{15} See Appendix.
Efforts were made to record field notes accurately, immediately following visits.

Interview notes were taken during the interviews.

Spending extended time in classrooms, observing and interacting with the intervention participants, and recording field notes was necessary to gain an understanding of the daily life where the curriculum intervention took place.

**Research process transparency**

I followed recommendations for increased transparency in the qualitative research process (Bowen, 2009; Anafara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2009). I disclosed my subjectivity in Chapter 1 in order to give the reader insight into my interpretive lens. I provided a detailed account of participant selection, data collection efforts and the analysis process. A description of the setting and curriculum intervention are also provided. Also included is a theme table which includes examples of the sources of the codes. I also utilized a peer reviewer, a retired media specialist with an Education Specialist degree, to review certain samples of my source material and the assigned codes and my conclusions.

**Moving toward an equal relationship between participants and researcher**

I attempted to conduct a study which was mutually beneficial to both researcher and the participants. I tried to share, through my knowledge of the academic system, what Lincoln (1995) calls the “perquisites of privilege.” In exchange for their participation, I shared whatever knowledge I could, with students and, at times, assisted them in using the Internet and scanning college websites in order to find the answers to
their questions. When asked or relevant, I tried to be open with students and shared stories from my own academic life. I offered students guidance and insights into choosing a major, transferring between colleges, gaining college admission, understanding college finances, and daily life in college.

Giving something back to participants, if even only information, promoted a trusting, reciprocal relationship. As Erickson (1986) states, “Trust and rapport in fieldwork are not simply a matter of niceness: a non-coercive, mutually rewarding relationship with key informants is essential if the researcher is to gain valid insights into the informant’s point of view” (p. 142).

I was introduced to students and teachers as a graduate student, assisting the course designer. I explained to students that I wanted to find out their honest thoughts about the course. While my position involved working with the curriculum designer, I also highlighted my role as a student and shared my own financial struggles. I explained to students that my presence in the classroom was the result of the university offering me a job to help me pay for my tuition. I also told students that the course designer wanted their honest opinions. I reassured them that, although I had been sent by the designer to find out their views, I did not design the course, so negative views would not hurt my feelings.

Triangulation of sources

Triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999) was used by comparing both the information collected in this study with a post-analysis literature review (Maxwell, 2008;
Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as well as comparing data collected from the different research sites (Merriam, 1992, pp. 206-207). Gathering views from participants at different sites helped the researcher find confirmation of similar views among the students, or in some cases important differences.
Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings

1. Student Home Context: On Their Own with Additional Responsibilities
   a. Absent Parents
   b. Student Parenthood
   c. Living Below the Poverty Line
   d. Potential First-Generation College Graduates
   e. Overly-Employed
   f. Starting Over

2. Up the Creek w/o a Paddle: Resource Scarcity during College Enrollment Process
   a. College Enrollment Resource Needs
      i. Information
      ii. Money
      iii. Time
   b. Daily Survival Time Consumers
      i. Being Overly Employed
      ii. Starting Over: Transitions
      iii. Early Academic Struggles
         1. Passing Classes and High Stakes Testing

3. Reason for College: Why Go?

4. Student View of College: Risky
   a. College as Unfamiliar
      i. Being on my own/newness
      ii. Family pressures/expectations
      iii. Knowing my major/career
      iv. Making friends/Meeting others
   b. College as Hard
      i. Failure/not “making it”/too hard
      ii. Gaining college acceptance
   c. College as Expensive
      i. Paying Tuition
      ii. Paying Living Expenses
      iii. Rate of Return/Finding a Job After

5. Moving Toward the Promise: Risk Minimizing Strategies
   a. Conserving Money
      i. Cheaper is better even if quality is lower
      ii. Plans to transfer
iii. Multi-stage Plans
   b. Don’t Repeat Mistakes: Start Small
7. Opting Out or Shut Out?
Why are students from high poverty areas less likely than middle class students to pursue a bachelor’s degree, when it might offer them an escape to better economic ground? What factors contribute to the process that reproduces social and economic class from generation to generation?

Research Questions

This particular research involved the analysis of data gathered during a program evaluation. Not a continuation of the original research aims, this analysis was designed to subject the same data to a different inquiry to seek a better understanding of the academic world of high school students through their viewpoint. The research questions aimed to investigate barriers to academic attainment and discover what academic success and college meant to the students. Questions were:

1. How do the students define success?
2. What does “college” mean to them?
3. What other “secret ingredients” are there to success (in addition to effort) from the view of the participants?
4. What challenges were they facing? What was the educational terrain, or path, students saw in front of them?
5. Did they see the same urgent problems the implementers saw or different ones?

Inside a college preparation class designed for students attending high poverty high schools was an ideal place to investigate these questions. Ten different classrooms were observed, and 76 high school juniors and seniors were interviewed. Fifty-two were seniors and 24 were juniors.
Grounded theory methods revealed important theme clusters which housed themes and codes to help explain students’ views of college and give insights into both the challenges they faced and their postsecondary plans\textsuperscript{16}.

First, I will begin by giving a brief summary of the findings and then elaborate further on the first theme cluster, which helped explain students’ home context.

Two theme clusters emerged which combined together to form students’ view of college: students’ home context and resource scarcity during the college enrollment process. Central to students’ views of postsecondary education was the perception of college as risky. Risk was the product of college being perceived as unfamiliar, academically hard, and expensive when confronted with resource scarcity. Next, I found that college-bound students became involved in numerous strategies designed to reduce the risk college attendance presented. These strategies, while helping students in the short term, involved activities associated with non-completion of four-year degrees, such as beginning their postsecondary pursuits at two-year colleges and for-profit institutions. Not all students attempted risk minimizing strategies, some of them did not take any risk at all. Other plans included forgoing college altogether. Among other reasons, students may not pursue four-year degrees because they do not share the belief in the promise of economic security a college degree claims to afford.

\textsuperscript{16} See table of Themes and Codes in Appendix B.
The first theme cluster housed themes which illuminated students’ home context. In order to understand the decisions students make regarding their education, one must also have an understanding of their daily lived world. Cilesiz (2009) highlights this importance saying, human behavior “is so embedded in and constrained by its social and cultural contexts that to construe such behavior as independent would be misleading” (232). As Mishler (1979) noted, “Action and context are not mutually independent: they are reflexive, in that meaning and context are produced.
simultaneously by the actors in and through their interaction.” To understand students’ educational worlds, it is also imperative to understand their lives at home.

Six important home circumstances were witnessed to have a huge impact on all facets of student life. These include absent parents, student parenthood, living below the poverty line, being potential first-generation college graduates, over-employment, and starting over. First I will briefly discuss the first three which most obviously impacted them financially, but in additional ways as well, as I will later describe. Then I will discuss one facet which limits students’ access to college information. Lastly, I will describe the remaining two contextual themes which reduce the amount of study time students have.

**Below the Poverty Line, Absent Parents, and Student Parenthood**

The first three include life below the poverty line, absent parents, and student parenthood. All three caused students financial hardship and brought additional responsibilities to students’ lives.

First, the students with whom I interacted attended schools with of the majority of the student body considered “economically disadvantaged.” Many of the students in my study were coping with life near the poverty line. They all attended schools where more than half of the students were eligible to receive free or reduce priced lunches. Meeting day-to-day financial demands caused a burden for these students. Life below the poverty line presents its own challenges, from residing in higher crime neighborhoods to lacking reliable transportation (Vollman, 2007).
Secondly, not only were many students surviving below the poverty line, many did not come from homes with two able adults who could help them survive. Many students lived in homes with only one or neither of their parents. Several students mentioned that their families were separated. One student told me he had been having trouble building his art portfolio, a college admission requirement, because he “hadn’t been home for awhile.” When asked where he had been, he replied, “I’m living at my brother's dad's.” Another student explained to me that she is a Ward of the Court. “I don't live with my parents. My mom died and my dad's in jail.” Another moved out during high school using a service to match him with roommates.

In addition to lacking the financial support of two working parents, some students also had their own families to care for.

Finding their Own Way: Potential First-Generation College Graduates

17 While students were not specifically asked about their household makeup, over 20 students mentioned either being parents themselves or parents not living with them. The instances I found were only instances which students chose to share this sensitive information. It does not mean more students weren’t affected by absentee parents. It would be the task of another study to investigate students’ home lives. Another study could delve more deeply into the quality of the home life and the extent to which each person was able to contribute time and money to the smooth running of the household and also could better identify the prevalence of missing parents and separated families within lower socioeconomic communities of students.
Students’ ease of access was impacted by the fourth theme, being potential first-generation college graduates. If students succeeded in getting a four-year college degree, the majority of students I interviewed would become first-generation college graduates. Unable to rely on parents for first-hand accounts of life in college, they would have to find their own way to a college degree. Having parents without bachelors’ degrees, means none of their parents were teachers or military officers, let alone doctors, lawyers, or college professors.

During the study, 76 students were asked if their parents had attended college. While some did have parents who had attended, it was clear that at least 48 had parents who never obtained a four-year degree. It was unclear from many of the remaining responses whether students had parents with a bachelor’s. I could only determine with a degree of certitude that seven had at least one parent with a bachelor’s.\(^\text{18}\)

**Time Consumers: Over-employment and Relocating**

The final two home factors aided an understanding of students’ academic lives. These included over-employment and relocations. Both of these impacted students by depleting valuable study time.

*Overly Employed Students*

To meet their daily financial obligations, many students worked while they attended school. Some worked more than one job and more than 30 hours a week. In

\(^{18}\text{I did not ask whether their parents had graduated, or whether they held at least a four-year degree, only whether they attended. Because of this I was only able to determine whether parents had completed a bachelor’s degree when students elaborated further.}\)
fact, 25 students mentioned employment during their interviews. Other attributes of work mentioned are in the below table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students work 24-35 hours a week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students have 2 jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students work 6-6.5 hours a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students seeking second job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students seeking full-time job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12: Working Students

While many American high school students work to earn extra spending money for incidentals, the participants in this study were more likely to work to pay for necessities. A large proportion of the students with whom I spoke mentioned long work hours. Student work, while producing the necessary resource of money, consumed valuable free time. Two students, who shared their work schedules, told me they had little free time during weekdays. One worked from 3:30 – 10:00 pm at a gas station. Another worked from 4:00 – 10:00 at an apparel store. One student asked her work to reduce her hours. “They had me working full time--32 hours a week. I told them, I can't work so much--I'm a student! Now it's 25 hours a week.”19

Student employment may also impact academic achievement, as time is used for work in place of studying. Several students specifically mentioned a lack of study time due to family, work, or sports obligations which impacted their ability to study or do schoolwork. As one student told me, “I study at home at night if I have time. I work or

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19 Twenty-five mentioned that they had a job; however, this does not mean that that the others did not work, but rather that 25 chose to mention it as some time during interviews or during informal conversation during visits.
have to babysit my cousins, nieces and nephews.” Because of a full schedule, one student was using her lunch period to complete her “home” work. “I do my schoolwork at school because I work when I'm not here and play volleyball. I do homework during lunch and during the period I am an aid for the security office.”

Starting Over: Transitioning

Another frequently mentioned time consumer was moving. Many students mentioned changing schools and/or cities. Sometimes students moved multiple times and in the middle of a school year. Families did not always move with the students. One student told me she had transferred from a local charter school the year of the study. “Before that,” she recounted, “I moved from Southern City. I was in Southern City for four years. I came to Capital City for two years, then moved back to Southern State. And then back to Capital City.” Then she explained why she hoped to attend college in her current city. “My family might move here.”

Some students revealed educational impacts of moving. One student told me, “My GPA's been good until I started moving....I went to high school in Another State also. I really only had two weeks of my freshman year. I moved so much.” Another blamed her previous school for math difficulties, “I came from Far State Metropolis Public Schools. They don't focus on math there. They didn't prepare me for algebra. I came here in 7th grade. I've struggled in math since then.” Two students told me how transferring schools caused them to be held back from graduating on time because they lacked one or two required credits.
Of the 20 who spoke about moving, eight spoke of a way the move(s) impacted them in a negative way. These negative impacts included a lower GPA, different standards caused them to struggle academically, lost credits and time, ineligibility for a scholarship, and feeling self-conscious as “the new kid”.

Out of necessity, the students with whom I interacted were burdened with the roles being both kids and adults due to absent parents, their potential first-generation status, student parenthood, and economic disadvantage. They were likely to be employed during high school and not living in two parent homes. In addition, many moved frequently, requiring them to readjust to new cities, teachers, and friends. In many ways these students were “on their own.”

Now that I have described students’ home circumstances, I will explore their educational world and the tasks which they must successfully navigate in order to graduate from high school and enroll in college. Important emerging themes to this process included the resources of time, information and money. I will examine these as necessary ingredients in successful college enrollment.

To prepare for college requires one to excel academically. In addition to excelling academically, there are three other tasks to complete the college enrollment process. Students must choose a college and a major, gain admission to college, and find funding to pay for both college and daily survival while attending. I will now discuss how shortages of money, information, and time impact successful completion of these tasks.
Resource Scarcity during the College Enrollment Process

Figure 4: Theme Cluster Two: Resource Scarcity during the College Enrollment Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Excelling in High School</strong></td>
<td>For high school expenses/college tuition and survival during college</td>
<td>How to prepare/what classes to take</td>
<td>To work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Choosing College/Major</strong></td>
<td>For expenses related to college visits/research</td>
<td>To know about colleges</td>
<td>To learn about colleges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For travel: internship and other career discovery experiences</td>
<td>To know about careers/majors</td>
<td>To learn about careers/majors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How to inquire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gaining Admission</strong></td>
<td>For college application fees</td>
<td>How to apply</td>
<td>To fill out applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding Funding</strong></td>
<td>For travel expenses to research funding opportunities</td>
<td>To know about types of funding</td>
<td>To learn about types of funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How to apply for funding</td>
<td>To fill out scholarship/FAFSA applications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: College Enrollment Process Needs
Students in my study did not have the resources of time, money and information which students from middle class homes have. Just graduating from high school, let alone enrolling in college, presented a challenge to them. On their own to navigate the waters, they were boating without paddles, lacking valuable resources to propel them along. This section examines how the lack of information, money and time impacted the students.

**Information**

Students who are the first in their families to attend college cannot depend on family members to provide first-hand accounts about the enrollment process. In fact, not having easy access to accurate information makes the enrollment process rather challenging. I observed two types of required knowledge to complete the college enrollment process: knowing how and knowing about. Students need to know how to apply, prepare, and make inquiries about college and financial aid. Students need to know about different types of funding, colleges, and careers and majors.

**Knowing how**

Students sometimes did not understand college entrance requirements and had not enrolled in courses recommended to gain admission. Some students also did not fully understand the college or financial aid application process.

Several students who claimed they were college bound were content to take the minimum number of credits to graduate, rather than filling their schedule with college prep courses. One student who wished to become a nurse told me she was upset that
the school placed her in “extra” math and “extra” science classes she did not need. She tried to get the school to allow her to drop both but they made her keep the math class, she explained to me, annoyed. Another college-bound student hoping to become a teacher dropped her senior year math class, saying, “I already had enough credit.”

Another student told me that watching “Criminal Minds” on TV had influenced her choice of college major. "I wanted to study biology for pre-med but now profiling seems interesting." She was concerned because she would need to study statistics in college. “I heard stats is hard," she told me. I asked her what math she was taking this year and she replied, “I’m not taking math this year. I didn't need it." Students evaluated their “need” for courses based on high school graduation requirements, rather than college recommendations or potential scholarship criteria.

Learning about careers, majors and college needs to happen well in advance of college admissions application deadlines in order for students to be able to plan properly for college. Financial aid applications also have deadlines. Resources such as Peterson’s (2010) provide timelines to assist parents plan step-by-step for their children’s education beginning with ninth grade. However, in my study, I found that some students were not following college planning timelines. One student thought she did not need to begin her college or career search because she was “only a sophomore.” A junior was surprised to learn that he could begin the application process. “We allowed to fill that shit out now?” he asked, after a peer returned from a school-sponsored college fair with a college application in hand.
In some cases important deadlines passed by without students’ knowledge, and moreover that seemed not to be an important issue for them. For example, one student asked me for help in locating the website which told the deadline to apply for admission to a particular college. When we found that the deadline had passed, he said, “It looks too late. I’ll just transfer later.”

Filling out the FAFSA application was difficult for students. While the application is free to fill out, it is (was) lengthy\(^\text{20}\). Certain information is also required when applying for financial assistance. Necessary documents include the parents’ tax forms, which may be difficult to obtain for some students with absent parents or parents who do not pay taxes. When parents do not file their federal income taxes properly and keep appropriate documentation, it may hinder the student’s financial aid application. Past research (Hurst, 2009) indicated that such oversight or ignorance on the part of parents, which is more likely to occur with this population, does impact some students’ ability to apply for financial aid. Accordingly, while it was not raised in my interviews, students whose parents were absent would inherently face such issues. Colleges seemed to understand this. The technical training school, where one student would be enrolling in a 14 month program, sent a representative to the school to assist the student in filling out her FAFSA.

\(^{20}\) The FAFSA was recently changed to make it easier and shorter to fill out.
Knowing about

Students also seemed to lack information about types of colleges, majors, and funding. Many did not distinguish between four-year colleges, two-year colleges, and technical schools. Students also lacked information about careers and their educational requirements.

Knowing the differences between four-year colleges, community colleges and technical training schools is important and students failed to make distinctions. A student who wished to become “a florist, landscape designer, or veterinary technician” told me she was having trouble finding a college with one of these majors. When I asked students whether they planned to attend and complete college, several answered in the affirmative and then proudly shared their plans to enroll in technical training schools 21. To them any formal schooling after high school was “college.” A student with a 4.0 GPA wished to study collision repair at a technical school because it “will help me in my future—for jobs.” She was excited to be the first in her family to go to “college.” When asked if they had any family members who had attended college, repeatedly students cited family who had attended technical training, or trade, schools.

Career educational requirements were also unknown to students. One student told me he planned to become a lawyer “in four years.” A junior told me she wanted to become a pediatrician and thought four to six years of postsecondary education would be enough to meet the requirements for that degree.

21 And indeed many of these non-degree granting institutions have the word “college” in their names.
Students also lacked information about financial aid. They were not sure about the types of financial aid and may not have known who to contact for more information. Several students asked me how much of a tuition waiver they would receive as a child of a parent who worked for my university. The question was noteworthy for two reasons. First, the students did not already know the answer to the question, and secondly, they sought the response from me (who is not an authority on this type of information). I inferred that the students were perhaps not aware of the many different departments and roles found within a large university, did not know whom to contact to find answers to their questions, or did not know anyone other than myself who had any contact with the university. Similar concerns were evoked with the question asked by a student awarded $10,000 in financial aid, “Grants you don’t have to repay, right?”

After witnessing the lack of information about careers, colleges, and funding and the lack of information about the process of applying, I became concerned about other knowledge students might have lacked. Students need to know that there are multiple applications to submit. In addition to an application for admission, finding funding for college may require submitting the FAFSA, college-specific applications, and individual scholarship application, each with its own deadline. It is a daunting task for these students, with little help from their families, to choose a major, pick a college, gain admission, and find funding with such little guidance.
Money

In addition to a lack of easy access to accurate information about college, students struggled to pay the expenses related to high school and college enrollment. High school expenses combined with additional household responsibilities put students at a disadvantage in their ability to save for college. Money earned during student employment was consumed by high school related expenses instead of saved for future college attendance.

Money Consumer: Paying for High School

Many students were in charge of paying their own way through high school. Students from low-income, one or no parent households share more of the household burden, both in terms of completing necessarily chores and paying expenses. Although no tuition is charged for public education, participants had expenses in high school for which they needed to pay out of pocket; and these amounts may be significant considering the low income my participants had. In addition to optional, yet traditional, items such as class rings, yearbooks, prom, graduation parties, and senior pictures, students were required to pay senior dues and library fees. They also needed school clothes and supplies.

During discussions and interviews with students, students told me they were saving money for these high school expenses, items which wealthier families might consider the parents’ duty. One girl told me she was saving up $200 for her class ring. Another was saving to pay her $185 library fine. A senior told me she needed to find a
job to pay her senior dues, otherwise she could not graduate from high school: “We each have to pay $210. That’s why I’m stressing. I have to buy a dress for my mom’s wedding and a prom dress and come up with these senior dues.” In fact another senior told me she recommended telling freshman that they should start saving now because they'll need clothes “to fit in” and to pay dues.

A list of senior dues at another of the schools I visited included the following:

- Senior Picnic $5
- Senior Breakfast $20
- Senior T-shirt $15
- Homecoming $10

Fees also deterred students from full participation in high school events. One boy told me he wasn’t going to attend prom. “I’m not going. It costs $65 to go.” Another girl dropped her art class, “Art cost $15 and I thought I was moving, so I didn’t want to pay the fee.” A student passed on a band trip to California because, “It’s too expensive to go on the trip. It costs $500.”

Finishing high school, while entailing a degree of financial burden, is only one part of the college enrollment process. In addition to costs associated with graduating from high school, there are many financial requirements which must be met in order to enroll and attend college. First, travel expenses must be paid if students are to explore colleges and careers. It is common for students to learn about career fields through internships. Campus visits are a frequent way to gather more information about colleges. To learn about financial aid opportunities, student may need to travel to campus to speak with a financial aid counselor or visit the library to research
scholarships. To those struggling to survive financially, the extra travel expenses involved in these activities can be significant\textsuperscript{22}. For students not having a drivers’ license or a reliable car, travel can be complicated. Expenses, beyond those necessary for daily high school life, which are associated with travel include having dress clothes, buying gas and insurance for a car, and maintaining a car in good working order. Up-to-date scholarship sources and college information can be obtained online, which require either the use of computers, printing facilities, and the Internet, which may not be free. As one student expressed his frustration, “I know I need to get a second job. I work...nights. I need another job—one [to pay] for school and one for college.”

Besides financial needs related to learning more about colleges, careers, and funding, students also needed money to pay their college application fees. Two students told me they were working and saving to pay their college application fees themselves. When I asked one when she planned to pay the fee, she replied, “I get paid Friday.” Another told me. “I just need to send in my application when I get the $100 application fee together.” Students whose parents were paying sometimes also had to wait for the parents to save up the money. As one student told me, “I gotta pay my application fee. I’m waiting for my parents to pay it.”

\textsuperscript{22} Many of the juniors and seniors did not yet have drivers’ licenses. By waiting to get a license until the age of 18, students could avoid the several hundred dollar fee for drivers’ education classes. In addition to expenses, students without a license would also be dependent on another to transport them to and from locations.
Time

Time is required for students to earn money, excel academically and do research to compensate for the lack of easy access to first-hand college and career information in their families. Time is also needed to fill out both admissions and financial aid applications.

Paradoxically, this process of educating oneself requires more time for those who do not have easy access to information from family member than for those who do. These potential first-generation students need time to search college websites online, visit campuses, find college funding, and learn about careers to which they have never been exposed. Unfortunately, time is often filled with daily survival, leaving little left over for future planning.

Valuable time is depleted as hours are filled with employment rather than studying or investigating careers or college. Time limitations are exacerbated by occasions of “starting over” where parents have moved the families to new cities and/or schools. Early academic struggles, never overcome, also compound the issue, setting students even farther behind.

Early Academic Struggles

Unlike students who easily “get” a subject, many participants in my study described subject-area struggles which had caused them problems since a young age. In order to overcome these early struggles, students needed extra time to study and to find and utilize good tutors.
The most frequently cited problem area was mathematics. Several students felt that they were just “bad at math”. As one student explained, “I'm not good at math. I'm the dumbest person in math. I hate math. I used to say that since I was little--it's already in my head.” Eventually hoping to go to law school, another senior told me that math difficulties ran in her family. “I do not understand it. It's always been that way. It's a family thing. The whole family does not like math.” Another student said “I passed 5th grade with a D in math.... I was never confident in math. I won't say answers out loud. I always wonder why others get it so much faster than me.”

Students who fall behind early in math and science may not be able to catch up as new course content builds on prior understanding. Two students described their science classes as moving too fast for them. “I just don't like my chemistry teacher,” said a student who hoped to become a teacher herself. “The way she teaches, she builds on things. Most kids don't know ‘A’ but we're learning ‘D.’” Another student was struggling in pre-calculus. “The teacher in this class moves too fast for me. He told me I either know it or I don't. If I knew it or didn't, wouldn't that mean we would be born smart? I told him that and he didn't know what to say.”

Early academic struggles also contribute to students' difficulty in passing the series of high stakes, subject-area tests required in order to receive a high school diploma. The year the program evaluation was conducted was the first year students were required to pass the graduation tests. Students began taking the tests in 10th grade and were tested each fall and spring, with an optional summer administration. They
were expected to pass all exams by the end of 12th grade\textsuperscript{23}.

According to the local newspaper, the first time the graduation test was given to sophomores in March 2003\textsuperscript{24}, more than three out of four students — 76.9 percent — flunked statewide. Nearly 95 percent of the state’s African American students failed the exam.

The graduation test was not a focus of my program evaluation, which provided the source documentation for this analysis; however, the tests were repeatedly mentioned by students, as they had an especially large impact at the two highest poverty schools I visited.

Students were quite vocal about disliking the test and the policy which required passing scores for a diploma. According to students, the graduation tests were a major source of stress. When asked about the testing, some students shared stories of the anxiety they caused. One admitted he wouldn’t have passed the test if he hadn’t “cheated” by using “test taking” guessing techniques. “I wouldn’t have passed State Graduation Tests without using cheating strategies they taught us. Eliminate two answers, choose ‘C’ when in doubt. They spend all this time to teach you how to cheat.”

When I asked one student how many times she had to take the test before passing, she replied, “Three or four times. That science test was hard. It was like college level. I don’t understand why we have to do it. Other states don’t have them.”

\textsuperscript{23} In 2009, the state legislature passed an education reform bill ordering the replacement of the test in favor of a new assessment system.

\textsuperscript{24} The test was first administered in 2003, but it wasn’t until 2007 that passing scores were required for high school graduation.
The graduation tests contributed to low morale in the schools where large numbers of students didn’t pass. These schools also had the largest number of economically disadvantaged students. One student told me how many students she believed had not passed. “We have 500 or 700 students here. Out of that about 160 are seniors. Only 60 have passed.” After a large number of seniors were deemed ineligible to graduate after the May results came in, a student described the low morale. “Well, we get down on ourselves when we don’t pass. You should have seen the school last week. So many people crying when we got our results. It was so sad.” After students found out they had not passed in May, many seniors stopped attending school. As one student recounted, “A lot of students said they aren’t coming anymore. That’s why no one’s here. Last week we got our final State Graduation Test scores and a lot didn’t pass.”

![Figure 5: Time Depletion Cycle](image-url)
Students, largely on their own in a resource scarce environment, find a shortage of time when attempting to overcome early academic struggle, readjust after relocating, and educate themselves about careers and colleges. In fact, the way time is consumed can lead to a cycle which perpetuates class reproduction as the above diagram illustrates.

*Figure 6: College Enrollment Funnel*

To successfully complete all four college enrollment tasks of excelling in high school, choosing a college, gaining admission, and finding funding requires resources of time, money, and information. For the study participants, time and money, in limited
supply, are diverted from the enrollment process towards additional responsibilities and everyday survival. The extraction of time and money cause a funneling effect, decreasing the likelihood of successful completion of all tasks.

From this study, it appeared that the tasks of “daily survival” which included “graduating from high school” were in competition with the “future planning” tasks of the college enrollment process for available time and money, as shown in the illustration below.

![Competition for Resources](image)

**Figure 7: Competition for Resources**

**Reason for College: Why Go?**

After examining students’ home context and the challenges they faced while attempting to enroll in college, I will now share results of analysis of students’ view of college. How many wanted to attend college and what would a college degree mean for them? First, I will discuss students’ educational aspirations and meaning of college and then I will share students’ postsecondary worries.
As the students I interviewed were all enrolled in a college preparation course, not surprisingly, the majority expressed a desire to go to college. Only a few told me their aspirations immediately following high school did not include pursuing at least a bachelor’s degree. However, as explained earlier, there is reason to believe many of

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25 When asked about their future educational and job plans, some mentioned careers, while others mentioned colleges or programs. From this information, it was not always easy to ascertain the degree they hoped to obtain.

26 Many students were placed in the class by administrators. They did not all elect to enroll in the course themselves.
these students may never go on to complete a four-year college degree. Elliott (2009), in his research, attempted to differentiate between students’ aspirations and their expectations of what was possible for them. They found that most children wish to attend college, yet their expectations of attendance are much lower. Elliott calls this an “aspirations/expectations gap” and finds the largest gap in those students who have parents with no college experience.

There were three major themes which encapsulated the reasons students wished to go to college. These included economic gain, prestige, and college in and of itself.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Use:</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required for Specific Career/Get a Good Job/Money-Maker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Doors/Flexibility/Independence from spouse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallback if Athletics Doesn't Provide a Career</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Use (Prestige)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator of Success/Prove to Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please Parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College as End in and of itself</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Help Society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Learn More</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15: Significance of College

The vast majority of students believed a college degree was important for its economic benefits. Most believed college was a desirable destination because of the promise of a better economic future. For some, it was the only destination after high school. As one student explained, “It's not much of an option. You can't do anything nowadays without a college degree. Parents are not going to support me. I don't have
great technical skills.” Another believed college was necessary for everyone. “Without a college education, you can't really do anything. You won't get paid a decent amount. Everybody should go--nobody can take that away from you. Everybody has to go.” Students mentioned going to college for better earning potential, a good paying job, or to meet career requirements. Students told me college was important for them because, “You get more opportunities for jobs.” Other responses included, “For a better future. To hold a better job” and “Because I want to be a high school music teacher.”

Some mentioned the economic security college would afford. “My mom didn't go,” told one female. She was fortunate to get a good job, but if my dad left and she didn't have a job, we'd be stuck. I don't want to be stuck.” Another told me, “My mom didn't go and I see where she is now. It's hard for her to find a job. If something happens to my dad, we'd be screwed.”

For some students, attending college had more to do with furthering a career in athletics than getting an education. One student who was planning to try out for the Olympics told me, “I'd like to study math or accounting or become a pro boxer. Boxing will be what I do, but college will be something I can fall back on in case I get hurt, like my dad did.” Another student who couldn't decide whether to go to college on a football or a baseball scholarship, told me about his brother who had first attended an out-of-state technical college and then had gotten transferred “four or five times” to other colleges, in order to keep paying football. As the student said, “My dad told him that he hopes he can at least get a bachelor's out of all the transfers.”
The second most frequently cited use of college was as a symbol of success. Having a college degree showed that they had “made it.” One student explained why he wanted to graduate from college: “To show them that I'm not a quitter. If I can finish college, I can finish anything. I conquered. I succeeded in life.”

For students who could not name any family members who had attended college, graduating from high school may have been a higher level of educational attainment than their parents. Graduation from college, in contrast, would be a pinnacle achievement. One student wrote in an essay:

First and foremost the main person that influenced me to attend college is my mother. She is an old-fashioned mom that wants me to go to college really bad. She went for nursing and was told she’ll never make it because she was bigger (weight-wise). So I'm going to Capital City College of Nursing to become a nurse for her. I'm not going just for her but for me too. No one has ever gone to college and finished in my family so I want to be the first and my mom don't ever let me live it down I said that. I really don't care because it’s a constant reminder of my priorities.

Another student was also sure he was going to attend and finish. He assured me, “I have my mind set on the prize.” One painfully quiet student, barely audible above a mumble, was wavering on whether to attend a costly one-year out-of-state art program at a for-profit art school. His relatives urged him to continue his schooling telling him to,
“not to let go of your dreams”. As one student told me, “Only one person in my family ever finished [college], so I think that’d be a good accomplishment.”

A few also planned to go to college to please their parents. One student, with Indian ancestry told me he planned to go to college “Because my parents want me to. They need academics. I don't want to be the ‘ugly duckling’ who didn't go or pass. I'm the youngest. Everyone else went and passed.”

A few students mentioned wanting to attend college because they loved learning or wanted to make the world a better place. One such student told me she wanted to study medicine to prevent others from suffering the same fate as her father. “I don't want to disappoint him. He wanted me to take studies so serious. He wanted me to study business but after his death I thought I can help people.”

Although most students seemed to believe college’s promise of a better future, many were worried about attending. Three broad areas of concerns surfaced. Students felt college would be unfamiliar, hard and expensive.

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<th>Unfamiliar</th>
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<td>Being on my own/newness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family pressures/expectations</td>
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<td>Knowing my major/career I want</td>
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<td>Making friends/meeting others</td>
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<td>Failure/not &quot;making it&quot;/too hard</td>
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<td>College acceptance</td>
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<th>Expensive</th>
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<td>Finding a job after college</td>
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<td>Supporting oneself/family during</td>
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<td>Paying for college</td>
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Table 16: Postsecondary Concerns
Concerns which revealed college enrollment to be unfamiliar, and thus scary, were the most prevalent among the students I interviewed. In students’ own words, their fears came from the idea of college as an “unknown.” These fears were exacerbated by the fact that they had few family members or close contacts with positive college experiences. Many of these students did not grow up hearing about parents’ college days, nor were they likely to have made many campus visits. For them, as they told me, college was truly “a new box, “something different,” and out of their “comfort zone.” As students unable to draw on their parents’ experiences, the transition to a large, diverse college setting was intimidating. Students were concerned about being on their own, making friends and meeting others, family pressures and expectations, and not knowing their majors.

Being on their own and finding friends were the most common fears. A student told me, “I’m terrified...about my first day. Orientation is supposed to help you, but 600 [students] in one class!” Another told me, “It will be something new to go through--moving into the adult stage. It's something new. Similar to moving.” A girl from Africa told me, “I'm scared for freshman year. I want to meet good, respectful friends in college. Not go out with crazy people. When you are a Muslim, you can't drink.” Another female told me:

I am nervous about attending college. It will be a completely different situation. Here classes are in the same building and my same middle
school friends are here in high school. Chances are that here there will be at least one friend in each of my classes. In college it will be different. I’ll be walking in not knowing anybody.

A few students indicated nervousness about managing a household on their own. One who planned to start at the local community college followed by admission to a prestigious law school told me, “I’m nervous about everyday life in my job and getting an apartment.”

A high school football star was concerned about starting over. When I asked if he was nervous about life after high school, he answered:

Super nervous. I don't want to brag or nothin’, but I have it good in high school. A lot of friends. Good backers, coaches. People say when you go to college you have to start at the bottom. Like moving to a new city.

That never gets easier. Somebody will point and say, ‘There’s the new kid.’

Not knowing which career to choose also concerned several others who were still undecided late in their senior or junior years.

**College as Hard**

The second group of concerns students shared were whether they would be able to keep up academically and whether they were good enough to gain admission. Many students weren’t sure what to expect academically in college, which augmented their fears. They were afraid of failure.
One student was worried about, “Tests in college, math and reading. Everything is higher, taking responsibility for yourself. I have a bad math history. I only started picking it up last year. I failed algebra.” Another student was concerned about the amount of homework. “The only thing is the homework. How much and will I get it done?” Another asked, “what if college is too hard and I don't get passed through it?” Another said, “I'm really nervous that I won't ‘make it’ and something will happen and I'll end up working at McDonalds.” One worried about admissions. “I’m worried about whether my ACT score is good enough to go to Capital City University’s main campus.”

Having witnessed negative examples of family member’s failed attempts to get a college, degree, students worried about their own chances for success. Many had grown cautious. One student who did not plan to pursue a four-year degree immediately after high school wrote about her reasons in an essay.

From growing up and seeing people flunk out of college or just basically wasting money on college and don't stick to it, I know that when I go to college it's going to be for sure. My mom always tell me don't go to college if you’re questioning whether or not you want to go, which I agree with her 100%.

**College as Expensive**

The last major group of concerns was financial. The participants in my study were worried about affording their college tuition, having enough money for living expenses during their college years, and whether they would be able to find a good job.
when they graduated. Many students expressed plans to both attend college and work, some full-time. When asked what they imagined they would be doing in one year, 18 of the 52 seniors and two of the juniors who planned to graduate early told me they planned to work and go to school.

*Paying for college*

College is costlier than ever. The typical cost of books/supplies, on-campus housing, and tuition at a public four-year institution is estimated at nearly $20,000 a year (College Board, 2009). The average cost of tuition alone costs $7020 a year (College Board, 2009). Sixty-six percent of college graduates from the state where this study was conducted have loans to repay. Nationwide, the average debt for graduating college seniors with loans is $23,200 (Reed & Cheng, 2008).

Engle and Tinto (2008) analyzed the financial aid awards of students and found that low-income, first-generation students on average fall short about $3,600 of the amount they are determined to need to pay for college, even when aid in the form of loans is included. When loans are not included, they fall nearly $6,000 short. This is a major burden on these students and their families as it represents as much as half of their median annual income of $12,100. Engle and Tinto calculated that earning minimum wage, these students would have to work 20 more hours per week in addition to the hours they were currently working to make up the difference.

One student told me he had only one worry: “how I’m gonna pay for college.” Another student was worried she would “fail to get a job to pay for college.” During the
year-long course of visits, I followed the saga of another senior’s struggle to find money to pay the tuition for an out-of-state postsecondary diploma in collision repair. With a 4.0 GPA, she was able to secure grants and scholarship monies, but she was still left $3000 short. She struggled to find a co-signer for a loan. Eventually, after much distress, a distant relative was located and approved.27

Paying for Living Expenses

Not only do students need money to pay for instructional expenses in college, but they also need money for living expenses, unlikely to be supplemented by their parents. In fact, during this time, they may even be expected to contribute money to help other family members back home.

One student told me his concern was “about supporting my family.” Another student told me she was most concerned about “living on my own, paying for things, surviving. How to pay for school and rent. How to work and attend school at the same time.” A senior told me he was nervous about “not being able to stand on my own two feet.”

Rate of Return/Getting a good job after

Some students were concerned about finding a good job after college. One student told me her biggest fear was “that I will not get a job right out of college. That I’ll have to do something I don’t want to do.” Another was nervous “about the job market shrinking. I think it might be even worse after college.” “I worry that the money I

27 In addition to paying for her tuition, she also told me she would need a car and was saving up to buy one.
make after I’m done,” said one student. “Will it be worth the cost put into it?” Students were very concerned about the rate of return on their educational investment. Given the relatively high level of investment, students with limited financial resources found it very important to ensure a reasonable return.

Student View of College: Risky

Because of their views of college as unfamiliar, hard, and expensive, shaped by resource scarcity, students believed they would be taking a risk in attending college. They worried about not completing college and being saddled with loans, while at the same time lacking a degree to use as a tool to get a good paying job. The newness,
academic challenges, and financial burdens of attending college in the absence of successful family examples and aid made college pursuits feel unreasonably risky for low income, first-generation students. Without family resources to bail them out if they were unable to keep up with tuition/living expenses or maintain passing grades, students’ situation was precarious. A failed attempt to gain a college degree, might actually have more serious consequences for low income students than if they had pursued another route. Not only would pursuing the degree be costly, but it might also have precluded them from other free vocational training opportunities offered in high school.28

Uncertainty and their limited resources made college a risky and difficult venture. Higher levels of uncertainty made economically disadvantaged, potential first-generation college students think twice before enrolling in college. As students with an already limited supply of free time and money, diverting resources from the tasks at hand, daily survival and graduating from high school, toward college pursuits was daunting.

Students’ home contexts were influential in developing a view of college as risky. That view influenced students’ actual aspirations and educational decision-making. Despite the challenges, some students continued to work toward attending and graduating from college. Findings showed that many of these students engaged in risk

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28 This may occur during high school. Because of scheduling conflicts, students who wish to enroll in classes geared toward immediate employment after high school may not be able to enroll in college preparation courses (and vice versa). For me personally, enrolling in typing class during senior year precluded me from taking chemistry, pre-calculus and trigonometry.
and fear minimizing strategies. They took actions to conserve money and minimize failure, including choosing the least expensive college choice, making plans to transfer, making multi-stage plans, and choosing to attend smaller colleges. While most students expressed a desire to get at least a bachelor’s degree, there were 19 students who did not. First, I will discuss the college-bound students’ strategies for minimizing risk and then discuss the possible reasons some students do not wish to pursue four-year degrees. Further analysis suggests that some students did not believe the promise of betterment which college promises.

**Moving Toward the Promise: Risk Minimizing Strategies**

![Figure 10: Theme Cluster Four: Risk Minimizing Strategies](image)
To minimize risk, some college bound students were engaged in risk minimizing strategies. Most students preferred to attend less expensive schools irrespective of quality. Several had multi-step plans to obtain a college degree. Some aimed to work full-time first to save money for college. Others first planned to attend relatively short technical training programs to gain job skills in order to then work to save for college. Students spoke of “starting small” and many had plans to transfer later.

*Conserving Money: Cheaper is better even if quality is lower*

For students with financial limitations, expense was a greater factor in college choice than quality or even degrees offered. One senior who wished to eventually become a lawyer, planned to start at the local community college. “I don't want to go to Capital City Community College. I'm accepted at Selective Liberal Arts College. But they want $32,000 a year. My dad says that's too expensive. He just recently lost his job. Capital City Community College is about $2000 a quarter, I think...I didn't send my grades to Capital City University because I didn't think my dad would have the money.”

Some students, saddled with paying their own tuition, were choosing to attend the local community college in order to save costs. When I asked one student where she planned to be a year from now, she replied, “In college and working. Capital City Community College....My dad said if I went anywhere else, I was paying for it.” Another said, “...the tuition price is a factor. If I live at home, it will be easier to not have to pay rent.”
Plans to transfer

Many students mentioned transfer plans. When asked where she thought she would be in one year, one senior said, “Transferring. I want to be able to go anywhere I want. To a prestigious school. I hope to get a 3.8 GPA at least and it's cheaper and easier to take classes at Capital City Community College.” Another student also planned to get basic courses out of the way at a cheaper school. “It costs $72 a credit hour at Capital City Community College. I’ll go there to get math and English classes done and then transfer. Another told me his plan was to, “Major in sports exercise at Capital City Community College and then transfer to Capital City University or Private College. I'd be stupid to go anywhere other than Capital City Community College since I’ve got a 75% discount there on tuition since my dad works there.”

Multi-stage Plans

Several students mentioned wanting to have a career first to save money for college. One student, who had emigrated from Africa, planned to become a flight attendant first before getting a bachelor’s. “I want to go to a four-year college. Maybe go to airline academy [first] to become a flight attendant. Then go to Daytona Beach or Liberty University in Virginia. I'd like to go there after being a flight attendant. Maybe I can go while working.” Another, who had already been accepted at two four-year institutions, planned to go to the local community college and transfer to a four-year college only after finding a job with a good income. One student planned to become a cosmetologist and a nurse. “I want to go to cosmetology school for 14 months and then when I'm finished, I'll go to Capital City Community College. Nursing will be my real job,
and I'll cut hair on the side.” A senior said he wanted to find a job where his employers would pay his tuition. “Everyone's saying go straight to school. I'm thinking of working for a year to have the money for college. I've got a friend who has a job where they pay 80-90% of the tuition. He works in a warehouse.”

The desire to avoid loans or the inability to qualify forced multistep plans onto students. I asked one undecided senior where she planned to go to college. “Maybe Nearby State University,” she responded. “Or if I go to the For-Profit School [where they have a 14 month program] to study business, I'll maybe transfer to a place where I can minor in music. I can then transfer to a four-year college. I don't want to pay high loans.” Another told me she would like to study mortuary science at the University of Nearby City, but she had no money. Her plan was to work at a local medical center first to save.

Start Small
Compensating for Information Scarcity: Clinging to What We “Know”

Because students had few close family connections with college experience, they appeared to rely heavily on the few nearby insights they could glean when making their own future educational decisions. Negative family college experiences had made some students cautious.

Don’t Repeat Mistakes

Many students who spoke about wanting to “start small” and attend small private colleges or a two year college first based their decision on a desire to avoid repeating family mistakes. Others felt overwhelmed by the size of the student body at
the local four-year public institution and believed they would receive more personal attention at a smaller school.

One student described why she planned to attend the local community college.

“My brother went away and it wasn’t good for him. He was so poor and made bad decisions. I want to start at a smaller school....” Another told me, “I’ll start at Capital City Community College. I learned from my sister's experience to start off small. Get the flow of studying and don't get lost in a big college.”

These four strategies helped students minimize their fears and financial risks. However, I wondered whether these sometimes complicated plans would be followed to the end.

**Avoiding the Promise: Doing the Minimum**

In addition to risk minimizing strategies, several examples of students just getting by, or “doing the minimum,” during high school were noted. For example, one student told me he would go to college “if I don’t slack off.” Another said, “I could be a straight ‘A’ student, but I barely get by. I just want a diploma.”

Originally I had assumed these students made up the 19 students who were not planning four-year college careers. While some were in this group, not all were. In fact several students who displayed characteristics of just “getting by” had already sent in college applications (one had applied at three colleges) or taken college placement exams. What several had in common were especially strong fears about college.
In many families college graduation was described as dream fulfillment, a prize, or an accomplishment. College, described in these terms, is distant. Graduation would be a hard-won struggle. For these families, usually with little to no college experience, college was not just a place to get a degree, it symbolized something more precious. It represented family betterment, distance from where one came, up from the bottom, a symbol of having arrived, having “made it”.

Students may perceive college attainment as a heavy burden to lay on their shoulders. A fear of failure and letting their families down might cause their “doing the minimum” behavior. Perhaps these students were engaged in a “fear” minimizing strategy, “doing the minimum” to lower expectations and possibly even avoid going to college altogether.

As the first in her family to even enroll in college, let alone graduate, one student seemed especially worried about her parents’ expectations. The senior aimed to get a bachelor’s degree in biology. “I don't want to study,” she told me. “My GPA is 2.9. I'm alright with that.” When I asked her if she was worried about next year, she replied, “Yes, everything. My parents are expecting a lot.” I asked her where she imagined she
would be a year from now and said “Hopefully in college” [italics added]. Her tentativeness, combined with her concerns and coasting behavior, make me wonder.

The student who hoped he didn’t “slack off” was “terrified” about the “newness of college.” While he originally told me he aspired to get a degree in psychology from a selective private college, he later confessed that he didn’t see himself at a four-year college.

The student who had bragged she could be a straight A student if she tried, later admitted that she struggled in math and tested only right above the English Language learners on her college math placement test.
Figure 12: Theme Cluster Six: Opt Out or Shut Out?

Educational Aspiration: Less than 4 year degree

Opt Out

Disbelief in Promise

Preference for work which does not require a 4 year degree

Desire to work full-time/begin families

Desire to be free from the classroom

Shut Out

Lack of Resources (Time, Information, and/or Money) Impede Educational Attainment
**Opting out or Shut out?**

In addition to college-bound students who did not seem seriously college-minded, there were 19 students who stated that their postsecondary aspirations were less than a four-year degree. Why did these students, enrolled in a college success course, not aim for a bachelor’s?

Of the 19 students who did not plan to pursue a bachelor’s, three wished to work full-time, one expressed a desire to spend six months in Europe visiting his mother, and the remaining 15 had plans to go to a technical or trade school or to get their Associate’s degree from the local community college. In addition to these students, there were also nine others who were either unsure of their plans or their attainment goals were unclear from their responses. Almost all of these students came from families where neither parent had obtained a bachelor’s. Out of the 28 students who were unsure, unclear, or pursuing less than a bachelor’s, 23 informed me that neither their mother nor father had graduated from a four-year college.\(^{29}\)

It is difficult to answer definitively whether students were *choosing* not to get a four-year degree (opting out) or whether their lack of resources was *shutting* them out (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). The difficulty can be illustrated by two examples which appeared to be students who preferred to “opt out.” Rather than opting out, they

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\(^{29}\)Two probably had at least one parent who had a four-year degree, and the remaining four may or may not have had parents with degrees—it was unclear from their responses. When asked if they had family who had attended college, unclear responses included “dad studied engineering in California,” “father went to college in California. He was in construction,” and “dad studied in Egypt.”
may instead have been “veiled shut out” cases. Student A had told me that she was not pursuing a four-year college degree, while Student B hoped to get his Bachelors in Fine Arts, but he was not sure he would be able to go.

Student A

"They [School administrators and teachers] make us raise our hands when they ask, 'Who's going to college?' When I didn’t raise my hand, they asked, ‘Why aren’t you going?’ If you don't [raise your hand], you feel bad. College isn't made for everyone. My mom didn't go and she do ok. My mom makes about $21 dollars an hour at State Government Office. Knowing that my mom has a successful job and never went to college [makes me] question whether or not I want to go.”

Second Student B

“Even if I don't do what I want, I've got other jobs lined up. Factory work paying $15 an hour--it's in a dangerous shop, but only dangerous if you do stupid things. They use college like a "scared straight" thing, telling you need college. You don't need it to be a truck driver or mechanic. My mom does local drops, but those who ride national can make $1000-1500 a day.”

Taken out of context, these two students’ statements, both defending their mothers’ choices not to attend college, one might think they preferred not to go to
college. Their statements appear to be a rejection of college as the sole route to success.

However, both students did express a desire to go to college, which was being thwarted by their circumstances. Student A was concerned about attending school while being a mother. In an essay, she wrote:

No one has ever influenced me about going to college like my sister did. A year ago I had a baby girl and as a mom at a young age, I thought I couldn't attend college because of the responsibilities I have as a mother. But my sister has a child also and now goes to college for a degree in Child Development. Knowing that my sister goes to school and still maintain to being a good mom influences me alot. It might be a little harder than it would for others but if I really want that it's something I have to do. I don't know about going to a four year college but I can attend a community college. Going to college and getting my degree while taking care of a baby is a risk I'm going to have to take.

If I choose to go to college it's because I want to go. It's not because my mom told me to go, or my sister, or my teacher, it's 'cause that's what I want to do. I going to enroll in college when I'm ready, I’m going to pick my own major, and I'm going to get my degree on my own. If my mom made me go to college, she’s not going to do my work, or my
midterms, or tests. That's me doing all that work, that's why I'm choosing on my own whether or not I want to go to college.”

Student B was concerned about academics and finances. In fact, he had struggled with reading all his life and had only read two books by himself. “Reading is more of an obligation than a relaxing thing,” he confided. His plans were to get his BFA in animation from Capital College of Art. He was disappointed that he would probably not be able to enroll in the Portfolio Development Program at the local career center, because he applied late. “My mom wasn't home to sign the application,” he said. In addition to his mom not being present to sign his application, he also could not tell me whether or not she had gone to college. “I don’t remember,” he replied, when asked. “She doesn’t talk about it.”

Consider the following additional example. Was this student being shut out of college due to her lack of information about careers and the disruption multiple relocations had caused in her life or did she simply prefer another route?

One senior I interviewed in April told me she had “no idea” what she wanted to do in her future. She was working part-time at a local supermarket, but was looking for a full-time job. After graduation, she planned to move in with an older sister, who was leaving the Army in May. After hearing about her sister’s experience, she was not interested in joining the Army. While her two sisters had attended the local community college and an out-of-state technical college, neither of her parents had gone to college.

This student had lived in three different states during high school. She had begun
Childhood Development training at her previous high school in another state and thought she might continue that in her current city. Whatever she decided, she would have to find a short term program at a smaller college. “I don’t like big crowds of people,” she said. “I don’t see myself at a four-year college. I have to force myself to go to school now, so I don’t see myself doing four more years.” She didn’t express any particular concerns or struggles in school, although she did tell me chemistry had been hard before they had begun doing more math in the class, which she liked.

It is not easy to separate students’ choices from their circumstances. Deciding whether they have been “shut out” or are “opting out” is difficult to determine. However, for those students opting out, I wondered if some rejected college because they did not believe their efforts to gain a college degree would be sufficiently rewarded. The next case is an example of one student who was opting out, at least momentarily; possibly because he did not believe a degree was worth pursuing.

This senior was not sure what he wanted to study or if he even wanted to go to college. While he could be the first in his family to finish, both his mother and sister had been “in and out of college a few times.” Both had attended at least two schools, first attending private colleges and later transferring to state schools. His mother never completed her bachelor’s, and his sister was now at the local community college. She had been in college for three years and still had not chosen a major. When asked about his study habits, he told me, “I usually do good on tests, but my GPA is not good. Probably due to homework. I don’t like doing work outside of school.”
While this student did say he wanted to go to college eventually to “make better money,” he also wanted “one year off. I’m kinda tired of school right now.” His mom had found him a full-time job cleaning for the city which he planned to do after high school graduation.

While it may be that this student was anxious to get out of the classroom, I wondered if he was not doing his best in high school because he just did not believe there would be a payoff after excelling in high school and pursuing a bachelor’s. After all, he had probably seen two women in his family rack up substantial tuition bills without reaping the rewards of finished degrees.

Other students may not believe in the promise of college because of an all-inclusive definition of “college.” For students who do not distinguish between technical colleges, community colleges and four-year accredited colleges, perhaps they were critical of the struggles faced by family members who could not find good paying jobs after completing short term programs.

Other possible explanations for opting out include a preference to do work which does not require a college degree, eagerness to work full-time or raise a family, and the desire to be free of the classroom.
Figure 13: Diagram of Postsecondary Planning
Summary

Students, finding themselves somewhat “on their own” and carrying adult responsibilities, have a lot to navigate in order to enroll in college. Not only must they find ways to survive daily with limited resources, they must also find additional resources to aid them in completing enrollment tasks, which include excelling in high school, choosing a college and major, gaining admission to college and finding funding.

Viewed through a lens which gleans insights gained from the few college experiences students can find around them, college is seen as unfamiliar, hard, and expensive. Fears about college combined with the students’ context of being on their own and having limited resources make college a risky venture. In order to attend, some students engage in risk minimizing strategies including starting small, choosing the cheaper college, planning to transfer, and having multi-stage plans. College-bound students who did not seem to be trying to excel during high school may have been attempting to lower their family’s expectations. A few students who aspired to less than a four-year degree do not participate in the college enrollment process. In was not evident whether these students chose this due to their own personal preference or whether they had been shut out due to lack of resources.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

1. Discussion
   a. The “Secret” Ingredients to Academic Success:
      i. wealth
      ii. knowledge
      iii. time
      iv. courage
      v. sacrifice
      vi. risk

2. Implications
   a. Policy Recommendations
   b. Recommendations for Future Research

When I began observations at Orange High School, Diana\textsuperscript{30} was having a bad week. Her cat had just died and she felt depressed. As the weeks passed, her mood improved, and she shared other events from her life. During November, she spent voting day working at a polling station to earn $100, which she planned to use to buy a surprise for her mother and her mother’s boyfriend, two $50 tickets to see a comedian. She told me she wanted to do this for her mother because “she doesn’t have many friends. She just works and comes home.”

While Diana was not a top student, she was college-bound and because of that, she felt she was “looked down upon for being an achiever.” “In urban schools,” she explained, “if you aren't in baseball, football or a pothead, you're looked down on.” She

\textsuperscript{30} Name changed.
had struggled in science since elementary school and was happy the school administration was allowing her to drop her physics class. However, they were not permitting her to drop the senior math class, which she felt was “extra.”

The thought of attending college was scary to her. She believed it would be a “completely different situation” and was worried about “walking in not knowing anybody.” However, she wanted to become a nurse, for both herself and for her mother who had never finished the nursing program at Capital City University. The fact that no one in her family had ever finished college was a “constant reminder” of her priority to enroll and graduate.

Diana, like many of the other participants in this study, faced college enrollment hurdles and fears of being in a new environment. This study aimed to increase awareness of challenges faced by students who are from low income homes and/or will be the first in their families to attend college. It also offered a window through which students’ postsecondary decision-making can be better viewed and understood.

This inquiry peered inside the lives of high school juniors and seniors to illuminate how social reproductive processes may happen. Many participants in this study made postsecondary plans which were not statistically favorable to degree completion; however, they did so in order to minimize financial risk and social fears. Students viewed four year colleges as intimidating, to the extent that some may sabotage their studies in order to avoid going altogether. In addition to their concerns about college being too hard academically, too expensive, and too unfamiliar, students
also faced hurdles during the college enrollment process in high school. Many of these hurdles stemmed from the fact that their parents were unable to take a central role in assisting them with their postsecondary planning. Policy makers, which include all who influence educational decisions including curriculum developers, politicians, teachers, and administrators, owe it to these children to make an effort to understand the world in which they live and to integrate this understanding into their work to provide better support for economically disadvantaged students.

Next follows a discussion of the key findings of this study in light of the existing literature and then a section on implications for teachers, administrators, and policymakers.

**Discussion of Findings**

Prior research has shown that lower socioeconomic and first-generation students are less likely to earn bachelor’s degrees than their counterparts (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

To examine why this may be so, I will discuss one of the posed research questions: What are “secret ingredients” necessary for academic success?” Shown through the lives of the students, the recipe for baccalaureate attainment includes the following six “secret” ingredients: wealth, knowledge, time, courage, sacrifice, and risk.
Wealth

Perhaps the most obvious ingredient in the academic success recipe is money. While it may appear self-evident, not everyone believes that money for education can be in scarce supply. In fact, one teacher with whom I interacted during the program evaluation told me that he was sure that anyone who really wanted to go to college could easily get a scholarship to pay the tuition. Besides the fact that tuition fees are not the only expenses students will encounter, I did not observe this teacher’s statement to be true. Students who really wanted to go to college were not regaling me with tales of full ride scholarships. Instead they expressed numerous concerns about how they would pay for school.

The college enrollment process presented formidable challenges to students
with limited resources of money. Students struggled to pay for high school costs, including class rings, library fines, and senior dues. They also had to wait for their paychecks to arrive in order to pay their college application fees.

High school, especially senior year, is terribly expensive for these students, especially as lower income students receive considerably less financial help from their parents than do middle class students (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Recent newspaper estimates of senior year costs have ranged from $9000 to a little over $600. For example, the *Seattle Times* (2007) ran a story about a retired computer systems administrator in Seattle who made a detailed list of senior expenses for his two twin sons. Not only did he include traditional items like senior pictures, but he also calculated the costs of trips to visit colleges. His expenses came to about $9,000 for each! The *Washington Examiner* (2010) printed another story which included an itemization totaling senior costs at $2021. A third conservative estimate calculated seniors' bare necessities at $624 (*Virginian-Pilot*, 2002). Many participants in my study received little help from their families to pay costs of high school, let alone college. Because they were “on their own” financially, students were worried about how they would pay for their postsecondary education.

While lack of wealth is a factor in paying high school fees, it also impacts students’ access to study materials and an environment conducive to studying. For example, Lynch and O’Riodan (1998) found that that students living in poverty often lacked basic facilities for studying. One school noted, “Some students in the winter are
studying with gloves on and no heat...[they] sit with the TV because it is warm. There is no option.” Children are more likely to excel in class if they come from homes where they have a place to study, where there are reference books, and newspapers, and where education is valued (Teachman, 1987; Burney & Beilke, 2008).

Knowledge

Another key ingredient for educational attainment is knowledge. Easy access to accurate information about colleges, careers, and the admissions and financial aid application processes was largely unavailable to participants. Bourdieu (1986) explains that this knowledge has hidden economic value, which he calls cultural capital. He believes it is frequently unrecognized as capital and instead mistaken for “legitimate competence.” In fact, Bourdieu states, “[S]choslastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family” (p. 48). While the knowledge itself can be construed as a form of cultural capital, having access to family members with this valued capital may also be understood as a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988, Lareau, 2000).

Students in the study were hampered by a lack of both cultural and social capital due to the frequency of parents being absent from their lives. Some had parents who had passed away; others had family members living out-of-state. One student was even a Ward of the Court, while one had already gotten an apartment and was living on his own with roommates. For students who did live with parents, family insights into the culture of college was absent because most of their parents did not have positive
college experiences. While some parents had never attended, others had tried and failed to graduate.

Prior studies have highlighted the key role parental involvement plays in students’ academic advancement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Pagliarulo McCarron & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2006). Many middle class students rely on their parents to guide them in their college preparations. Parents aid them in learning about and choosing a major, visiting and choosing a college and filling out applications. Also, having a parent with a university degree increases the likelihood of a young person to attend college prep courses in middle and high school (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000).

Participants’ choice of college may also limit their prognosis of finishing a four-year degree. Some of the participants had complicated multi-step plans to earn a college degree. Many had plans to start at the local community college and transfer later. However, this may not be the wisest choice in terms of degree completion. As noted by others, students from low SES backgrounds may face class-specific challenges in higher education choice (Ball, Davies, & Reay, 2002; Brooks, 2003; Reay, Davies, & Ball, 2001). Strategic college choices can increase the chance of degree completion (Pascarella et. al. 2004; Titus, 2006; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, Moeller, 2008, 2009). Low income, first generation students greatly increase their chances of earning a bachelor’s degree if they start at a non-profit four-year institution. For profit colleges were found to be riskier in terms of persistence (Engle & Tinto 2008).
Engle and Tinto (2008) found that low-income, first-generation students were more than seven times as likely to earn bachelor’s degrees if they started in four-year institutions, but less than 25 percent of them did so. The study found that only five percent of low-income, first-generation students who began at public two year institutions actually earned bachelor’s degrees within six years. At for-profit institutions, less than one percent of low-income, first-generation students earned bachelor’s degrees within six years despite the fact that 35 percent of them aspired to do so upon entering postsecondary education.

Gaining admission to quality colleges was a challenge for the participants in my study who did not seem to understand the requirements. Several told me they were not enrolled in any math class senior year, as they felt it unnecessary. Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) found that 71% of the lowest socioeconomic status students did not meet even minimal precollege course qualifications (compared to 30% of high socioeconomic students). Like Cabrera and La Nasa’s study, Adelman’s research (2006) has also shown that successful completion of advanced courses in high school provided the best odds for predicting later four-year degree attainment. In fact, he found that the highest level of mathematics completed in high school was a key marker in momentum toward completing a bachelor’s degree. Specifically, successful completion of a course in trigonometry or pre-calculus more than doubled the odds that the student who enrolled in college would eventually graduate.

In addition to not meeting minimum admission requirements, participants also
failed to meet important deadlines in the application process. I found, like Nagaoka, Roderick, and Coca (2008), that students may face barriers to four-year college enrollment because they may have difficulty managing the process of college application and miss important steps. First-generation college students are disadvantaged in parental assistance, receiving less help during the application process than those whose parents are college educated (Choy, 2001). Smith (2008, 2009) showed how parents did not have essential information about how to prepare for, apply to and eventually enroll in college.

**Time**

Money and knowledge, while important, are not the only necessary ingredients. Students also need time--to research and learn about colleges and careers and to excel in high school. Because of their financial situation, they also needed time to work. Bourdieu (1986) instructs us that time is closely related to economic and cultural capital. He defines capital as “accumulated labor” (p. 46) and notes that it takes time to accumulate wealth and cultural understandings. In addition to cultural capital, he states, “ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time... (p. 48).

Furthermore families which possess cultural capital do not need as much time to accumulate further capital. As Bourdieu (1986) explains, “[T]he initial accumulation of cultural capital, the precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the off-spring of families endowed with strong cultural capital...” (p. 49).
Enrolling in advanced courses, maintaining a high GPA, and performing well on standardized tests were challenging for students whose time was robbed by student employment and having to “start over” because of relocations. Work took priority in students’ lives. Many were constantly searching for a better job, a second job, for more hours, or greater pay. Several students in my study moved more than four times during their high school years and spoke about the negative impact of the moves.

Shifts to a new school are hard both socially and academically on students, especially moves made in the middle of a school year (Ingersoll, 1989). Students who spend more years in the same school are able to build relationships with school staff. It is an asset to work with teachers who already are aware of some of the students’ strengths and weaknesses. Interruptions make students lose time, as more hours are needed during the adjustment process in order to acclimate oneself to a new city, school, friends, and teachers (Kerbow, 1996). Student mobility has a particularly negative impact on achievement in high poverty schools. As Kerbow, Azxoitia, and Buell (2003) write:

The potential consequences of student mobility are numerous. They range from the immediate, such as interruption of students' learning as they change schools, to the less obvious, including disruption of classroom routines and school planning over time. Viewed from this perspective, student mobility creates a complex matrix of issues that
span student achievement, classroom instruction, and school organization.

Employment also consumed a great deal of students’ free time. Allard (2008), an economist for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, found that only 15% of high school students work on school days; however working seemed to be the norm for the participants in my study. Allard found that those who worked on weekdays spent an average of five hours working on the weekend and 4.4 hours of work each weekday\(^{31}\). That is an enormous amount of time for students to devote to employment.

Using available time by working complicates the matter because many students from high poverty homes need additional study time than those from higher income homes. Prior research has noted the cumulative disadvantage first-generation students face which begins with inequalities in childhood (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Aronson, 2008; Choy et. al., 2000; Pascarella et. al., 2004; Lee & Burkman, 2002). Being excluded from educational opportunities or not having the tools to be successful from an early age compounds the problem. Lower income, first generation students are more likely to start elementary school already behind others academically (Rothstein, 2009). As Burney and Beilke (2008) state, “...children of parents with higher educational levels have been read to more frequently, have more books in the home, have already learned how to use computers, and have had differing patterns of interactive reading and

\(^{31}\) If a student returns home from school at 4:00 and works 4 ½ hours with 30 minutes of commute time, the student would return home at 9:00 pm without a break for dinner. Assuming a 10:00 bedtime, there is not much time remaining for researching colleges and scholarships, filling out applications, studying for the ACT, etc.
conversation than those children from families with less education and fewer resources.” Unable to afford many of the extracurricular experiences wealthier students have, this disadvantage continues and is compounded as the school subject matter builds upon prior coursework.

The high stakes graduation tests particularly caused a hardship on some students, as many struggled to pass all of the subject area exams. Perna and Thomas (2009) believe high stakes tests create barriers for students, especially in schools with low performance on these exams. They observed that schools shift energy toward state testing goals in place of other, more worthy, efforts to meet the needs of the whole child. Perna and Thomas (2009) list some of the effects of this re-centering:

High school exit exams shape college enrollment by limiting high school graduation; diverting attention away from ensuring that students obtain the minimum academic requirements for graduating from high school; reducing time for college counseling; and reducing students’ real and perceived academic qualifications for college.

By focusing resources on passing the exam, already strained resources may add to the cumulative disadvantage faced by those attending these schools.

**Courage**

When one football star talked about the effect of being “the new kid” and expressed his concern that college will make him repeat the ugly process yet again, it became evident to me that going off to college required vast amounts of courage for the
participants in my study. They were very concerned about the “newness” of college and perceived college as a new, unfamiliar world. Lacking vast resources of cultural capital, they were nervous about “fitting in” and finding friends.

Other research has noted the struggles first-generation students face once they arrive on campuses. First-generation students experience more difficulty navigating the bureaucratic aspects of academic life due to their lack of exposure to college (Pagliarulo McCarron & Kurotsuchi Inkelas, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). They often feel out of place in college. As Pagliarulo McCarron and Kurotsuchi Inkelas (2006) restate Inman and Mayes (1999):

Knowledge of the campus environment, campus values, access to human and financial resources and familiarity with terminology and the general functioning of a higher education setting, which may generally be transmitted through parents, may be lacking among first-generation students as their parents did not attend college. This lack of knowledge may contribute to a sense of college “culture shock.”

First-generation students who continue to university face unique challenges and feelings of inadequacy because of their status as cultural outsiders (Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991). Lehmann (2007b) found that first-generation, working-class students were more likely to leave university very early. Not “fitting in”, not “feeling university” and not being able to “relate to these people” were key reasons for eventually withdrawing from university.
Lynch and O’Riordan (1998) found that students who have little prior exposure to college life felt or feared they would feel out of place in postsecondary education. As Aronson (2008) states, these students “often feel fearful or isolated in college, are aware of speaking differently from others, have difficulty making friends, question their own abilities, feel like outsiders, or feel that education institutions do not understand or respect their experience” (p. 49).

**Sacrifice**

Drawing on my own experience as a first-generation college graduate and analysis of what could be hidden behind students’ fears of college, I believe that sacrifice is also a “secret ingredient” to academic attainment. Perhaps the best illustration of the sacrifice necessary to gain a postsecondary education can be found in the teen mother who was worried about whether she could attend college and be a good mother. Other students would be choosing education in lieu of full-time work, which could provide money to help their families.

Not only would students sacrifice time and money, they will also need to sacrifice parts of their personalities. Bourdieu and Passaron (1977) describe a selection mechanism which serves as a filtering system to eliminate the lower class from educational opportunities. The higher the level of education, the tougher it is for the lower class to achieve due to their lack of valued cultural capital. The more one’s culture is realigned with the valued culture, the more chances one has of success in higher levels of education.
This exchange of one’s cultural capital for another involves sacrifice and adaptation. Students face adjustment challenges when they enter a college environment where they encounter racial, ethnic, and religious differences (Allen, 1992; Goodwin, 2006). As students acclimate to a new set of cultural norms, there is an impact when interacting with family members and friends who haven’t gone through the same process. First-generation students frequently experience problems “that arise from [living] simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither” (Rendon, 1992; p. 56). At home, first-generation students report that relationships with family and friends who did not attend college often become strained as the college-goers are perceived as changing and separating from those who didn’t go. (London, 1989, 1992; Piorkowski, 1983; Rendon, 1992; Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001). Piorskowski (1983) describes what she terms “survivor guilt” felt by students who attempt to “make it” as they think about less fortunate peers and family members. This sense of guilt can serve to hold achievers back. Jensen (2004) believes this type of culture shock may leave a student “feeling like an imposter” (p. 171).

Perhaps because of the perceived distance and unfamiliarity with college, the few experiences family members had with college weighed heavily in students’ decision-making. Many students had learned to be cautious about going away to college based on others’ experiences of postsecondary failure. In fact, their choices, which may not result in statistical increases in nationwide measures of equality, may result in higher educational attainment than that of their parents. As Bilson and Terry (1982) point out,
“first-generation students...are making a longer jump from the social status of their parents than are second-generation students. And they are making that jump with fewer resources and less support... (16)”

There is also an opportunity cost of choosing education over full-time work. Not all families have the luxury to afford this opportunity cost. As Bourdieu (1986) points out, “all agents do not have the economic and cultural means for prolonging their children’s education beyond the minimum necessary for the reproduction of the labor-power least valorized at a given moment” (p. 49).

Risk

Students must be risk-takers to get a bachelor’s degree. Devoting four additional years to educational advancement without safety net is risky for first-generation, low socioeconomic status students. Not only is college scary to students, but it is also financially risky--especially for those who face a greater risk of dropping out. The amount of debt for students who leave before graduation is cause for worry. Low-income, first-generation students who left during their first year owed on average $6,557 while those leaving in their fourth year owed $16,548. These students must repay their loans without the extra earning power afforded by attaining their degrees – and without family resources which might be available to their wealthier peers who also leave in debt (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Even before taking a risk to enroll in college, there was a gamble involved for students who chose to apply for college admission before receiving their final scores on
the state-mandated tests. Some seniors who I interviewed in April did not yet know if they had passed. They were waiting anxiously for the May test results. Would students with limited financial means be willing to pay college application fees due long before May, if they were not even sure they would be receiving a high school diploma?

Fears of the unknown and financial hardship were enough to deter many students from planning to enroll in accredited, four-year colleges. Students engaged in risk and fear minimizing strategies which included choosing the least expensive college, planning to transfer or planning multiple stages to get their education, and beginning at smaller schools. While these strategies might make four-year degree obtainment statistically less likely for them, their choices decreased risk by either providing multiple points for students to abandon their relatively expensive educational pursuits or ensuring that costs, if one were to fail, would be minimal.

The recipe for educational attainment does indeed involve “effort,” but additional ingredients are money, knowledge, time, courage, sacrifice and risk. For middle class, second (and beyond) generation students, these ingredients may be “taken-for-granted.” However, for the participants in my study, these ingredients presented challenges which must be overcome in order for them to aspire to and achieve four-year degrees.

Implications

Policy Recommendations

In contrast to the psychology-based curriculum intervention which implied that a
lack of motivation was a main barrier to “at risk” student achievement, this study found students motivated. Students showed a desire and willingness to learn more about college; they were eager to take the college preparation course to learn more about everyday life in college, a key informational aspect missing from potential first-generation students’ familial repertoire. However, the curriculum focused on improving study skills and increasing motivation. One student was disappointed in the course content. “I thought it [the course] would occasionally have guest speakers from college,” she explained, “and we’d get tips about college. About college life. This wasn’t what I was expecting. I wanted to know about eating and living on campus. I was expecting a lot of tips since I’m going next year. Like what's college going to be like.”

Students were struggling to survive in a world with limited resources. Lacking resources, students’ focus was on daily survival, rather than excelling in high school, researching colleges and careers, and enrolling at top schools. Students were also worried about “fitting in” at four-year colleges, keeping up academically, and surviving financially.

This research suggests that in order to increase access to quality postsecondary educational opportunities, we expand and retool interventions aimed at first-generation, economically disadvantaged students. The participants in this study needed greater informational assistance and guidance throughout the college enrollment process. Providing students with a personal enrollment counselor who will understand their needs and individually help them complete each college enrollment task, to fulfill
their postsecondary goals, would be ideal. Guidance for lower income and potential first generation students should be very context-specific, and a high degree of awareness of students’ limitations should guide support programs. What is considered appropriate student responsibilities in a suburban school context (e.g. following deadlines on their own, filling out forms without help) may be too much to ask of these juniors and seniors.

These students were unfamiliar with majors and colleges. Because of this, they found four-year campuses scary. A personal enrollment counselor could help students gain more familiarity with the college environment and enrollment processes so that it is less intimidating. Students need to be informed about postsecondary options and graduation rates. They need to understand college rankings and accreditation and their impacts on employment prospects. Students should have easy access to college information from a source they trust. Time must be provided to utilize the resources. Students need experiences where they can learn about the daily life on campus and the college application process. Students need to know entrance requirements early including recommended high school coursework. They need to be well-informed before eighth grade mathematics enrollment decisions are made. Increased contact with colleges through visits and guest speakers would aid students. Opportunities to contact college students and form friendships with other college-bound peers also could help demystify college culture.
Many participants in this study struggled academically. Policy makers, teachers and administrators need to understand the lived worlds of students at home and consider this when making academic policies. Teachers need to understand student time constraints. They should re-evaluate homework loads/needs. Schools may need to provide teacher training in more efficient homework assignment strategies and find ways to provide time for students to complete assignments with assistance available. High stakes testing should be reconsidered, and schools should offer other ways to measure school and curriculum standards that do not penalize those who may have been impacted by cumulative disadvantage or who may not readily possess valued cultural capital. Policy makers should ensure that school staff, teachers, and administrators keep paths open so that students have the opportunity to correct path disadvantage when possible and desired. They should provide a non-judgmental and supportive learning environment, and offer remediation and encouragement without closing doors to the extent possible.

Financial concerns limit these students as well. Schools can reconsider overt and hidden costs of high school, offer grants/scholarships to assist students with high school fees, and offer work study opportunities at the high school level. They can also provide students with information regarding grants, loans, and scholarships, provide time and access to online sources students may use to locate funding and assist students with completing their applications. Teachers and administrators should ensure students know how to access information about the employment outlook for different careers.
and teach students how to contact job placement offices of the college of choice and the questions to ask to effectively assess the college’s ability to assist them in this area. Those assisting students should understand students’ geographic needs (or constraints) and tailor career information toward the local community if necessary.

A reconceptualization of the role of schools may be necessary, as schools provide more support to college-bound students. By giving students this personalized, additional support, more students might be able to realize their academic attainment goals and obtain “the prize” of which they and their families have dreamed.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Several areas would be particularly interesting for future research. Research gathering students’ experiences and perceptions which is able to follow the same cohort from their last years in high school to their post-graduation years would be interesting as well as more research into the area of student time usage.

This study showed the possible challenges. It did not follow students after high school graduation to see if they did, indeed, enroll in college and what challenges they faced there. Qualitative, longitudinal investigation exploring students’ perceptions of their educational landscape covering both the end years of high school and the year after graduation would provide better understanding of student choices and limitations of choice along with the confirmation of ideas. A follow-up with the same students to determine whether or not they attended and completed college (and found a “good”

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32 See Errante’s (1997) elaboration of “full-service schools,” which encourage community involvement through mutually beneficial practices and services.
job afterwards) could offer better perspective on students’ perceptions during high school. Also, a study originally designed with these research questions would have the flexibility to pursue the questions in more depth and change direction if new and interesting lines of inquiry emerged. Questioning could continue to fill gaps in the theory until a true “saturation point” is reached. For example, participants could be asked to elaborate on why they were “doing the minimum” or to share more about how they were selecting colleges where they would apply. A more systematic method of soliciting participants for interviews could also improve this study—for instance, interviewing all seniors or increasing the attention paid to “key” informants.

Secondly, “time” seems to be a very interesting resource and warrants further investigation. We are all given equal amounts of time, but an analysis of the ways time is used may reveal important insights into the ways poverty snatches and consumes this valuable resource. Learning about colleges, majors, and financial aid is a necessary task in the college enrollment process. How much time is necessary for potential first-generation students to investigate these areas in order to become proficient enough to make informed choices? Instead of using their time to research career and educational options, participants in this study dedicated an enormous amount of their free time to employment. Microanalysis of student usage of time may yield fruitful insights into the college enrollment process by showing how daily survival needs limit economically disadvantaged students’ ability to excel in high school or fill knowledge gaps about college.
Lastly, similar studies could be conducted with different populations to see how the findings might be similar or different. Would middle class students find similar challenges and do they hold the same views of college? What postsecondary educational enrollment challenges do students in other countries face? How is class difference enacted in Guatemala, for example?

**A word of caution about the implications**

While we aim to move toward increased access and ensuring that students have a true choice about their educational futures, we should also be careful not to equate life betterment with educational credentialing. While higher education is an important path to financial security and social mobility of urban students, there are risks involved in attempting to attain higher education. As Bourdieu (1986) reminds, “...profits in one area are necessarily paid for by costs in another...” (p. 56). Students from high poverty schools pay for postsecondary degree pursuits in multiple ways which are not only monetary. For example, first-generation college students may face alienation from their families (London, 1989, 1992; Piorkowski, 1983; Rendon, 1992) or become overburdened with loans if the benefits of their educational endeavors do not materialize (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Reed & Cheng, 2008). Thus the emotional and financial tolls of attending college may be too costly for some students. Accordingly, we need to give thought to “college for all” policies and the ways they make some students feel “less than” others. In addition to individual issues, “College for all” may not be a realistic nor useful goal for all of society. At the end of his inquiry, Lehman (2009) concludes:
Finally, we may want to challenge our very own understanding of reproduction processes, which are rooted in middle-class notions of social mobility and meritocracy. Why do we consider the decision of a plumber’s son or daughter to become a plumber a social problem, but not that of a lawyer’s daughter or son to become a lawyer? (p. 170)

As Lehmann notes, “What creates social stratification in the first place is therefore not a reproductive choice, but a system that affords such different rewards to different accomplishments.” He then asks the reader to consider the following hypothetical situation:

It is minus Celsius in January…your heating and plumbing system has just broken down, you are sitting in your cold home, and both your plumber and your lawyer are enjoying themselves on a Caribbean cruise. Who will you miss more? (p. 171)

Greater understanding of the challenges some face is warranted. As Labaree (2008) notes, education has not historically been a very effective tool in fixing societal problems. Using “college for all” approaches may do more harm toward unifying and promoting respect within our nation, which ironically are ultimate goals of increasing access in higher education. For example, Lawson (1975) warns that the possible outcomes of socio-educational change need to be carefully considered. For example, “democratization” of education with schools doing “little more than preparing youth for more schooling” could lead to “student discontent and social dysfunction...as the
student of low academic ability fails to perform in a gray area of diluted academic
generality, and drops out, is eventually forced out, or is compelled to assume a
mediocre non-competitive position in the society” (349).

As Michael Sadler stated in his famous 1900 address, “Knowledge is a necessary
ingredient and instrument of education, but not the be-all or end-all of it” (Bereday,
1964, p. 307). He points out that while he does not want to reduce the importance of
education and the joys of learning, he does want to remind us that education is separate
from “success” or one’s betterment. The most important call from this research is for
greater compassion and understanding (Lave, 1990) from teachers, administrators, and
policy makers regarding challenges first-generation and economically challenged
students face.
References


Mann, H. (1848) Twelfth Annual Report as Secretary of Massachusetts State Board of Education.


153


Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions and Script

Pre-Script:

Before asking any questions to students,

I ran through an informal verbal script stating the following three things:

A. You don’t have to answer any question you don’t want to. Just say “pass” if you don’t like the question. *(No student ever said “pass” to any of the questions)*

B. I did not create the course. I am only receiving free tuition because I come out here to ask you nosy questions, but it will really help the course designer to know what you think about it and to know more about your life as a high school student. Feel free to answer honestly. It won’t hurt my feelings if you don’t like the class.

C. I won’t share your name with anyone. I’ll give feedback to my supervisor about what you said, but it will be anonymous. *(Many students told me they did not mind if I shared their name, saying “he doesn’t know me anyway.”)*

First Semester

- Do you have any family members who have attended college? Who?
- What are your career goals?
- Would you recommend the Strategies for College Success Course to other students? Why or why not?
- Do you feel you need to be in this class? Why or why not?
- Have you noticed your behavior or thinking change since being in this class? If so, how?
- What is your most difficult subject? Why is it the most difficult? Do you think this class will help you improve? Why or why not?
- What skills do you think students need in order to do well in college?
- Do you feel nervous about your future? About attending college or getting a job after high school? What are you most concerned about?
- What did you think of the book, “A Hope in the Unseen”? How far have you read in the book?
• If you were the course designer, what would you change about the class? What might you add or take out?

Second Semester

• Year:  sophomore, junior, senior, other
• How would rate this class compared to your other classes? worse than others, same as others, better than others
• Are you glad you took this class? ___ yes ___ no
• Do you have any family members who have attended college? Who/Major?
• What are your career goals?
• Why did you sign up for this class?
• Do you think you will attend and complete college? (If yes) Why do you want a college degree?
• Would you recommend the class to other students? Why or Why not? What did you like the most/the least about the course?
• How do you study? How do you plan your study time?
• What is your most difficult subject? Why is it the most difficult? Do you think this class has helped you in your most difficult subject? Or to prepare you for college? Why or Why not?
• Do you feel nervous about your future? About attending college or getting a job after high school? What are you most concerned about?
• Where do you plan to be one year from now?
## Appendix B: Theme/Code Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Clusters</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Example statements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Home Context</td>
<td>On Their Own</td>
<td>Potential First-Generation College Graduates</td>
<td>“First and foremost the main person that influenced me to attend college is my mother. She is an old-fashioned mom that wants me to go to college really bad. She went for nursing and was told she'll never make it because she was bigger (weight-wise). So I'm going to Capital City College of Nursing to become a nurse for her. I'm not going just for her but for me too. No one has ever gone to college and finished in my family so I want to be the first and my mom don't ever let me live it down I said that. I really don't care because it's a constant reminder of my priorities.”</td>
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<td>Absent Parents</td>
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<td>“I don't live with my parents. My mom died and my dad's in jail.” [Student tells me she is a Ward of the Court.]</td>
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<td>Extra Responsibilities</td>
<td>Student Parenthood</td>
<td></td>
<td>“A year ago I had a baby girl and as a mom at a young age I thought I couldn't attend college because of the responsibilities I have as a mother. But my sister has a child also and now goes to college to get a degree for Child Development. Knowing that my sister goes to school and still maintain being a good mom influences me a lot. It might be a little harder than it would for others but if you really want that degree it's something I have to do. I don't know about going to a four year college but I can attend a community college. Going to college and getting my degree while taking care of a baby is a risk I'm going to have to take.”</td>
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<td>Overly Employed Students</td>
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<td>“Also I work at Local Gas Station—been there for 6 months. I work from 3:30-10:00. This summer I'll work for a collections agency.”</td>
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<td>“I know I need to get a second job. I work at Local Department Store, nights. I need another job-1 [to pay] for school and 1 for college.”</td>
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<td>Below the Poverty Line</td>
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<td>Starting Over: Transient</td>
<td>Information Shortage</td>
<td>Knowing About</td>
<td>“Grants you don’t have to repay, right?”</td>
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<td>One student told me he planned to become a lawyer “in 4 years.” A junior told me she wanted to become a pediatrician and thought 4-6 years of post-secondary</td>
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Table continued
| the College Enrollment Process | Knowing How | education were required for that degree. A student who wished to become a florist, landscape designer, or veterinary technician told me she was having trouble finding a college with one of these majors.

One student who wished to become a nurse told me she was upset that the school placed her in “extra” math and an “extra” science classes she didn’t need. She tried to get the school to allow her to drop both.

Money Shortage Costs of High School | “We each have to pay $210. That’s why I’m stressing. I have to buy a dress for my mom’s wedding and a prom dress and come up with these senior dues.”

Money Shortage Costs of College Enrollment Process | “I just need to send in my application when I get the $100 application fee together.”

Time Shortage To Earn Money | “They had me working full time--32 hours a week. I told them, I can’t work so much--I’m a student!”

Time Shortage To Excel Academically (Early Academic Struggles and High Stakes Testing) | “I study at home at night if I have time. I work or have to babysit my cousins, nieces and nephews.”

| (4 year) College is Risky College as Unfamiliar | Being on my own/newness | “I am nervous about attending college. It will be a completely different situation. Here classes are in the same building and my same middle school friends are here in high school. Chances are that here there will be at least one friend in each of my classes. In college it will be different. I’ll be walking in not knowing anybody.”

“No, not nervous. A little about attending college. I like my box. College is gonna be a new box.”

“I’m nervous about going to college. In middle school and high school, the teachers are always there. If you don’t turn something in, they’re on you. If you miss a day, they give you the notes. College will be out of my comfort zone.”

Knowing my major/career I want | “I’m nervous about it--in the way that I don’t know what I want to study.”

Making Friends | “Here classes are in the same building and my same middle school friends are here in high school. Chances are that here there will be at least one friend in each of my classes.”

Table continued |
| College as Hard | Failure/not "making it"/too hard | “If I’m going to pass or fail. Will it be real hard?”
“I’m really nervous that I won’t ‘make it’ and something will happen and I’ll end up working at McDonalds.”
| College acceptance | “I’m worried about whether my ACT score is good enough to go to Capital City University’s main campus.”
| College as Expensive | Paying Tuition | “Only thing is how I’m gonna pay for college?”
| Paying for Living Expenses | “Most concerned about living on my own, paying for things, surviving. How to pay for school and rent? How to work and attend school at the same time?”
| Rate of Return/Getting good job after | “I worry that the money I make after I’m done. Will it be worth the cost put into it?”
“A little nervous about getting the job market shrinking. I think it might be even worse after college.”
| Risk Minimizing Strategies | Conserving Money | “I don’t want to go to Capital City Community College. I’m accepted at Selective Liberal Arts College. But they want $32K a year. My dad says that’s too expensive. He just recently lost his job. Capital City Community College is about $2000 a quarter, I think. I’m waiting for my FAFSA. I didn’t send my grades to Capital City University because I didn’t think my dad would have the money.”
| Plans to transfer | “It costs $72 a credit hour at Capital City Community College. I’ll go there to get math and English classes done and then transfer.
“Major in sports exercise at Capital City Community College and then transfer to Capital City University or Small Private College. I’d be stupid to go anywhere other than Capital City Community College since I’ve got a 75% discount there on tuition since my dad works there.”

Table continued
| Multi-stage plans | “I want to go to cosmetology school for 14 months and then when I'm finished, I’ll go to Capital City Community College--I’m going to check into their nursing program. I've got financial aid taken care of [for the cosmetology school]. It costs $12,400 for the 14 months. Nursing will be my real job, and I’ll cut hair on the side.”

“Everyone's saying go straight to school. I’m thinking of working for year to have the money for college. I've got a friend who has a job where they pay 80-90% of the tuition. He works in a warehouse.” |
| Don’t Repeat Mistakes | Start Small | “My brother went away and it wasn't good for him. He was so poor and made bad decisions. I want to start at a smaller school and the tuition price is a factor. If I live at home, it will be easier to not have to pay rent.”

“I'll start at Capital City Community College. I learned from my sister’s experience to start off small. Get the flow of studying and don’t get lost in a big college.” |
| College as Heavy Burden | Betterment | Family pressures expectations | “I feel nervous because I've got a lot of pressure from myself and my family to go on to college. Everyone is pressuring me to get a football scholarship.”

“Yes, everything. My parents are expecting a lot.”

“Q: Do you think you will go on to complete college? “yes, I just look at my family members. I want to do better.” |
| Fear Minimizing Strategy: Lowering Expectations | Doing the Minimum | “I could be a straight A student, but I barely get by. I just want a diploma.” |
| Educational Aspiration less than Bachelors | Opting Out | Promise Disbelief | “I don’t see myself at a four-year college. I have to force myself to go to school now, so I don’t see myself doing 4 more years.”

“If I can get a good job after high school then I’ll do that.”

“But I want one year off. I’m kinda tired of school right now. My mom's ok with it.” |
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| Eager to Begin Families/Work Full-time |                                                                      | “They make us raise our hands when they ask, ‘Who’s going to college?’ Then they asked, ‘why aren’t you going?’ when I didn’t raise my hand. If you don’t [raise your hand], you feel bad. College isn’t made for everyone. My mom didn’t go and she do ok.”  
“‘They use college like a "scared straight" thing, telling you need college. You don’t need it to be a truck driver or mechanic. My mom does local drops, but those who ride national can make $1000-1500 a day.”" |
Appendix C: School Environment

In this study, I also observed the school environment, which is also vital in understanding students’ educational landscape. While the following examples illustrate problems in the school environment which contribute to “cumulative disadvantage,” it did not seem to me that the school facilities and teachers held as much power as students’ home environments and the college enrollment process challenges to shape the students’ views of college. In spite of the fact that I did not include these thematic areas in the theory, I think it is important to share examples which show the at-times negative climate in the high poverty schools.

In the schools I visited, teachers spoke out against the administration and policies. Some teachers complained about the lack of prep time and some were very vocal about their dislike of being assigned to teach the college preparation course. Several teachers also complained about the lack of supplies and the inadequacy of the students.

In fact, in one classroom where a large number of immigrants from Africa were enrolled, the teacher was very vocal about her dislike of teaching the course to students
she considered unprepared for college. Loud enough for the students to hear, she told me during a visit:

They [These students] are not even going to college. We have a problem. We're investing so much money into students to get them scholarships to go to college, but they're dropping out after a year and it's wasting the money. And, those are our students. They have to be ready. I shouldn't have to help them remember their [computer] passwords. This should be college level. I don't mind it so much in my math classes because those aren't supposed to be college bound. This class is being used as a dumping ground. I hate teaching it really. Some only have 10 credits. They haven't passed their [State Graduation Tests]. They're not going to graduate. My highest grade right now is a D. I've got one special ed student who says he wants to go to law school. He can't write sentences and he wants to go to law school! They don't care. They don't do the work.

Despite their teacher's negative assessment, two seniors approached me during a later visit seeking information on religious studies and engineering programs at my university. I asked them if they were graduating this year. Yes, they both proudly said, telling me they had passed their state graduation tests and had completed all credits.
At another school, a student complained about the teachers and differences between wealthy and poor districts. When I told her I was studying “comparative education,” she informed me:

You should compare our school with Nearby Suburban Schools and Wealthy Suburban Schools. Those kids got so much. They have a fast food restaurant right in their school! They say Nearby Suburban Schools is similar to us, but those kids’ parents have money. They have field trips and things. I don’t want to sound bad, but those parents can pay for tutors and we have to use the same, old teachers for our tutors.

The school environment certainly does shape students’ views of the education system. These kinds of comparisons which the children are making contribute to their concerns that they may not fit in, that there are “Others” who will be more academically prepared and financially able. Low expectations from teachers surely impact their views of themselves and their abilities.

However, there were other very positive observances in the same schools, as well, including several very dynamic teachers who seemed to understand students and took a keen interest in them and their talents. For example, one energetic teacher played quiet jazz music while students worked on their computers and would introduce me to students each time I arrived. He would say, “Talk to Jenna. She sings,” or “Meet Tyson. He’s a boxing champion!” Diana’s teacher inquired daily about her feelings after
her cat died and though she did not know the students before they arrived in her
classroom that year, she could tell me many details about their lives and interests
outside of school. She also praised students loudly and frequently. Another teacher told
me about a struggling, yet ambitious, student from Africa and then raised her voice
loudly, so the class could hear, “Jacob's a good kid and I like him.”