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I, Ainsley E. Lambert, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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Applying & Deciding: Students’ Perceptions of the Role of Parents and Schools in the College Enrollment Process

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Applying & Deciding: Students’ Perceptions of the Role of Parents and Schools in the College Enrollment Process

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Applying & Deciding: Students’ Perceptions of the Role of Parents and Schools in the College Enrollment Process

Abstract

Drawing on social and cultural capital theories, this study examines the complex process in which both family and school-based factors influence students’ college enrollment decisions. While many studies examine the role of parents and the school from the perspective of parents and/or teachers, this study adds to the current literature by examining students’ perceptions of the role both parents and schools play in their college enrollment decision-making process. This study draws on 19 in-depth interviews (with 2 administrators and 17 high school seniors) conducted in the spring of 2011. The findings suggest that students’ perceptions of their parents’ involvement differ by social class for some, but not all, dimensions of parental involvement. Social class differences emerged in students’ perceptions of their parents’ involvement in their schoolwork, parents’ expectations for educational attainment, and parents’ aligned action. Social class differences in the students’ use of college related resources at the school were less clear, however, the resources available at the school appeared to make more of a difference for lower-income students. Implications for future research are discussed.
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Introduction

The economic benefit of obtaining a college degree has increased substantially over the past quarter century (Turner, 2004). Thus, completion of a college degree is of growing importance for all Americans, and particularly important for minority and low-income groups. Since the 1970’s, there has been a steady increase in college enrollment and completion rates for all groups; however, a closer inspection reveals that racial minority groups and people who hail from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, have been, and continue to be underrepresented in higher education institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). A recent article in the New York Times highlighted the fact that “most low-income students who have top test scores and grades do not even apply to the nation’s best colleges…”—instead, these students are more likely to attend community-colleges or local four-year colleges (Leonhardt, 2013:1). This revelation means that even when low-income and minority students do enroll in college, they are more likely to attend less selective colleges (Roderick, et al., 2011).

One hurdle to securing a college degree and the greater economic benefits associated with higher education is the college enrollment process. During this process, students must make decisions regarding which colleges they will apply to, determine how they will finance their education, complete all required forms, and ultimately, select which college they will enroll. Students without sufficient information tend to prepare less for college entrance exams, choose less viable college options, and are less likely to complete and send in their applications to colleges, as well as apply for financial assistance (Schneider, 2007). For students who do not successfully complete each step of the college enrollment process, this can mean missed opportunities, delayed enrollment, enrollment at less selective colleges, or no enrollment at all.

Because the enrollment process is such an involved process and so integral to attaining higher education, scholars often focus on this process and explore how varying amounts of social
and cultural capital influence enrollment decisions. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the potential resources an individual can access and mobilize through his or her social networks. The amount of social capital a person has, therefore, depends on the size of the network and on the quantity and quality of the influence “…possessed by each person to whom he or she is connected” (Dika and Singh, 2002:33). Coleman (1988) builds on the work of Bourdieu (1986) emphasizing that social capital functions as conduits through which individuals receive information. In contemporary education research, parental involvement in the education process is deemed a critical form of social capital (Dika and Singh, 2002). For example, Pascarella and colleagues (2004) find that students with higher-educated parents have better access to capital through family relationships. In its application in educational research, scholars focus on how social capital “is related to SES…and accrues from membership in social networks that provides valuable information and resources to students” (Hallinan 2001:56). In this sense, a student’s social capital stems not only from parents, but schools as well. From the social capital perspective, education scholars gain an understanding of how an individuals’ social location in a stratified society can either inhibit or enhance their access to resources and impact their educational outcomes.

In addition to social capital, students’ cultural capital can also impact their educational outcomes. Contrary to the popular belief in the United States that the education system provides all with an opportunity for upward social mobility, cultural capital theory suggests that schools can also work to maintain the status quo (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In an attempt to explain the relationship between social privilege and academic achievement, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) posit that higher class students do better academically because schools reflect and reward their elite cultural practices and dispositions; by the same token, lower class students are
disadvantaged in school because they lack high status socialization. One of the major criticisms weighed against cultural capital is that the concept is much too vague and broad, causing disarray in the conceptualization, measurement, and findings in empirical research. The concept of cultural capital has expanded to include so many distinct variables that it is difficult to determine which ones are actually believed to account for academic success (Kingston, 2001). Despite its broad conception, some scholars have been successful at developing a measurable definition of cultural capital. Cultural capital, defined as “institutionalized, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” for example, has proven to be a useful conceptualization of cultural capital (Lamont and Lareau, 1988:156). This understanding of cultural capital theory led to a successful examination of how class based cultural factors influence parental participation in schooling. Results from Lareau’s (1987:74) study show that “standards of schools are not neutral…” but rather, “requests for parental involvement may be laden with social and cultural experiences of intellectual and economic elites.” In her study, class-related factors did in fact shape “parents’ compliance with teachers’ requests for parental participation in schooling” (Lareau, 1987:74) These findings, along with others, give insight into the complex process where both family and school-based factors influence a student’s college enrollment decisions.

This study draws on social and cultural capital theories to examine the role that parents and schools play in students’ decisions regarding their plans for college. While many studies examine parental involvement from the perspective of parents and teachers, this study draws on in-depth interviews with seventeen high school seniors to examine the following questions: How do students perceive parents’ role in the college enrollment process? Do students perceive the school as an alternative or supplemental source of information related to the college enrollment
process? How do students utilize resources offered through the school to navigate the enrollment process? This study will also examine class differences in student’s perceptions of their parents’ involvement, as well as their perceptions and utilization of school resources. Studies which approach parental involvement in the enrollment process from the perspective of parents typically gauge what parents *believe* to be their role in the college enrollment process. While important, the student’s perspective is particularly central for understanding exactly what parents and schools do that matters in the college enrollment process. Hence, this study will add to the literature by examining both the role of parents and the role of the school in the college enrollment process from the perspective of students. Finally, this study will briefly touch on education-industry partnerships, which emerged as an unexpected and important finding.

**Background**

*Parental Involvement as Capital*

Parental involvement in the education process is, by many accounts, a critical factor in enabling students to achieve desired academic outcomes. In general, parental involvement is conceptualized as a form of capital, which gives individuals access to resources that may facilitate positive academic outcomes (Perna & Titus 2005). An examination of literature on parental involvement reveals that the concept has become a sort of catch-all term for the many things that parents do related to their children’s education. A large portion of studies on parental involvement focuses on parents’ attitudes and expectations, and/or parents’ behaviors in the home and in the child’s school environment.

*Parents’ Expectations*

Indicators that determine how far parents expect their child will go in school are used to measure parents’ expectations for their children’s educational attainment (Crosnoe, et al. 2002).
Studies examining parents’ attitudes and expectations of their child’s academic success have found that parents’ expectations are influenced by socioeconomic status (SES), and further, that parents’ expectations influence children’s educational outcomes (Neuenschwander, et al., 2007; Fan and Chen, 2001). Crosnoe and colleagues (2002) hypothesized that disadvantaged parents may be less optimistic about their adolescents’ chances of attaining a post-secondary education and their educational success in general. Their study found that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds did, in fact, have more pessimistic expectations in regards to their adolescent’s chances of attending college in the future. Negative expectations were attributed to the fact that “economic hardship can be demoralizing, leading parents to doubt themselves and to have less hope for the future” (Crosnoe, et al., 2002:700). Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) found similar results in their study of high school students using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study. Their findings showed that 92 percent of upper SES parents expected their child to acquire a bachelor’s degree, while only 54 percent of lower SES parents expected the same. While the authors do not make this suggestion, it is also plausible that parents expect the norm based on the social environment in which they live (Walpole, 2003). Therefore, we might expect lower SES parents to anticipate lower levels of education, whereas higher SES parents would be more likely to anticipate higher levels of education.

Parents’ Involvement in the Home

While prior studies on parental attitudes towards education have demonstrated the negative effects of disadvantage on parents’ expectations, studies have also found that these negative effects can be mediated by parents’ behaviors in the home. For example, Catsambis (2001) found that parents’ persistent encouragement to prepare for college was positively associated with adolescents’ educational success up until the last year of high school. Parental involvement in the
home is typically measured by the frequency of school-related interactions between the parent and child. Studies often use items that quantify how often parents supervise homework (and other activities) or the amount parents talk with their child about school (Astone and McLanahan, 1991). In some cases, scholars have argued that this measurement is insufficient, considering that parental involvement in the home (and at school) is not static and is likely to change as children age (Catsambis 2001; Crosnoe 2001). Still, the conventional approach to measuring parental involvement consists of determining the frequency of parent-child interactions related to school.

Many scholars once subscribed to the culture-of-poverty theory, arguing that lower-income families did not value education, which led to weaker involvement in the education process for parents of low-income students. However, studies have found this theory to be false. Perna and Titus (2005) found that, while disadvantaged African Americans possessed fewer types of capital that promote college enrollment—they had, on average, lower levels of family income and parental education—African American parents displayed greater parental involvement than their white counterparts. Still, while lower socioeconomic status does not necessarily mean that parents will be less involved, SES does provide real constraints for how parents can be involved. This becomes especially clear when considering parental involvement at school.

**Parent-School Involvement**

Parent-school involvement is gauged by measuring the frequency of parental contact with the school about their child’s academic performance, as well as how active parents are at the school site (Cooper and Crosnoe, 2007; Catsambis, 2001). Cooper and Crosnoe (2007) suggest that parent-school involvement gives parents insight as to how schools operate, facilitates a flow of information, promotes school-related discussions with children, and conveys the importance
of education to children. Moreover, parent-school involvement has been found to be positively associated with academic outcomes (Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Economically disadvantaged parents, who are more likely than their higher SES counterparts to work long hours in sometimes multiple, physically demanding jobs, must overcome time, energy, and access constraints that limit their ability to maintain high levels of involvement at school (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007; Lareau, 2004). It is no surprise then, that parents’ involvement at school decreases as economic disadvantage increases (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). This means that economically disadvantaged parents and children are more likely to miss out on the benefits associated with higher levels of parent-school involvement.

**Parents and the College Enrollment Process**

When examining parents’ involvement in the college enrollment process specifically, the type and amount of resources parents are able to provide their children depend on parents’ socioeconomic status. Higher SES parents are better equipped with knowledge about the college enrollment and financial aid process, and also have greater financial means to support enrollment (Freeman, 1997). Low-income and racial minority students on the other hand, do not have access to the same levels of information and guidance from their parents that is needed to navigate the college enrollment process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005). This lack of capital may impede low-income and racial minorities from successfully navigating the college enrollment process. Kirst and Venezia (2004) found that minorities and their families often did not fully understand college admission requirements, including the financial aid application process, and that this lack of understanding contributed to differential participation in college application. Additionally, Freeman (1997) found that low SES students were the least likely to complete college applications and were also less likely to apply to four-year institutions—only...
21 percent of the lowest SES applied to a four-year institution, in comparison to 76 percent of high SES students. Stated differently, high SES students were 55 percent more likely to apply to a four-year college than their low SES counterparts. Lastly, studies have shown that the inability of low-income parents and parents of first-generation students (students who are the first in their family to attend college) to pass on pertinent information or knowledge limits their children’s ability to distinguish between the various types of colleges they can apply to (vocational, two-year, four-year university and so on). This often results in low-income and first-generation students applying to two-year colleges or colleges that are less selective, even when the students may be qualified to enter more selective colleges (McDonough, 1997).

Aside from filling out college application forms, the application process also involves a number of other steps. In compliance with admission requirements, students are expected to prepare for and sign up to complete appropriate entrance exams (i.e. the ACT or SAT). Students may also need to fill out financial aid forms, scholarship applications, or make college visits (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001). First-generation students and students from disadvantaged families who lack resources at home, often rely on their school to help them navigate the college application process and all that it entails. Some schools though, are more equipped to assist students with the process than others.

**Schools and the College Enrollment Process**

Students receive differential educational advantages depending on the type of school they attend. In cities, the concentration of low-income minorities often results in low quality schools that are staffed by unqualified teachers (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010). On the other hand, schools found in predominately white, economic advantaged neighborhoods have the ability to buy equipment that facilitates higher learning, as well as hire more qualified teachers with more
experience (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010). Generally, studies show that affluent schools encourage college attendance by engaging students with challenging curricula that prepare them for the academic demands of college, while schools in low-income or working class neighborhoods provide students with a curriculum that prepares them for jobs that do not require a college education (Freeman, 1997). This type of channeling is similar to the practice of tracking—the sorting of students into different academic paths that lead to different outcomes, based on perceived student abilities (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010).

Some studies have documented that the practice of tracking throughout the life course results in low-income and minority students being disproportionately placed in non college-going tracks. Mickelson (2003) describes tracking as a process that begins early in children’s academic careers and shapes future opportunities for students. Depending on the specific track students are assigned to, they may be more likely to enroll in college, join the Armed Forces, join the labor market straight out of high school, or drop out of school altogether (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010). At the same time that scholars have shown that tracking leads to disproportionate numbers of minorities being represented in lower tracks, others have documented that higher SES parents are able to use their financial resources and knowledge of the educational system to ensure their children are placed in higher tracks (Oakes, 1990; Mickelson, 2003). However, while research finds that these kinds of school practices can inhibit disadvantaged groups from entering college, other studies examine how certain school practices can promote college enrollment among underrepresented groups (Hill, 2008; Roderick, et al., 2011).

For students from low-income families, especially first-generation students, accessing information regarding college can be difficult at home. In these instances, students and their
families must largely depend on teachers, faculty, and counselors within their school for pertinent information on the college enrollment process. Kim and Schneider (2005) find that students from disadvantaged families benefit more from institutional assistance with the college enrollment process than do families from advantaged groups. At the same time, these disadvantaged groups are less likely to seek out these resources from schools on their own (Hill, 2008). For this reason, the degree to which schools facilitate college enrollment is largely dependent upon the promotion of college-going norms and the amount and type of resources the school offers to assist students and their families in navigating the college enrollment process (Hill, 2008). The types of resources schools offer are important, as they are informed by assumptions about the types of support families actually need from their school. Schools that make an attempt to facilitate college enrollment among disadvantaged groups would need to offer different types of support than a schools that assist advantaged groups. Hill (2008) identified four resources schools can offer that facilitate college enrollment. Those included encouraging college visits, assisting with college applications, assisting with financial aid applications, and contacting college representatives on behalf of students.

In addition to the types of support schools can offer, Hill (2008) also examined the equitable distribution of college planning resources by looking at school-initiated outreach to families regarding the college planning process. The results of the study identified three types school strategies in promoting college enrollment: traditional, clearinghouse, and brokering. The traditional strategy provides limited college-related resources and does little to ensure students’ access to available resources. Schools that reflect a clearinghouse strategy offer “substantial resources for college planning but do little to ensure students and families have access to the resources” (Hill, 2008:60). Schools that offer many college-planning resources and also work to
ensure access for all families and students reflect the brokering strategy. Unlike the traditional and clearinghouse strategies, the brokering strategy proved to influence the college enrollment process similarly for students of all races and ethnicities. However, blacks and Latinos were significantly more likely to enroll at a four-year college as opposed to a two-year college when attending schools that used clearinghouse strategies. Other studies report similar findings regarding school strategies to facilitate college enrollment. For instance, Roderick, et al. (2011) found strong associations between students’ reports of faculty guidance on filling out applications and financial aids forms with attending college. These findings affirm that schools, which provide resources related to the college application process, can counteract a lack of resources in the home based on parents’ SES.

While prior findings support positive outcomes associated with school programs that provide students the opportunity to learn about various colleges, ask questions, and receive help with applications, some researchers have argued that the racial gap in college enrollment cannot be closed by school guidance programs and initiatives alone. Roderick, et al. (2011) argue that in addition to guidance programs within schools, schools need to create academic climates and college-going cultures that are embedded in the academic program. This involves developing a curriculum of rigorous coursework, promoting shared goals for college attendance between teachers and students, and creating strong norms for performance within schools. In schools with this type of climate, first-generation students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds have a greater opportunity to get the information and support needed to facilitate college enrollment.

In summary, parental involvement includes both expectations and behaviors and takes place in two major social contexts: the home and the school. Research has indicated that the amount and type of parental involvement varies by socioeconomic and racial minority status...
Racial minority parents and parents of lower socioeconomic status are most likely to lack the capital necessary to provide their children with adequate resources to navigate the multitude of tasks associated with the college enrollment process (Charles, et al. 2007; Kim & Schneider, 2005). Therefore, lower-income and minority students are often required to rely on schools to access these necessary resources. While some schools are unable, or even unwilling to provide students access to college enrollment resources, studies have presented evidence indicating that lower-income and minority students benefit from attending schools that do actively promote college attendance and provide the necessary resources to do so. This study will examine the following questions related to the college enrollment decision-making process from the perspective of high school seniors: How do students perceive parents’ role in the college enrollment process? Is the school perceived as an alternative or supplemental source for information related to the college enrollment process? Do students utilize resources offered through the school to navigate the enrollment process? Finally, this study sought to examine whether any class differences existed in student’s perceptions of their parents’ involvement, as well as their perceptions and utilization of school resources.

**Methods**

Many studies approach parental involvement from the parents’ perspective, assessing what parents believe they do in relation to their student’s education. With this in mind, this study takes a qualitative approach from the perspective of high school seniors in order to gain a more thorough understanding of what students believe they gain from interactions with both their parents and their school as they navigate the college enrollment process. The analyses presented in this paper are based on 19 in-depth interviews, which took place in the spring of the 2010-2011 academic year. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect anonymity. The
sample included seventeen high school seniors and two administrators at Franklin High [pseudonym], a traditional high school located in a medium sized city in the Mid South, which I refer to as Worthington. I conducted interviews with two administrators, in order to learn about the workings of the departments within the school and what college resources were available to students through the school. Interviews with high school seniors focused on their plans for post-graduation and how they came to make decisions related to college choice and college enrollment. Specifically, questions focused on the role that their parents and the school played in their decisions. Regardless of whether students planned to enroll in college or pursue some other endeavor (e.g., enter the labor market, join the military etc.), high school seniors in particular are an appropriate group for examining topics related to college enrollment because at this stage, students are consciously thinking about what they will do after high school.

I used various approaches to recruit participants. One approach involved hanging flyers, which advertised the study, in heavy traffic areas in the school (i.e., the cafeteria, the entrance/exit of the school, the gymnasium). I also made an announcement and handed out these same flyers during a senior assembly. Additionally, because this student assembly was specifically for seniors who were interested in a co-op, or school-to-work program, I also visited several senior English classrooms to recruit participants. All recruitment flyers included a general statement informing students that this research would involve a one-hour interview, during which students would be asked to discuss their post-high school plans. Because the school district required that all students (regardless of age) gain parental consent, the flyers that were distributed were attached to an IRB-approved parental consent document. Students who were interested in participating were instructed to turn in their signed parental consent documents to their senior counselor.
Once the students had submitted their parental consent documents, the senior counselor compiled a list of students and, per my request, indicated whether or not each student qualified for free or reduced lunch. This was used to ensure that my final sample would vary among social class (similar to the practices of Condron and Roscigno (2003), I regard eligibility for free or reduced lunch as an indication of low-income status; in 2010-2011, a family of four was eligible for free or reduced lunch if the family income was less than $22,050 (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010)).

While over 100 students initially indicated that they were interested in participating in the study, only 17 students turned in the required parental consent form. To protect the anonymity of the participants, the senior counselor was not informed of the final sample size or which students were selected to participate (though all 17 students became a part of the final sample). It is difficult to determine why only 17 students returned the parental consent form and participated when 100 students initially indicated interest, but I suggest a few possible explanations. First, since participation in this study required the additional steps of taking home a parental consent form, having it signed, and returning it to the guidance office—an area of the school that most students do not frequent on a daily basis—it is possible that this deterred many students. Secondly, several students that I became acquainted with during my time at the school stated to me that they forgot to return their forms to the senior guidance counselor, so it is possible that others forgot to do so as well. Third, in order to complete the interview, it was necessary to miss class or in some cases, stay after school. As a result, it possible that many students were unable, or ultimately decided that the study was too involved and no longer wanted to participate. While there may be other possible explanations as to why so many students did not participate, there is no clear evidence to suggest exactly why this happened.
For those students who did turn in their permission forms, participation in this study involved a semi-structured interview that lasted, on average, approximately one hour. The major focus of interview questions was on whether the interviewee was planning to attend college, what factors had contributed to his or her decision, where the student received his or her information, and who had helped the student take steps towards making the final decision a reality. To gain some additional background information about the students, I also asked respondents about their involvement in extracurricular activities, their employment status while in school, their parents’ education and occupation, as well as a few general demographic questions (i.e., age, race, etc.) Interviews with students were recorded (and later transcribed) and were primarily conducted in a small conference room in the guidance office that also served as the school’s “college resource room.” Two student interviews took place in a vacant office and one in another conference room due to scheduling conflicts in the “college resource room.” Interviews with the two administrators took place in each of their own offices, one located in the counseling center and one located in the main office. All participants were ensured confidentiality and were paid a small amount (five dollars) in the form of a gift card for their participation, which was funded by a small internal research grant.

In Table 1, I present the descriptive characteristics for the student sample (n=17). A little more than fifty percent of the students who were interviewed were female (eight male and nine female). Twelve of the students identified as white and five of the students identified as African American. Additionally, 47.06% qualified for free or reduced lunch. These numbers are fairly reflective of the larger student population of the school, which is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 was constructed based on available data collected by the local school board. In 2010-2011, 67.3% percent of the student body identified as white and nearly 30 percent
identified as African American. In regards to free/reduced lunch, nearly 42% percent of all students at Franklin High qualified for free or reduced lunch during the 2010-2011 school year. Under the column labeled “Transition to Adult Life,” I present the seven possible student outcomes identified by the school board. Just over 57 percent of 2010-2011 graduating students attended a college within the state, 3.7 percent attended a college in another state, and 31.7 percent attended a vocational or technical school. The remaining students either joined the military, found employment, or were categorized as “unsuccessful”. The annual reports produced by the local school board do not clearly define what is meant by “Work School Combined.” I was surprised to see that zero percent was reported for this outcome, considering that several of the students in my sample reported that they planned to work for Postal Express, an international shipping company, while they attended college. Unfortunately, I was unable to learn why this outcome was reported as so.

In my analysis of the data, I coded for patterns in students’ responses based on the structure of the interview. I also coded for other common issues raised by participants. Keeping with the aims of this research, I particularly focused on student perceptions of interactions with parents in relation to their schooling and plans for post-graduation, their perceptions of the resources available at the school, and how they described using the resources they perceived to be available. Along these lines, I looked for variations by social class in the perceived contributions of parents, as well as variations in what resources students felt were available and their use of those resources.
Findings

Perceptions of Parental Involvement

Based on both current literature and data analysis, six themes related to parental involvement in the college enrollment process emerged: 1) parent-student discussions about schoolwork; 2) parents’ expectations for educational attainment; 3) parents’ knowledge of the college enrollment process; 4) parents’ role in developing plans for after high school, 5) parents’ aligned action, and 6) parents’ financial support for student’s college. Within each of these six themes, students’ perceptions of the amount and nature of their parents’ involvement varied. Some students perceived their parents as being minimally involved in the sense that there was little talk about schoolwork and college at home; low expectations and little knowledge about the college enrollment process; as well as low aligned action and minimal financial support. Aligned action can be described as goal-specific behavior through which parents channel information and resources outside the family and appropriate them for the purpose of helping their children achieve their goals (Kim & Schneider, 2005). Parents who demonstrated minimal involvement tended to be bystanders of the college enrollment process and as a result their children were more likely to take on the college enrollment process alone. When students described their parents in this way, they were placed in a category I call “self-directed.”

The second category of students perceived their parents as partners in the college enrollment process. These students described their parents as having higher and stronger expectations for their education. In fact, students in this category often described that not attending college was not an option. In addition to higher expectations, these parents were also described as having greater knowledge of the college enrollment process and more likely to give students specific advice on which colleges to consider attending. Students in this category also
described their parents as having higher aligned action with the student’s goals, demonstrated by attending college fairs or other college related events at the child’s school. Moreover, many of these parents sought out additional resources beyond what the school provided. Finally, these students also perceived their parents as being capable of providing financial assistance for college. When students described their parents’ involvement in this way, they were placed in a category I call “collaborative.”

Below, I present each of the six themes that emerged from the student-interviews. Within each of the six themes, I contrast the two categories of students, demonstrating how some students perceived themselves as being more self-directed versus those who perceived themselves as being more collaborative. It is important to note that no student in this sample described his or her parent(s) as taking a lead role in navigating the enrollment process. Further, most of the time students’ perceptions of their parents’ involvement consistently fell within either the category of self-directed, or the category of collaborative. However, in a few instances, a student may have perceived her parent(s) as being collaborative under one theme, but conversely, may have described herself as being more self-directed under another theme, indicating that parents’ involvement is multifaceted and complex.

**Theme 1: Parent-Student Discussions About Schoolwork**

Prior research has suggested that one aspect of parental involvement in children’s education entails parent-child discussion(s) of the child’s schoolwork or other school-related issues, such as grades, course selection, or school activities (Perna & Titus, 2005). A second component of parental involvement in education is parental monitoring of the student’s behaviors, such as school attendance and homework completion (Perna & Titus, 2005). The
majority of students in this study indicated that discussions of school with parents largely centered on academic performance (i.e. grades).

Discussions between parents and self-directed students were characterized by superficial conversations and interactions related to the student’s homework and day-to-day activities. However, self-directed students who achieved at lower levels (2.5 GPA or lower) tended to be lower class and perceived their parents as being lax about grades. These students felt that parent-student discussions typically did not occur until the student’s academic performance was waning.

Greg explained:

“I got my first ‘D’ (laughs) when I came here…they ain’t say nothin’…they really didn’t pay much attention until I got another one.”

Similarly, Matt stated:

“They didn’t really care until this last grade report. I got two ‘D’s’…”

In addition to perceived lax attitudes towards grades, these students also indicated that parents’ monitoring of homework or daily school activities was mostly without action. For example, Matt states:

“They’re always like ‘how was school today? Are you doin’ alright in school?’ Stuff like that…I say ‘School was alright’ and ‘I think I’m doin’ alright’” (laughs).

Matt, like others, perceived his parent’s questions as casual conversation rather than genuine interest or concern. Some self-directed students indicated that their parents would ask more specific questions related to homework; however, these parents often failed to follow up with the student. Without follow-up from parents, these self-directed students perceived parent-child interaction to be insincere and easily manipulated. Emily explained:

“… they check on me every once in a while…they’re like ‘Do you have any homework?’ Sometimes I’m like ‘Yeah, but I’ll get to it later’ and I end up getting to it the next morning in first period” (laughs).

Greg describes conversations with his parents about his school activities in a strikingly similar way:
“They ask me do I got homework. I tell em’ yes or no and they don’t really say too much about it...Like when I have a project or something that ain’t due till like a couple weeks from now I’ll say, ‘naw I don’t have any homework,’ or if I know I’m gonna do it in the morning, I’ll be like ‘I don’t have any’.”

These self-directed students perceived that discussions of schoolwork in the home centered on low academic performance. However, higher achieving self-directed students felt that discussions in the home centered on their high academic performance. Higher achieving self-directed students were not heavily supervised or monitored by their parents in regards to their schoolwork. Additionally, they often described their relationships with their parents as being based on trust and notions of student responsibility. For example, Mackenzie stated:

“...they know I’ll get it done. I just tell them that I get good grades and they’re like ‘cool’...sometimes they do ask me about my report cards. It’s just A’s, B’s, whatever.”

Another student, Adam, told me:

“...they don’t really worry about me...I think it’s because they know like...I’ve never had a zero in my life. I won’t let myself.”

Similarly, Ashley stated:

“They know I’m a very responsible person and...I make sure I get it done and it’s good...They know that I’m a very hard worker and I make sure I get my stuff done.”

Higher achieving self-directed students perceived that their parents trusted them not only to manage their workload, but also to maintain high academic achievement. Interestingly, two students who described themselves as being high achievers had a 2.6 and 2.8 GPA. These two students, who were lower-income, shared similar sentiments of their peers who maintained GPA’s higher than 3.0 (several higher than 3.5), though their actual achievement was considerably lower. This suggests that there may be class differences in parents’ and students’ definitions of what constitutes high achievement, which has important implications for the college enrollment process. For these two students, a 2.6 and 2.8 GPA may be considered high achievement in the home, however, it is unlikely that these GPA’s would be competitive in the college enrollment process or in the obtainment of scholarships.
For self-directed students, conversations with parents about schoolwork centered on academic performance and, for the most part, parental involvement mainly consisted of checking report cards or asking general questions like “How are you doing in school?” For collaborators, though, parents tended to be more involved in their child’s schooling. Conversations often went beyond talk of grades and collaborators described their parents as being a resource on which they could draw for help with schoolwork. For example, Kendra stated:

“My mom, she’s a nurse and I’m going into nursing so whenever I have anything in anatomy I usually go to her about that…She had a 30 on her English ACT portion so anything that comes to writing I also go to her for help.”

Kendra perceived her mother as a resource for help with her schoolwork based on her mother’s higher level of education. This was a form of capital that very few students in this study described and most of the students were self-directed when it came to their schoolwork. However, a few students were collaborative and viewed their parents (usually mothers) as involved in the specifics of their education and as partners in times of need during the learning process.

*Theme 2: Parents’ Expectations for Educational Attainment*

Beyond parent’s involvement in schoolwork, students also discussed perceptions of their parents’ expectations for their education. Scholars often measure parents’ expectations for their children’s education by asking parents to indicate how far they expect their child to go in school (Englund 2004; Zahn 2006). While most students in this study described their parents as having high expectations for their education, self-directed students indicated that their parents did not necessarily expect them to go to college. When asked if there were specific things she remembered her mother telling her about her education, Keisha recalled that her mother told her:

“…just to you know, to make up my mind if I really wanted to go [to college] and if I didn’t then you know, that’ll be fine as long as I pass high school. As long as I graduate from high school.”
From Keisha’s response, it is clear that her mother expects her to graduate from high school, but it is not clear that she expects her to go to college. Other self-directed students recalled explicit discussions of college in the home from a young age. Brittany stated: “My dad kind of pushed [for college]…when I was little I guess.” At the same time though, Brittany also perceived that her parents were equally supportive of the decision not to attend college. When asked what her parents would think if she chose not to enroll in college, Brittany stated:

“…I don’t know…I think they would be okay with it…if I was not to go…I think they’d be fine with it…cause they- they pretty much just stay behind me 100%.”

These self-directed students perceived their parents as having expectations of college attendance, but simultaneously, they also perceived the decision not to attend college as an acceptable choice. Self-directed students who gave this account tended to be lower class, which is consistent with previous findings that parental expectations and definitions of success vary by social status—with lower SES parents being more likely to view a high school education as the norm, whereas higher SES parents tend to view a college degree as the norm (Walpole 2003).

As described above, self-directed students perceived high school graduation as acceptable and college as an option, based on their parents expectations. Collaborators, on the other hand, perceived college attendance as the only acceptable option. These students tended to be higher-income and when describing their parent’s expectations, would often recall conversations during which their parents explained why college attendance was important. Katie stated:

“My dad is- He never even tried to go to college so he’s like, ‘you really need to go because I’m really lucky with the job I got,’ and like, ‘you have to go to college and make sure you do what you need to do.’ And my mom is like- She tried to go back to school after she had me and she’s like, ‘it’s really hard, just get it done and try to have a life and family after that.’ Like my parents are like, ‘you have to go to college.’ Like, ‘you don’t have a choice.’ So I’ve just always figured I would go to college after high school.”

Many collaborators described similar conversations during which parents voiced the idea that without a college education, a “good job” would be difficult to find. It is also important to note at
the end of the excerpt from Katie, she states that she perceived that *not* going to college was not an option. The majority of collaborators made similar statements, indicating that parent’s expectations for college attendance were very strong. Brandon told me that his mother had always expected him to go to college. When asked what he thought his mother would do if he chose not to go to college, Brandon stated, “She’d probably make me!” Similarly, while Kendra expressed that she genuinely wanted to go and was looking forward to college, she also indicated that her mother reiterated expectations for college attendance often: “My mom…she’s like ‘Oh, you’re going to college. You’re going!’” (laughs)” In this way, Kendra’s mother jokingly emphasized that college attendance was the only acceptable option. For collaborators, these expectations were made clear often in the home. Even when some parents were less explicit, the expectations were still perceived the same. This is illustrated by Kenneth, who stated,

> “Um, I think they [parents] act like it was my choice but in the end I’m pretty sure I really didn’t have the choice. I’m going.”

**Theme 3: Parents’ Knowledge of the Enrollment Process**

The role that parents played in the development of student’s plans varied, partly based on students’ perceptions of the knowledge that their parents had, or lacked, regarding the college enrollment process. Self-directed students indicated that their parents had little knowledge of the college enrollment process and therefore, were not able to provide much assistance as the student navigated the college enrollment process. Some articulated specific things that they felt their parents were not apt to help them with. For example, reflecting on his older sister’s experience with the college enrollment process, Damon, a lower-income student, stated:

> “..my sister, she kind of got like the bad end of the stick when it came to like going to colleges cause she didn’t really know too much about like FAFSA money and cause she was the first in the household. My mother didn’t know much about it either. So she didn’t know much about scholarship money and FAFSA money. I mean she [sister] had a pretty good GPA and ACT score but she ended up not gettin’ much or being able to make the right decision when it came to going to college.”
Based on his older sister’s experience, Damon perceives his mother as incapable of providing knowledge that will help him navigate the college enrollment process, specifically, finding scholarships or federal student aid to help pay for college. Other students were less specific when they discussed the kinds of information their parents were unable to provide. Ashley, for example, who was did not qualify for free/reduced lunch, stated:

“My dad, he- I think he didn’t make it past his sophomore year in high school…he had dropped out so he doesn’t really know all the things about high school and all that and my mom…she didn’t go to college.”

Ashley perceives her parents as less able to impart knowledge that would be beneficial in the college enrollment process due to their lower levels of education and lack of experience related to college. For Ashley and other self-directed students, Franklin High was perceived as a resource that could make up for the lack of knowledge in the home. For example, when Brittany, a lower-income student, was asked if she and her mother found the college fair at school helpful, she responded:

“Yeah cause I don’t think we would have had any other kind of way to see what was out there besides that…”

Brittany feels that without the programs offered by the school, she and her parents would be unable to find information about different colleges. The role of the school in this regard is discussed in greater detail later.

In contrast to self-directed students, collaborators perceived their parents as having greater knowledge of the college enrollment process. According to collaborators, this was often the result of having an older sibling, who had already gone through the college enrollment process, or in some cases, from the parents’ own personal and recent experience with college enrollment. For example, Stephanie’s mother filled out and submitted some college applications for her. According to Stephanie, a higher-income student, her mother knew how to do this
because she had already been through the college application process with Stephanie’s older sister. Brian, another higher-income student, who also had an older sister already enrolled in a four-year university, stated that his parents had greater knowledge of the college enrollment process after having been through it once before. Brian stated:

“At one point, I did an application and it said something and I had no idea what it was trying to say and I went to my parents and they was like ‘Oh yeah, it’s this, this, this,’ and I was like, ‘Oh okay.’ So yeah, it’s helped that they’ve been through the ‘rodeo’ once.”

The accounts of Stephanie and Brian, who attributed their parents’ knowledge of the enrollment process as the result of having an older sibling, stand in stark contrast to that of Damon. Damon too had an older sister, who had been through the application process, and yet he continued to perceive his mother as being ill-equipped to assist him. Based on the data, it seems that Damon perceived his mother as being completely removed from his education. Therefore, it seems that even if his mother was willing to help, Damon, unlike Stephanie and Brian, was not likely to seek it out.

While Brian and Stephanie attributed their parents’ knowledge to the experiences of their older siblings, some collaborators perceived their parents as having greater knowledge of the enrollment process as the result of recently attending college themselves. Kendra, for example, described how her mother’s recent experience in college helped with the enrollment process:

“Since she recently went to school, she kind of knows the ropes…she wants me to have the college experience and stuff like that. She’s told me about classes, what you need to know, what you don’t…taking advantage of tutoring and being around certain types of groups, little things like that.”

In addition to knowledge about enrollment, Kendra feels that her mother has been able to impart knowledge related to the college experience that will benefit her once she transitions from high school to college. In contrast to self-directed students, who perceived their parents as having little to no knowledge about college or the enrollment process, collaborators perceived their
parents as being knowledgeable and capable of assisting them with applications and the transition to college.

Within this theme, self-directed students and collaborators alike came from both lower and higher-income families. As a result, there was no clear indication of class differences in students’ perceptions of their parents’ knowledge of the enrollment process. However, moving beyond the free/reduced lunch indicator of social class, Emily’s assessment of her parent’s knowledge was based on their lower levels of education. With a larger sample and a more detailed measure of social class, it is possible that a clearer class-related pattern would have emerged.

**Theme 4: Parents’ Role in Developing Post-High School Plans**

As evidenced, self-directed students perceived their parents as being unable to provide helpful information related to the college enrollment process. Nonetheless, these students reported that they did in fact talk with their parents about their plans for after high school. Conversations between parents and some self-directed students, however, were often characterized by advice that was not directly related to college enrollment, or advice that was vague and not capable of being used to advance the participant in the college enrollment process. For example, Greg laughingly recalls that his father, who was on an athletic scholarship at a four-year university, advised him not to party too much:

“…he got kicked out (laughs). Cause like he said ‘don’t party too much.’ He got kicked out for partying too much…he never went back.”

For Greg, the story is amusing but not helpful for actually helping him get into college and he is unable to describe any other useful advice he has received from his parents. Other self-directed students indicated that conversations with their parents were characterized by vague advice. Keisha’s mother for example, told her:
"...just to like follow whatever my dreams is, then just to you know go for it and always stay focused and maintain a good grade and you know...they’ll be right there beside me.”

Most self-directed students perceived themselves as being autonomous in the college planning process; therefore, in conversations with parents related to college planning, parents were seen as following the lead of the student. For example, Keisha stated:

“She just goes along with what I’m saying and if you know, something isn’t right then she’ll speak up and say something.”

Another student, Natalie, told me:

“They pretty much told me to go with the flow with what I said. I mean like, I had already got everything planned out.”

Similarly, Brian affirmed,

“They just wanted me to do what I wanted to do. They didn’t want to like persuade me to do anything. They just wanted me to be happy with what I choose.”

In an almost echoed statement, Ashley stated:

“I mean they pretty much just tell me to do like what I wanna do...they don’t really push me to do stuff that I don’t want to do. They pretty much just let me make my own decisions when it comes to that.”

While the literature suggests that parent-child conversations about college plans are beneficial, it is not clear whether all conversations are equally beneficial. It is plausible that conversations about higher education are advantageous in the sense that they affirm parent’s expectations for education. However, these findings suggest that it is not the frequency of college discussions, but rather, the quality of the discussions and what students are able to take away and use to their advantage in the college enrollment process that matters.

Most self-directed students stated that their parents simply went along with their plan, giving minimal input. Collaborators on the other hand, perceived their parents as giving more direction and specifying a preference for particular schools. In part, collaborators described their parents’ preferences as being based on the cost of attendance. Other students though, perceived
their parents’ preferences as being based on other factors, such as distance. Only one student felt that their parents’ preference related to the type of college she should attend. Katie stated:

“…my parents weren’t really pushing [the local two year college] because my mom wants me to go to a university so… I decided to go to a four-year school.”

This excerpt illustrates that Katie’s parents made a distinction between a two-year and four-year school and preferred a four-year university. So, while collaborators indicated that their parents gave more direction and specific advice in the college enrollment process than did self-directed parents, advice on which college to attend was constrained by finances and also varied based on what factors parents believed to be important in college selection. Based on the literature, one would likely expect lower-income students to benefit less from their parents’ advice and higher-income students to benefit more. However, there were no clear class distinctions in the ways students’ described developing their plans with their parents. Both lower and higher-income students showed up in both categories and both described college choice constraints based on finances—illustrating the murky class distinctions between those considered lower-income and those considered lower-middle or middle-income.

**Theme 5: Parents’ Aligned Action**

As described above, the quality of college-related conversations in the home matter for students entering the enrollment process. At the same time, the things that parents actually do matter as well. What parents “do” is described here as parent’s aligned action. As described previously, Kim and Schneider (2005) conceptualize aligned action as goal-specific behavior through which parents channel information and resources outside the family and appropriate them for the purpose of helping their children achieve their goals. Based on student reports, it became clear that parent’s aligned action varied. Some parents were perceived as being very proactive while other parents were perceived as being very passive in the enrollment process.
Self-directed students described their parent’s behaviors as falling in the latter category. For example, Ashley, who was attempting to get federal student aid for school, told me:

“I’ve filled out my part of FAFSA since I did my taxes but my mom still- Like, I just reminded her the other day and she’s like “Oh my gosh! I haven’t filled out my part of it.”

In this example, the student is responsible for making sure the parent is completing the necessary steps to acquire financial assistance for college. Other self-directed students perceived their parent’s involvement as non-existent. Damon explains his mother’s lack of involvement in the following excerpt:

“I feel like she [mom] thinks I’ve been able to handle it. That's one thing she always comments on is she- I mean when I first got my scholarship she cried. I mean of course everyone's gonna cry, but she was more crying due to the fact that she was able- she didn't have to do nothin’. She didn't do anything. She didn't know much what I was doin’ at all. She just woke up one day and I handed her a scholarship saying ‘oh momma, look how much money they gave me.’ So, she was just so proud that I was able to do it on my own.

Damon’s perceives his mother as being very proud of his ability to navigate the college enrollment process successfully without her assistance. It is interesting here to consider Damon’s earlier discussion of his older sister who was not equally successful in doing the same. This point is taken up further later when Damon describes what role he believed the school played in his success of applying for college and acquiring a scholarship.

In contrast to the parents of self-directed students, parents of collaborators were described as having greater aligned action. For example, students described parents as requiring the student to take the ACT multiple times in an attempt to get a higher score; attending college fairs at school; seeking out additional information and resources not provided through the school; making college campus visits with the student; and providing financial assistance for college. The collaborative students within this theme, tended to be higher-income.

Most of the students in this study, and their parents, attended the college fairs at the school. This was primarily because attendance at the college fairs was mandatory. However,
collaborators perceived their parents as having a genuine, added interest to attend. They also
described their parents as being quite active at the college fairs:

“Well my mom came with me this year and last year…I’m pretty sure it was mandatory but like she was
already planning on going anyway…we got a lot of information last year…and it really helped. My mom
like, she was running to like every table getting everything and saying ‘Oh, we can go here. We can do
this!’ (laughs)”

Several students discussed parents’ aligned action in terms of what their mothers did. For
example, Kenneth stated,

“Well my junior year my stepdad went but he didn’t really- He didn’t know what anything- (laughs)...My
mom went this past time...She like asked questions about like the Postal Express thing and the university
thing.”

In a different context, Emily also describes action taken specifically by her mother:

“My mom did like research- I don’t know if someone like told her about it or something but like she found
out about the university’s Ultra Program...cause she knew how bad I wanted to go to that university and
stuff like that.”

Emily was disheartened because she was not able to get into a local, public four-year university
due to her low ACT score. However, her mother discovered what Emily called the “Ultra
Program,” in which she would take classes at the local community-college, but would have a
university student ID and would be able to transfer to the four-year university as soon as she met
a set of requirements. Emily’s mother also found a scholarship opportunity through her employer
for which Emily could apply. This illustrates that parents of collaborators sought out information
on their own through networks that existed outside of the school.

Collaborators also described their parents aligned action as participation in college
campus visits. Kenneth stated that his parents had visited one university (that was two hours
away) four to five times with him for various band competitions. Brandon also described his
mother’s participation in campus visits:

“We talked. We went to visit a college and we talked about like college options...We visited two out of
town universities and we talked about you know, the differences and stuff.”
Based on students’ reports, there appeared to be a class distinction within this theme. Collaborator’s parents, who were described as having greater aligned action, tended to be higher-income. This coincides with prior research, which finds that levels of involvement decrease as disadvantage increases. Finally, the perceptions of the aligned action of parents appear to vary by gender of the parent, however, the scope of this paper does not allow for exploration of this topic. Still, it is important to minimally note here that when students described what their “parents” did, they often did so by talking specifically about what mothers did.

**Theme 6: Parents’ Financial Support for College**

All that has been described thus far is important for navigating the college enrollment process, but one critical aspect of parents’ aligned action is the provision of financial assistance for college. Participants’ perceptions of their parents’ ability to offer financial support varied. Very few students in this study felt that their parents could afford to pay for their college; however, some parents were able to offer more financial support than others. Self-directed students understood their parents to be unable to contribute financially in support of their college education. Not surprisingly, these students tended to be lower-income, though there was a small number of higher-income student whose parents were unable to contribute financially. Messages from parents regarding their inability to offer financial support were at times explicit and at other times more implicit. When asked about the nature of the conversations Adam, a higher-income student, had with his parents about his college plans, Adam stated:

“Like they know what I’m doin’, they know what I want to do but- They just say- Like the main thing they always said was, ‘How are you going to pay for it?’…cause they can’t pay for college.”

Here, the message that parents are unable to pay for college is explicit. For other students though, the same message was implied or understood. When choosing between two colleges, Laura, a lower-income student, explains that that her mother was not very interested in the small,
private liberal arts college she was considering. This was partly because Laura’s mother “knew that they [the college] didn’t have anything” that she “wanted to do,” but more importantly, Laura explains that the cost of attending was “really expensive” and that her mother “kind of knew” she “wasn’t going to go there.” Although Laura’s mother does not explicitly say so, Laura is aware of her parent’s inability to offer financial support and as a result, Laura’s choice of college is constrained.

Laura and other self-directed students sought out alternative ways to pay for college. Damon, for example, was fortunate to receive a scholarship, however, many students found that they either did not meet the criteria for scholarships or did not have ACT scores and/or grades that were high enough to make them competitive candidates for scholarships. Thus, some students sought federal student aid and were encouraged by their parents to do so. Nick’s mother for example, told him “go where you want…don’t worry about student loans because it’ll be worth it.” Greg also indicated that his parents encouraged him to seek federal aid. When asked how his parent’s responded when they first learned he was interested in pursuing an education at an automotive school in Chicago, he stated “…first thing was my FAFSA (laughs), getting money to help me out or whatever…” Other parents however, voiced concerns to their children regarding student loan debt. For example, Ashley, a higher-income student, said that her mother “wants to have, you know, me not be overwhelmed with um, loan bills like thirty years from now.”

Beyond the desire to avoid student debt, there were some students who did not qualify for federal aid but yet their parents could not afford to pay for college out-of-pocket. These students found an alternative way to pay for college through a local program in which students work for Postal Express, an international shipping company, and in turn, Postal Express pays full tuition at
the local community-college or the local, public four-year university. According to self-directed students, many parents saw this program as a viable way for students to pay their own way through college. Adam’s parents for example could not afford to pay out of pocket for college, yet their family income level was high enough that Adam did not qualify for financial aid. Adam stated that his parents told him “you have to work at Postal Express” because of their inability to pay for his college. Ashley’s mother also saw Postal Express as a good opportunity to pay for college, saying, “My mom’s like, ‘Go Postal Express!’” She thinks it’s awesome!” Parents of self-directed students, unable to finance their child’s college education, relied on their child’s ability to obtain scholarships, federal student aid, or participate in the college tuition program through Postal Express.

As mentioned earlier, very few students in this study felt that their parents could afford to pay one hundred percent, if any, of their college expenses. However, in contrast to self-directed students whose parents were unable to contribute any financial assistance, collaborators perceived their parents as able to provide some. Some collaborators intended to rely on small savings accounts or their parents’ to pay out-of-pocket, what was not covered by scholarships and/or financial aid. For example, Brian explained that a small savings account has been helping him afford college:

“We have uh, we set up like a savings account that we’ve been puttin’ in since I don’t know, sixth or seventh grade…It was just straight for college. It wasn’t touchable. So, that’s been helping a lot.”

The following excerpts from Kenneth and Katie illustrate that when scholarships and/or student loans do not cover one hundred percent of college expenses, collaborators often relied on parents to make up the difference. When asked how he planned to pay for college, Kenneth stated, “some scholarships and whatever the rest is, hopefully I’ll just be able to pay that…out of my parent’s pocket. [laughs]” Similarly, Katie stated:
“They’re [parents] trying to pay for it which is hard…it’s like $20,000 a year. I have, I think $13,000 of it paid for through like, just like academic packages…and then I got direct loans and something sub loan...so I just owe like…I have to find a way to pay fifteen hundred, which my parents are probably going to do…”

In addition to direct financial assistance, Katie also described indirect ways that her parents would provide assistance, such as allowing her to live at home to avoid incurring housing costs:

“…And like my parents provide me with everything I need so. They give me like- They’ll let me live there until I’m done with school and they said like whatever I do like, I can take the first year at home still and like work and build my money before I actually move out. So they’re just like really supportive of everything.”

Not surprisingly, the majority of students who felt that their parents could not contribute financially were lower-income and those who perceived their parents as being able were higher-income. Still, the results from this section again illustrate the not-so-clear distinctions between the lower, lower-middle, and middle-income families. Even students from families with higher-incomes and higher levels of education perceived their parents as being unable to pay for college, and many described the ways in which their college choice was constrained due to finances. Also noteworthy is that both lower and higher-income students perceived the school-work program at Postal Express as a viable option, which is described in greater detail later in this paper.

In sum, self-directed students perceived their parents’ involvement in their schooling as based on academic performance. For some students, involvement centered on low academic performance, while for others, involvement was based on high academic performance. For both groups of self-directed students, parents’ involvement in their schoolwork was minimal. The difference is that low achieving self-directed students perceived parents as having laid back attitudes about grades and schoolwork, whereas high achieving self-directed students perceived parents as having trust and confidence in the student’s ability to be responsible and maintain high achievement. Self-directed students also perceived their parents as having lower expectations for their education. Some felt that parents would be satisfied as long as the student graduated from high school. Others stated that parents wanted them to attend college; however, the perception
was that their parents would be supportive in the event they chose not to attend college. In regards to parents’ knowledge of the college enrollment process, self-directed students perceived their parents as knowing very little. Nonetheless, students reported that they did in fact talk with their parents about their college plans. For most, conversations with parents resulted in vague advice and parents tended to follow the lead of the student in college related decisions. Self-directed students also perceived their parents as having low aligned action in the sense that parents’ limited knowledge constrained their ability to help with applications and college selection. Additionally, parents’ inability to contribute financially for college is also a factor in parents’ low aligned action.

For collaborators, parents were perceived as being more highly involved than self-directed students. With regard to schoolwork, collaborators talked with their parents about grades, but also discussed specific coursework and were more likely to describe their parents as a resource for help with homework or school projects. These parents were also perceived as having greater expectations for students’ education, so much so, that collaborators often stated that college attendance was the only acceptable option. In addition to higher expectations, collaborators perceived their parents as having greater knowledge of the college enrollment process, which typically stemmed from having an older sibling who had already gone through the college enrollment process, or in a few cases, from the parents own experience as a college student. This greater knowledge facilitated higher aligned action where parents were better able to help with applications and college selection. Collaborators also described ways in which their parents pursued resources beyond what was made available through the school. Finally, in contrast to self-directed students, collaborators perceived their parents as being more capable of offering financial support for college attendance.
So far, the findings have shown that parental involvement in education varies. For some students, parents served as a resource in the college enrollment process. For others this was less the case. The second half of this study is devoted to understanding how schools can serve as an alternative or supplemental resource in the college enrollment process. While scholars have examined the effects of schools on college enrollment, few have been qualitative and from the perspective of the students. In this study, interviews were completed with the principal, the senior guidance counselor, and 17 high school seniors, in an attempt to shed light on the following questions: 1) From the administrative perspective, what resources are offered by the school? 2) What resources do the students perceive to be available? And 3), how do the students utilize the resources that are available?

**Perceptions of School Resources**

There is debate within the sociology of education regarding whether schools reproduce (and even exacerbate) or reduce social inequalities. As described previously, low-income minorities often attend low quality schools that lack college-related resources and offer an education geared towards jobs that do not require a college degree (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010; Freeman, 1997). On the contrary, predominately white affluent neighborhoods boast schools that offer rigorous, college-prep curriculum from qualified and experienced teachers (Demond & Emirbayer, 2010; Freeman, 1997). This would suggest that schools play a major role in maintaining the status quo. However, research has shown that when schools demonstrate a pattern of four-year college going, demonstrate high expectations and a commitment to preparing and supporting students in the enrollment process, low-income urban students are more likely to plan, apply, and be accepted into four-year colleges with selectivity levels that match their qualifications (Roderick, et al., 2011). Findings such as these indicate that schools can in fact
challenge the status quo by first presenting students and their families with a different perspective on what college opportunities exist, and then providing them with the information, resources, and guidance in the enrollment process (McDonough, 1997; Roderick, et al. 1997).

Administrators

In order to assess what college-related resources and support Franklin High offers, I first interviewed two administrators at Franklin High, the principal and senior guidance counselor. According to administrators, Franklin High offers a number of resources related to college enrollment and both maintain that the provision of resources and an emphasis on postsecondary education are major aims of the school. Mr. Thompson, the school principal, stated:

“It’s up to each individual school to try to promote a college-going culture and we do that from day one when they come in. You know, when they come in at orientation in the summer for 9th graders, we’re talking about college.”

Similarly, Mrs. Wilson, the senior guidance counselor, explained that there are many resources provided to students who want to go to college. At the same time though, she recognized that the student body is not homogeneous and that some students make other plans. Still, she feels that it is partly the school's responsibility to make sure students have access to resources and information that will help them make decisions for life after graduation:

“We want every student to realize that college is an option but we also realize that some students want to go into the military or go into a trade. But we want to make sure that whatever they choose, they have the knowledge you know, that they’ll need to be successful after high school.”

There are three offices at Franklin High School: the main office, the athletic office, and the guidance center. Most of what was discussed in the interviews with Mr. Thompson and Mrs. Wilson related to the operations of the guidance center. As Mrs. Wilson put it, “the guidance center is sort of the glue that holds it all together.” In addition to handling standard issues unrelated to college enrollment (e.g. early dismissals, tardies, academic problems, parent-teacher conferences, etc.) Mrs. Wilson described an array of duties that she handles as the senior
counselor, a position nested within the guidance center. Those duties include, but are not limited to: compiling a senior handbook; disseminating information related to school activities and college enrollment to both students and parents; making sure students are aware of scholarship opportunities and deadlines; writing recommendation letters for students for college applications and scholarships; organizing a college fair (which is a part of a larger event, “senior night”); attending workshops to learn about different colleges and the programs that they offer; organizing information in the guidance center and college resource room; and leading all 350 seniors on a tour of the guidance center and college resource room so that students know what resources are available and how to use them. To illustrate how the school links students to these resources, as well as other resources not mentioned here, it is necessary to discuss some of what the school does in greater detail.

For Mrs. Wilson, keeping parents informed on school activities and information related to college was key to facilitating parental involvement and it was clear that she felt parental involvement was important. In fact, Mrs. Wilson implied that in order for students to be ready to enter college, parental involvement was necessary:

“We want involvement from the parents from the very beginning. You know, they can’t just drop their student off, in four years pick em’ up, and expect em’ to you know, be ready to enter college. We want the parental involvement.”

Because of the desire to have parental involvement, one goal was to increase communication between the school and the parents. To meet this goal, Mrs. Wilson created a listserv of parent (and student) email addresses. The listserv, which included over 300 email addresses, was used to disseminate information related to what may be happening at the school (e.g. report cards, homecoming, parent-teacher conferences, etc.), as well as information more directly related to college enrollment, such as college application deadlines, scholarship opportunities, or FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). Mrs. Wilson explained that she was sending a
newsletter to students and parents every seven to ten days and had just recently sent her 21st newsletter. Based on parent responses, Mrs. Wilson found this to be a very useful resource:

"Parents love it. They absolutely love it. I have gotten so much positive feedback, because especially at the high school age, the teenagers want to do their own thing and you know, a lot of them are working after school so they may not even see their parents in the evenings. Well, this way the parents are staying involved because they know what's going on in school. For those that don't have access to email, I do print it off. I send it to all my senior English teachers so they can print it off and post it. I send it to the principal and the senior sponsor and then we print them off and post them out on the file cabinet where the scholarships are so students or parents, either one, can just come and get a hard copy of it. So we make it accessible."

Another way that the school attempted to increase parental involvement was through the college fairs held in the school’s two gymnasiums at the beginning of students’ junior and senior year. Student participation was “mandatory,” though Mrs. Wilson explained that the school is limited in what it can make students do. Still, student participation was considered mandatory and parent participation was “strongly encouraged,” a message that was conveyed through the listserv.

The college fair, which is organized by Mrs. Wilson and other staff members of the guidance center as a part of senior night, has “grown by leaps and bounds” according to Mrs. Wilson. What started out as just a few colleges has grown to include “over 60 colleges” now. In addition to having representatives from more than 60 colleges distributing information to both students and parents, Mrs. Wilson also described bringing in a FAFSA representative to answer students’ and parents’ questions:

“At senior night we had [a state] Higher Education rep come and he's our ‘go to’ person for FAFSA. He came and he spoke for a few minutes and then he also had a table where he could speak with our students. Then he came back and did a financial aid night here at Franklin at the beginning of January. And I was constantly sending em’, ‘Don't forget January 1 is when you can actually do your FAFSA. January 1.’ I really pushed because last year they ran out of money early on for some of the grants and that, and so I was really pushing for everybody to apply. I scheduled a day where he would come and meet with parents individually. I had five computers in the conference room and he would sit down with them and help them complete the FAFSA. As a follow up there's been other financial aid workshops and I've emailed that information to the parents so they could attend, whether it was at a local four-year university, the community-college, um, or at a church location. And then also I've given his cell number. He has allowed me to give his cell number to students and parents.”
It is clear that providing information is a major objective, but moreover, ensuring that all students and parents are able to access and utilize the information is of equal importance. Based on the categories identified by Hill (2008), Franklin High reflects a brokering strategy where there is an array of resources and a commitment to equal distribution of, and access to, information by all students and parents.

Beyond simply connecting students and parents to information, the guidance center also provided a service to assist with sending college and scholarship applications. Completing applications often requires compiling several documents in addition to the application itself, for example, recommendation letters, immunization records, official transcripts, essay responses, and/or a fee or fee waiver for those who qualify. Gathering and organizing this much information can be a cumbersome process for students and parents to navigate, especially for those who are engaging with this process for the first time and/or for students who are applying to multiple colleges. Mrs. Wilson described how Franklin High assists with this process:

“At most schools you know, you're on your own as far as mailing any type of scholarships or college applications or anything like that. Here, we have an extra clerk in the guidance center, to help with that... We don't leave it up to the students or the parents. I mean it's a big hassle off their plate and we take care of it and we make sure it's complete... We make sure—we'll do is they give us all the information that they want mailed and we mail to the college in one complete packet instead of sending it piecemeal...and then we can track it. We send a stamped, addressed postcard with a list of all of the items that we mailed and the date it was mailed. The colleges, they get that postcard, stamp it received, and send it back to us. So then we have a list of the documents that we mailed on any particular day so we can say, ‘well it was mailed on February 15th and it was received by them on February 27th.’ So we can sort of back track and document. Very, very organized.”

From the administrative perspective, taking responsibility for making sure applications are put together correctly, mailed to the appropriate location, and received by the appropriate party is a great resource for both students and parents. This service, along with the listserv, college fair, and most other resources related to college enrollment exist within, or flow from the guidance
center at Franklin High. However, at least two other resources described by the administrators existed outside of the guidance center: ACT prep and CEEP (City Education and Employment Program).

One of the major steps that must be taken by students who are planning to attend college is completion of college entrance exams, such as the ACT or SAT. Regardless if students have plans to attend college or not, all students at Franklin High are required to take the ACT at the school during their junior year. According to the principal, Mr. Thompson, this is because of “a new accountability system, where the ACT now counts for over 20% of the schools accountability index.” In other words, a major portion of the schools assessment is based on how well students perform on the ACT. Because of the implications, “there’s been a greater push in terms of ACT preparation.” Mr. Thompson explained:

“We have an ACT prep program online that all of the students have access to. We've been utilizing it a lot more in the classrooms as well. We've got more teachers this year that are actually assigning students assignments where they have to get online and utilize the program so it's becoming part of their instruction. And from last year to this year, the ACT average in math overall has come up and I think we contribute that to a lot of the work that the teachers are doing.”

The manifest function for incorporating ACT prep work into the curriculum is to ensure the school has a higher assessment score; yet, the latent function is that students are able to access an online ACT prep program for free, as well as receive assistance with ACT prep work from teachers in the classroom. As a result, students have the opportunity to better prepare for the ACT which can impact their admittance to certain colleges, as well as their ability to obtain scholarships that take ACT performance into consideration.

The ACT prep program exists outside of the guidance center and is available to all students in the school. The second college-related resource that exists outside of the guidance center, CEEP, is only available to select students. CEEP, according to the program’s website, is a program in which “career planners” within the school “assist students…to remain in high school,
to graduate, and to make a successful transition to employment and/or post-secondary education or military service” (Worthington School Board Website). The CEEP program is designed specifically to reach out to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Mr. Thompson stated that a demographic shift has begun taking place at Franklin High and as a result, he took the initiative to bring in the CEEP program to address the needs of the changing student population:

“Mr. Oliver is the CEEP Coordinator... I arranged to bring him in... because our demographic is changing a little bit and we're getting kids that are little needier... It's the first year we've had this program... and basically, he has a caseload of kids that he selects based on demographics, zip code, and um, income level of the parents, and he works with this cohort of students throughout the year with the goal of trying to make sure those kids you know, get to college... but he's not restricted to working with just his caseload of kids. He works hand in hand with the counselors in the guidance center as well.”

The CEEP program is designed to reach out to students who may need extra assistance with the college enrollment process, as well as students whose plans may involve employment or military service after high school. Only two students in this study were selected to be a part of the CEEP program, however, several students who did not qualify for the program, described Mr. Oliver, the CEEP coordinator, as a potential resource for college planning. This becomes important in the following section, which focuses on the resources students perceive to be available and how students utilize them.

Students

From the administrative perspective, Franklin High offers a number of resources for students who are planning to attend college. Yet, it is perhaps more important to consider what resources the students perceive to be available and further, how the students actually use those resources. By first examining what resources students perceive to be available, one can determine whether students are aware of the resources offered through the school. Once students demonstrate awareness and access to college resources, we can begin to examine whether and how much students actually utilize the resources that are available.
The students interviewed in this study described a number of college related resources and characterized Franklin High as providing an overall environment that emphasized college enrollment. As one student put it, “…they don’t ‘push’ college but they’re very motivational…like, everyone here wants everyone to go to college.” In response to questions about the kinds of resources the school provided, students described the college resource room, located in the guidance center, which contained a computer with internet access, shelves of books about scholarships and colleges across the nation, books containing information on various branches of the military, ACT prep books, and two filing cabinets, one filled with college applications and one filled with scholarship applications. The mailing service in the guidance center, where students can receive assistance with sending college and scholarship applications was discussed often. Students also frequently described “senior night,” as well “junior night,” in which representatives from banks, the military, numerous colleges, and Postal Express visited Franklin High to distribute information. Excused absences for college visits were commonly discussed by the students, and some students also described field trips to college campuses or college fairs outside the school. Other resources described by the students included Mrs. Wilson’s listserv and the ACT prep program. Lastly, two additional resources were mentioned frequently by the students that were not mentioned by the administrators: 1) several students described teachers and staff members as resources for information related to college; 2) many students also described being connected to Postal Express as a major resource because it provided them with a way to pay for college.

During the interviews, all students consistently demonstrated awareness of the various resources offered through the school. However, the way in which the students utilized the resources was less consistent. With varied reasoning, some students explained that they did not
use the resources provided at the school. Most often, these students stated that they did not need the resources, though a few others indicated that they did not put forth the effort to use the resources that were available. Other students described taking advantage of several of the resources offered through the school—some taking the initiative and seeking out the resources, whereas some were more likely to utilize resources when they were sought out by school programs. For example, some students described being recruited by the guidance center at Franklin High to participate in college-related events that were specifically for minority students.

The first group of students, who did not take advantage of the resources offered through the school, typically gave two reasons: 1) there was a perception that they did not need the resources because they already had set plans, and 2) several students described themselves as being “lazy” or lacking motivation to utilize the resources. Students who felt that they did not need the resources because of set plans, included students who were planning to enlist in the military, attend the local community-college, or attend a local four-year college. Some of these students explained for example, that there were teachers and staff members at the school who would be willing to help them develop their plans by giving feedback or answering, however, students often made statements similar to the following: “they would help me and stuff but I think I pretty much just had my mind set on where I wanted to go.” While teachers and staff members were perceived as potential resources, they were not sought out because students in this group felt content with their plans. Another resource that was not taken advantage of by students in this group was the college resource room, located in the guidance center. When asked about whether she had used the college resource room, Emily, who was planning to attend the local community-college, stated, “I mean I would but like I'm pretty set on like where I wanted to go and stuff like that.” When asked the same question, Katie, who was planning to attend a small
local, four-year private school, stated, “I probably would have used it if I needed it. I just never needed it…” Interestingly, Katie followed up her comment stating that she had in fact come to the guidance center to obtain scholarship applications. She said:

“I grabbed a couple of them. I didn't fill them out of course cause I was too late on the due dates when I was trying to get things together. I was just behind on everything cause I didn't take it serious enough like in the fall when I should have been like, getting everything together.”

At the same time that Katie stated that she did not need the resources, she indicated that she had made an attempt to use them but was unable to do so because she was “behind” in the application process. Katie also indicated that she did not use the excused absences for college visits, because she knew that she “didn’t want to go away” and “decided not to waste the time or money.” Like many other students in this group, Katie seemed to forgo available resources and considered only a limited number of local colleges that she knew of already. Moreover, once a decision had been made and a college selected, these students were unlikely to deviate and consider other options.

The students described thus far made plans to attend a local two year or four year college. One student in this group however, stated that he did not utilize the college resources because he planned to enlist in the military. When asked whether he had attended the “mandatory” college fair at school, Matt, who had already taken steps to enlist in the Navy at the time of the interview, stated:

“I didn't go to the one this year…I heard something about a college night and I'm like I don't need to go to that.”

Because Matt had plans to enlist in the Navy, the college fair seemed nonsensical. At the same time, Matt also told me that he had not heard back from the Navy. In fact, he was told that the waiting period for his application was “indefinite.” So while Matt had taken the initial steps to enlist in the Navy, his plans had not materialized at the time of the interview, which took place at nearly the end of his senior year of high school. Matt later told me that he had been selected to be
a member of the CEEP program and that Mr. Oliver, the CEEP coordinator, had helped him develop an alternative plan:

“I was kind of worried about it, like a couple of months ago because I didn't have a back up plan and the Navy said that it's indefinite for them to decide whether they want me in the Navy or not cause they have to look at my papers but I'm not worried about it anymore cause I have a backup plan. Mr. Oliver helped me set up an interview for Postal Express and then orientation at [the local community-college].”

So while Matt initially stated that he did not need the college resources offered by the school (i.e. the college fair) because he was joining the Navy, he later stated that he was worried about what he would do after graduation considering that he had not heard back from the Navy regarding his enlistment. However, because Matt was sought out by the CEEP program he was able to develop an alternative plan that included enrollment at the local community-college and employment at Postal Express, which will in turn pay his tuition.

Some students stated that they did not need the resources available because they had already made their plans for post graduation while others stated they did not use the resources because they were lazy or did not put forth effort to do so. Matt, who had decided that he was going to enlist in the Navy, stated that he did not take advantage of the ACT prep program offered by the school. Yet, he did take the ACT. When asked how he prepared for the ACT, he stated:

“Nothing…I just winged it…you've got the practice ACT…It's like ACT questions and stuff like that and it's just like a practice…They do it in your classroom…I just filled in bubbles. (laughs)”

Because Matt felt that he would not need the ACT for his plans to enlist in the Navy, Matt chose not to take the ACT prep work seriously. Yet, as mentioned above, Matt’s plans to enlist in the Navy had not materialized and Matt ended up enrolling in the local community-college instead. Other students in this group though, who did plan to enter college, indicated that they too did not take advantage of the ACT prep work offered through the school. Katie stated, “They gave us the online courses that you could do I just never did it. I should have though…I guess I was just too
lazy and didn't get on and do it. I wish I would have done it.” In regards to the ACT prep work that was assigned in class, several indicated that they did not put forth effort on the prep work because the assigned work did not count as a grade. Mackenzie, who was planning to attend a local four-year school, explained:

“Well, we have like we have like little worksheets but our teacher didn't care if we really got the right answer so none of us cared to do it. Well, besides to right like A, B, C, D down but that was it. As long as we had it filled out. (laughs)”

Even though completing practice problems could potentially increase her performance, Mackenzie, as well as others, indicated that if a teacher did not check the work or count the work as a grade, there was no real need to take the prep work seriously. Ironically, Mackenzie expressed frustration during her interview that her ACT score, a 21, was not high enough to compete for scholarships. What is most interesting about the students in this group was the perceived lack of need, when most did in fact need the resources. These students assumed that they would attend a local college and indicated that they had little knowledge of universities outside the region or the hierarchical nature of postsecondary institutions. It is likely that this limited view of what college opportunities were available resulted in the perception that the use of resources was unnecessary. This is consistent with the findings of McDonough (1997) who concluded that low-income and first-generation students consider a constrained set of colleges, were unable to identify the range of college options and further, were unable to decipher which type of college best suited their needs.

Unlike the first group of students, the second group of students was more likely to use the resources that were available. Some students in this group took advantage of the school resources when faculty members or school programs sought them out. For example, Damon explained how a field trip through Franklin High helped him obtain a full tuition scholarship:
“At Franklin, they did some field trip to [a four-year university east of Worthington]...The university paid for us to go down there and view the school so we went down there and we was supposed to fill out a scholarship for a minority scholarship and we also applied to UK. So I did that and I ended up getting full tuition after getting the scholarship so it helped me.”

Damon also explained how a push from Mrs. Wilson helped him land a second full tuition scholarship at a local four-year college:

“… we had another meeting with Mrs. Wilson with all the minority students that qualified for the Porter Scholarship at the local four-year university and like she made it a requirement...like if you didn't do it, she said she was gonna call your parents...She was telling us even if you have plans going to another school, still apply for it just in case you might end up staying here in this city. And I ended up applying for that and I got full tuition there also.”

Damon believed that his older sister missed out on opportunities such as these because Franklin High did more to encourage and facilitate college enrollment than the high school his sister had attended. Students also described taking advantage of the ACT prep work that Franklin High provided. Whereas the first group of students tended not to take the prep work seriously and described simply “bubbling in” answers to get finished, students in this second group took the in-class prep work more seriously. While Brandon admitted that he “didn’t really study for it,” he explained that he did do the ACT prep work provided at school:

“… at school they made us take the practice ACT so I did that and they had us get online and you know um, they have like practice tests online for it...I just did what the school had us do. I didn't do any on my time...it got me used to like time limits and things like that and what would be on it.”

Brandon benefitted from the ACT prep resources provided at the school by becoming familiar with the ACT format and material. Others in this second group were more proactive in their approach to ACT prep, doing additional work beyond what the school required. Ashley, for example, described doing the packets provided by the school to work on her writing, but also stated that she did practice problems on her own time “once or twice a week.” Ashley was able to increase her ACT score from a 16 to a 22 and attributed the increase to the prep work she had done. Another student, Kendra, described doing online practice work on her own time as well. Interestingly, Kendra was the only student who connected taking advanced courses to being
better prepared for the ACT. She explained that she saw a noticeable difference in her ACT performance after advancing from her college algebra course to her pre-calculus course:

“I was able to look at the math portion and be like ‘Hey I know what this is! I remember this from this year’...So definitely taking the extra step in my classes has helped me.”

While many students in this group felt that ACT prep work had helped them perform on the ACT, Kendra felt that signing up for higher-level courses was the major source of preparation for her. In addition to proactively preparing for the ACT, students also described using the college resource room. Thomas explained that to use the resource room, “You can just say you need to go to the guidance center and say you want to go look into colleges and you'll come down to the guidance center and they will have you sign in on the little clipboard on the front of the door.”

This was not required for any student, however, students in this group described occasionally using the resource room. Brandon explained how using the resource room had helped him with selecting a college:

“I came down here a couple times to look up stuff and use the books just to look for like what schools had what majors and then the price is in there...I got to see the majors and tuition fees and that kind of helped me narrow my picks down.”

For Brandon, seeking out information in the college resource room had helped him narrow down his choice of college. Other students described making college visits to help them narrow their choices. Damon explained that prior to receiving his full tuition scholarship, he was interested in a small four-year college where tuition is covered through federal grants. After describing his visit to the campus, he stated, “It was a good college but, not for me.” Franklin High did not require college visits, although they were encouraged by allotting students three excused absences to make visits. For Damon, visiting the campus helped him eliminate a school that he felt was not the right fit for him.
Aside from getting a feel for the campus, college visits can also give students a glimpse of what college life is like. Adam described visiting a four-year college in the western region of the state:

“I took a tour there like in September…Like they take you through the dorms and like a real college class…I didn't know what they were talking about but it was cool…”

Adam seemingly enjoyed the trip and liked the school’s atmosphere, however, financial constraints limited his ability to attend the school. He explained that he had “applied for like sixteen scholarships” but many were financial need-based and his family did not qualify for them. At the same time, his parents were unable to pay for his college out of pocket, so Adam ultimately settled on the local two-year college with plans of working for Postal Express and hopes of transferring to the local public four-year university after two years. Thus, while some students were more proactive than others in their approach to the college enrollment process, financial constraints were often still a major barrier and limited their college options.

College visits were not the only way students in this group sought out information on specific schools; they also described using teachers and administrators as sources for information. This is different from students in the first group, who often stated that they rarely, if ever, talked with their teachers or administrators about anything unrelated to their coursework. The students in this second group however, described casually discussing colleges, degree programs, and their plans for post-high school with their teachers, counselors, and other staff members. Laura told me that when she became interested in a specific college, she signed up to meet with Mrs. Wilson, who was able to tell her more about the school and also provide her with scholarship applications specifically for that school. Another student, Natalie, explained that later on in the day of her interview, she was attending orientation at the local community-college, which had been set up by Mr. Oliver after she had approached him with questions about what her
next steps should be after being admitted. Some students had more specific questions related to their plans for post-high school. Kenneth for example, knew that he was interested in music but was unsure of which schools had respected music programs. He described how he used his music teachers to assist him in his college selection:

“Um, starting this year I was just on the ball. I was ready to go to college the first day we came to school here. I just started asking around about music schools and there was a couple- Most of our instructors, or half of em’ are graduates of Morehead. So they’re gonna be like, ‘Yeah it really is a good school. What you heard about it is true’ [laughs]…I also started getting on the Morehead website. Um, just finding out information.”

Kenneth was able to use his connections to music instructors at Franklin High to learn about the music program at Morehead State University. Similarly, Natalie, who was interested in teaching, told me that she had heard one school in particular had a reputable teaching program. When asked who she had learned this information from, she explained:

“… one of my teachers, Mr. Gassman told me…He was pretty much going around and asking us what we wanted to do and he told me like the top three schools he thinks would be the best for that and everything. And I've heard that they've had a good teaching program from quite a few of my teachers. Not only him but he was I think the first one that told me that.”

The difference between the first group of students’ use (or lack thereof) of the school resources when compared with the second groups’ use, is notable. The students described here utilized the resources that the school required them to; but more importantly, the students in this second group were proactive by doing more than the school required and by seeking out additional information through the resource room, college visits, or using teachers in their school to answer pertinent questions.

One additional and surprising finding from this study was the connection between Franklin High, Postal Express, and two local colleges: a two-year college, and a four-year college. As briefly described earlier in this paper, Postal Express is an international shipping company, that will, in exchange for working nightshift, pay full tuition at either of these colleges.
Of the seventeen students in this study, seven planned to pay for their college by working at Postal Express; two of whom planned to attend the four-year university and five of whom planned to attend the two-year community-college. This is a noteworthy finding, as this group constitutes just over 40 percent of the sample. As a result, several questions emerged: 1) How did this connection come to exist? 2) How do students at Franklin High learn about the program? 3) What are the benefits and costs of the program to students? And 4) Why did more students in this study choose to attend the two-year college, rather than the four-year college, when Postal Express will pay full tuition at both? Since this study was not aimed specifically at answering these questions, data and analysis can provide only partial answers to these questions. Nonetheless, because this was such a unique, unexpected, and potentially important finding, I explore these questions in some detail below.

**Education-Industry Partnership**

The relationship between Postal Express, the local public four-year university, and the local two-year community and technical college, can be described as an “education-industry partnership.” The education-industry partnership is described by the Center for American Progress, a research and advocacy group, as striving to:

“provide alternate pathways to postsecondary credentials that have labor market value for individuals who are not on a traditional college track…Strong partnerships tend to develop around local and regional economic and workforce development needs and can take many different forms…Businesses, colleges, unions, public agencies, and community-based organizations come together in these partnerships to find solutions to jointly identified educational challenges and use combined resources to implement them” (Soares, 2010).

According to the advocacy group, community-colleges in particular can play the role of helping develop a skilled workforce in an effort to preserve US competitiveness in a global market. Soares (2010) describes the partnership between community-colleges and industries:

“A community-college and industry partnership is a collaboration between a community-college and an individual business, group of firms, chamber of commerce, industry association, or sector partnership with
the purpose of using the combined resources to create alternative education programs that are tightly linked to regional economic development and labor force needs for nontraditional students—both younger workforce entrants and older ones in need of skills and education upgrades.”

With its major hub in the city of Worthington, Postal Express established a relationship with two local colleges after identifying workforce development needs, which included the need for more part-time Next Day Air nightshift workers. To avoid losing Postal Express, this Mid South state developed a solution that included collaboration between the two-year community/technical college and the local public four-year university (Soares, 2010).

While this information explains the connection between Postal Express and the two local colleges, it remains unclear what effects these partnerships have on students as they enter postsecondary education. Moreover, it is also unclear how Franklin High became recruiting grounds for Postal Express. Several students described assemblies in which representatives from Postal Express would come and distribute information. Others mentioned that Postal Express participated at the school’s junior and senior night, which was also referred to as a “college fair” and a “college night.” Brian explained:

“…at one of the college fairs that we went to… I went and talked to a representative from Postal Express and she kind of told me everything. You know, they pay 100% of your tuition, um, they pay a certain percentage of your books and everything. You start out at a rate, and then um, like if you keep good grades… you get academic bonuses. Um, the KEES money that you earn through high school, when they get that they [Postal Express] send that check straight to you so that's straight money in your pocket. And you know… they're real flexible with you, you know, as far as school and everything so I went to a couple meetings on that and then it's kind of like you know, I don't wanna come out of college you know, in debt, and this is one of the greatest ways to do it.”

While this is appealing to many students at Franklin High, some students expressed concern about the demands of working night shift and attending college. Katie explained:

“Like Postal Express comes here a whole lot to offer us like ‘you can get money,’ ‘we'll pay for your school as long as you work here’ and stuff like that. I don't really want to work like that… I heard it's really hard. I have a couple of friends that do it now and they're like ‘It's awful!’ Like I don't even see em’ anymore because they're either working or doing school work. They hate it, so I was like ‘I'm not doing that.’ I'd rather have loans and be in debt for school.
In contrast to Brian’s perspective, Katie seems concerned about the hours and demands of working nightshift and attending college. Katie would also “rather have loans and be in debt,” whereas Brian is hoping to avoid student loan debt altogether by working for Postal Express. Other students like Adam, expressed frustration and unhappiness with having to work nightshift at Postal Express in order to pay for college: “Everyone's saying like, ‘It's tough. You're gonna hate it.’ But I'm like ‘But I have to do it. Like what else am I gonna do?’” This excerpt highlights the predicament that students find themselves in when they are unable to finance their education using scholarships or federal student aid. Soares (2010) implies that education-industry partnerships are beneficial to students, however, the author fails to consider any potential harmful effects the partnerships may have on students achievement and persistence in college. Moreover, Soares (2010) also implies that these partnerships are especially beneficial to students who are not on the “traditional college track,” however, many students from this study who intended to work for Postal Express while attending the local community-college indicated that they had intentions to advance to a four-year institution down the road in order to pursue a bachelor’s and master’s degree (one even planned to pursue a degree in pharmacy). Additionally, none of the students in this study expressed a desire for technical training as their reason for attending the local community-college. Instead, every student who planned to attend the community-college and work for Postal Express described their main reason for joining the program as a way to finance their education. In addition to the perception that Postal Express was a solution to the problem of being unable to afford college, Keisha, who planned to go to work at Postal Express and attend the local community-college told suggested an additional reason for joining the program:

“Uh yeah, my best friend, she's going to work at Postal Express and uh, you know go to the community-college also...A lot of people around here is gonna work at Postal Express cause when somebody's tellin you they gon' pay for your college, it's like "yeah I wanna do it" and most the people here's gonna do
Based on Keisha’s account, it seems that some students are interested in attending the community-college even when there is also the option of attending other four year universities. Considering the social background of the student population at Franklin High, it is likely that many students are unsure of what to expect in college and therefore, are more comfortable attending the community-college first to “see if they like college” as Keisha stated. For students who are more concerned with the costs of college, it is possible that enrolling at the community-college is a more viable option considering that one is not required to pay room and board, which many four-year universities require of freshmen students. Additionally, some students indicated that they planned to attend the community-college to get their “basics” done, meaning their general education requirements. Laura, for example, told me:

“I change my mind a lot about stuff so I’d feel safer if I got to [the local community-college] and if I change my mind, I don’t lose any money you know? I’m fine.”

Similar to Laura, several students who planned to attend the community-college voiced concerns that they were unsure of what degree they wanted to pursue and felt that the community-college was a good place to start by taking all of their general education requirement courses.

These student interviews give some insight into how the “education-industry partnership” can play a role in students’ college choice, as well as how students experience the program. However it is clear that this topic needs further exploration. Future research on this topic might address: How common is this type of partnership? What effect do education-industry partnerships have on students’ college choice? What effect do these partnerships have on students’ achievement? What role strain do students experience as nightshift workers and full-time college students?
Discussion

This study aimed to add to the understanding of the role that parents and schools play in the college enrollment process, specifically by approaching this topic from the perspective of high school seniors. The students in this study indicated that parents shape college enrollment decisions through expectations for college attendance, conversations about college in the home, and parents’ aligned action. Perceptions of parental involvement varied and two types of students emerged: self-directed and collaborators. Self-directed students perceived their parents as having lower educational expectations, less knowledge about college and the enrollment process, lower aligned action, and minimal financial support. Conversely, collaborators perceived parents as having high educational expectations, greater knowledge of the enrollment process, greater aligned action, and being capable of providing at least some financial support for college. Most of the time students’ perceptions of their parents’ involvement consistently fell within either the category of self-directed, or the category of collaborative. However, in a few instances, a student may have perceived her parent(s) as being collaborative under one theme (i.e. parents’ expectations for educational attainment) but conversely, may have described herself as being more self-directed under another theme (i.e. when discussing parents’ knowledge of the college enrollment process). For example, Ashley described her mother as having expectations that she would attend college and laughed when describing her mother’s overzealous participation at the college fair. At the same time though, Ashley described both her mother and father as having little knowledge related to the college enrollment process, causing her to feel that the college-choice and enrollment process is “nothing they can help with.” She stated: “Sometimes I’ve felt a little alone on this whole decision process and I guess I just needed to make my mind up but it's nothing they can help with I guess.” While most students in this sample fit neatly into either category of self-directed or collaborative, the experience of a few students like Ashley highlights
that students from this social background may feel supported by parents in some ways, but simultaneously unguided and lost in others.

Social class differences among students’ perceptions of their parents’ involvement emerged, but only for certain themes. It is possible that other variables related to income might influence parents’ involvement. For example, studies have found that family structure and sibship size matter for parents’ involvement (Sui-Chu and Willms 1996; Downey, 1995). Additionally, students’ prior achievement might also matter for parents’ involvement. Low-achieving self-directed students for example, who tended to be lower-income, described their parents as having lax attitudes about grades and providing little supervision of their schoolwork. This is potentially confounded by the fact that these parents may be less involved as the result of their students’ low achievement. However, it is clear that social class differences mattered in several themes. In regards to expectations for education, self-directed students who perceived their parents as having lower expectations, tended to be lower-income. Collaborators, who described parents as having greater aligned action, tended to be higher-income. When it came to financing higher education, collaborators, who perceived their parents as being capable of contributing, tended to be higher-income. At the same time though, there were students who were higher-income, but perceived their parents as being incapable of contributing financially. This highlights the ever-increasing costs associated with postsecondary education and the financial strain that exists, even for lower-middle and middle class families.

In other themes, class differences were less clear. Specifically, there was no clear indication that lower-income students perceived their parents as having more or less college-related knowledge than did their higher-income peers. Both income groups reported having parents who gave vague college-related advice, simply followed the student’s lead, or
encouraged the two-year college when the students GPA and ACT scores indicated that the two-year college might not match their academic abilities. At the same time that class distinctions were blurred in these areas, there appeared to be an association between class and type of college selected. Of the eight students who qualified for free or reduced lunch, one enlisted in the military, five enrolled in two-year colleges, and two enrolled in four-year universities. Of the nine students who did not qualify for free lunch, four enrolled in the two-year college and five enrolled in four-year universities.

The second half of this paper sought to examine the role of the school in student’s college related decisions. Returning to Hill’s (2008) work, which identified three school strategies for promoting college enrollment: traditional, clearinghouse, and brokering, it is important to consider the type of strategy used by Franklin High. The three types of school strategies were developed based on the type of college-related resources offered and the degree to which schools initiate outreach to students and their families to ensure access to those resources. Based on the account of two administrators and 17 students, whom all described an array of available resources and an organized commitment to reaching out to parents and students, Franklin High can be categorized as utilizing a brokering strategy. Interestingly, interviews with students revealed that many students did not make use of the resources offered through the school, although nearly one-hundred percent (16/17) of the students considered themselves college bound. This is an interesting finding in consideration of the idea that schools can make a difference for students’ college-going outcomes by making resources available. However, at the same time that many students did not utilize the resources, there were some students who felt the resources provided through the school had a major impact on their college enrollment decisions. This suggests that while schools may not make a difference for all students, there are students
who benefit. More importantly, the students who described benefitting the most tended to be lower-income students, who lacked capital in the home. This affirms that schools can make a difference, particularly for racial and lower-income minorities.

Another interesting finding related to students’ use of the school resources was the group of students who felt that they did not need the resources, considering that they had already made post-graduation plans. Among these students, very few applied to schools outside of the state or made mention of knowing about schools outside of the area. These findings suggest that students’ scope of what colleges are available to them is limited to what they have been exposed to—and in this case, tended to include community-colleges and in-state four-year colleges. While some high schools encourage students to apply to reach (long shot), mid-level (match), and assured (safety) universities, it appears that the students at Franklin High are not receiving this message from the school or in the home, even in light of all the resources offered at the school. It is also plausible however, that students may receive this message, but dismiss it, as it seems unrelated to their goals and expectations for their educational future. At the same time, the resources and services offered at the school were vital for some. This is highlighted by the experience of Damon, a low income, African American male, from a single parent family, who relied solely on the school for access to information, applications, scholarships, and college visits, and was able to obtain two full-tuition scholarships to two separate four-year universities. The findings suggest that even when the majority of students in this study indicated that they did not utilize school resources, there were still those few who benefitted greatly.

The final section of this paper, which elaborated on students’ decision to work at Postal Express, reveals that for both lower- and middle-income students in this study, college choice is constrained by family finances and is largely dependent on affordability. Working at Postal
Express in exchange for full tuition meant choosing between the local community-college and the local four-year college where tuition expenses would be covered. This finding was surprising and opened the door to several additional questions regarding the impact of education-industry partnerships, which future research should address.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Finally, I must identify some limitations to this study. First, as with most qualitative work, the small sample size in this study made drawing broad conclusions and generalizing difficult. In several instances throughout the paper, it seemed that having a larger sample size would have allowed for clearer and more defined results. Specifically, class distinctions in some areas were blurred due to outliers in the data in which one or two lower-income students showed up in a category that contained mostly higher-income students, and vice versa. It is also possible that having a more specific measure of SES (as opposed to using the free or reduced lunch indicator) would have helped make class distinctions more clear. Secondly, conducting a comparative study by including more than one school would have strengthened the school-related findings by shedding light on how students interact with different college-promoting strategies. Finally, the number of students in this study that intended to work for Postal Express in exchange for college tuition may have been higher than the student-body average, as one of the recruitment sights included a student assembly specifically for those students who were interested in co-oping at Postal Express during their senior year of high school. At the same time though, including these students in this study resulted in richer findings and revealed an important direction for future research. It is important for education scholars to investigate the frequency and effects of education-industry partnerships on students’ college choice. Further, once these students begin taking college courses, what is the impact of their employment (in this
case, nightshift) on their achievement? While the local economy may benefit, it is important to further examine both the up and downside of students’ participation in these education-industry partnerships.
REFERENCES


Pascarella, Ernest T., Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, & Patrick T. Terenzini.


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Economic Disadvantage (n=17)

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<tr>
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*Mean Age 17.76 yrs
### Table 2. Franklin High Descriptive Statistics (2010-2011)

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Source: Data Management, Planning, and Program Evaluation Division (2010-2011)