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UNDERMATCHING: THE ROLE OF FAMILIAL INVOLVEMENT IN COLLEGE-
CHOICE AMONG WORKING-CLASS STUDENTS

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Kelley L. Martin

College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities
Student Affairs Administration and Leadership in Higher Ed.

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UNDERMATCHING: THE ROLE OF FAMILIAL INVOLVEMENT IN COLLEGE
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By Kelley L. Martin

We recommend acceptance of this dissertation in partial fulfillment of the candidate's requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Student Affairs Administration and Leadership.

The candidate has completed the oral defense of the dissertation.

_____ March 3, 2020

Tori Svoboda, Ed.D. Date

Dissertation Committee Chairperson

_____ March 3, 2020

Emily Allen, Ed.D. Date

Dissertation Committee Member

_____ March 3, 2020

Adele Lozano, Ph.D. Date

Dissertation Committee Member

Dissertation accepted

Meredith Thomsen, Ph.D. Date

Director of Graduate Studies

ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand how working-class students and their families make decisions regarding institutional choice specifically around institutional selectivity. By understanding the college-choice process of low-income working-class students, institutions of higher education and practitioners will gain a better understanding of how to recruit and retain high achieving low-income working-class students. Increased enrollment of low-income working-class students at more selective institutions not only assists the college or university in diversifying their student body, but evidence suggests low-income working-class students have better educational outcomes when attending an institution well matched to their level of academic achievement.

Through the use of semi-structured interviews, 10 college students and the family member most influential in the student's college-going decisions were interviewed. There was a total of 19 participants interviewed. Each student were enrolled in their first year at an institution of higher education.

The results of the study showed the highly impactful role that high school counselors played in helping students determine which institution to attend. In addition, the results explain how low-income working-class families developed a college-going consciousness in their household. The results explored how families supported and found value in attending an institution of higher education.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I explain the problem of undermatching among low-income working-class students with institutions of higher education, outline the research purpose and research questions, and provide the conceptual framework used to contextualize this study. I briefly explain the research design and methodology, provide definitions that help us frame the research, and provide my positionality statement. I conclude the chapter by identifying the significance of the problem and provide a chapter summary.

Statement of Problem

Americans believe in upward mobility and typically consider education the key to mobility. In the contemporary era, it is a college degree or, increasingly a graduate school degree that best promotes upward mobility. And yet, we are stagnant if not declining college enrollment, persistence, and graduating figures of students from the lowest-income families. (Hurst, 2009, p. 258)

If, in fact, Americans are committed to the use of higher education as a key to social mobility, then it is important for Americans to understand the ways institutions of higher education are not attracting nor graduating students from low-income families. Students from high-income families tend to attend institutions of higher education with graduation rates that exceed 80%, while students from low-income families typically attend institutions with a 50% or lower graduation rate (Pekow, 2017). These statistics

indicate that low-income students are facing an uphill challenge based on the graduation rates at the institutions they attend.

Low-income students often forgo the college-going process; additionally, when low-income students do attend institutions of higher education, they are more likely to drop out or progress at a slower rate than their middle-class peers (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Even when a low-income working-class student manages to navigate the college-going process, they do not make degree progress nor graduate at the same rate as their peers from higher socioeconomic status groups (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Research regarding the experiences of low-income students at institutions of higher education indicates that they spend more time engaged in earning money and working than participating in co-curricular opportunities (Martin, 2015). In addition, the time spent working rather than engaging in campus-life can have negative consequences beyond graduation (Martin, 2015). However, there is an exception to these trends when working-class students enroll in more selective institutions (Hoxby & Avery, 2013).

Low-income working-class students who attend more selective colleges or universities experience improved academic outcomes (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Bowen, Chugos, and McPherson (2011) found graduation rates for all students, regardless of income, increases as the level of institutional selectivity increases. Furthermore, graduation rates of low-income students increased at a higher rate than their middle-class peers at more selective institutions of higher education (Bowen et al., 2011). Hoxby and Avery (2013) found “low-income students that attend selective institutions progress and graduate at the same rate as their high-income peers with similar grades and test scores” (p. 2). This finding is important because the study indicates when students, regardless of

income level or class, enter an institution of higher education with similar assessment scores, the more selective institutions achieve more equitable outcomes between low-income working-class students and their middle- and upper-class peers.

Working-class students also leave selective four-year institutions of higher education with less debt than they might accrue from a two-year institution (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Despite the findings low-income working-class students attending more selective institutions of higher education accrue less debt and achieve better academic outcomes, current enrollment trends do not align with the research. Low-income working-class students still undermatch (or attend an institution less selective than they are eligible to attend) at a rate exceeding 60% (Bowen et al., 2011).

Lastly, research indicates families play a significant role in the college-going decisions of low-income working-class students (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Families of working-class students impact the decisions their students make regarding whether to attend an institution of higher education, and at times which institution the student will attend (Auerbach, 2007; Brooks, 2003; Rondini, 2018). Research suggests social class impacts the ways students interpret the higher education market and families do influence the decisions young people make surrounding college choice (Auerbach, 2007; Brooks, 2003; Pugsley, 1998). As one example, in a longitudinal qualitative case study, Brooks (2003) found parental figures had a strong influence in shaping their students' attitudes and perceptions regarding higher education. Additionally, Brooks confirmed little deviation between the way the student articulated the value of higher education and the student's description of their parent's views.

Rondini (2018) conducted another qualitative study on family influences for low-income students, hoping to understand the role family played in positive outcomes of low-income first-generation students. Rondini interviewed both students and parents for this study, and the data suggested both students and family members believed education was a means for upward mobility. The students in the study reported that they not only felt a personal sense of responsibility to attend college, but they felt an obligation to their families to earn a college-degree (Rondini, 2018). The lived experiences of low-income families proved to be a catalyst for motivating their children to do well academically and pursue a college education. The study did not explore if the families had opinions regarding institutional selectivity or the type of institution their student should attend but added to the literature regarding the ways low-income families contribute to successful educational outcomes even in the absence of fiscal and material resources.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation tracked high-performing low-income students for twenty-years as they moved through the educational process. Class disparity was present already in first grade, when low-income students represent only 28% of the of the top academic quartile while 72% of first graders in the top academic quartile come from higher income families (Wyner, Bridgeland, & Diulio, 2007). Those high-income students not in the top academic quartile in first grade were two times more likely to enter the top academic quartile than their low-income peers by 12th grade (Wyner et al., 2007). I would suggest that this disparity is not about intellect but reflects a lack of opportunity and the use of social capital to maintain class structure through the educational system.

The phenomena of undermatching, and a pattern of low-income students achieving poorer academic outcomes in higher education, should not be surprising. As

early as 1979, Anyon published a study that shed light on the ways in which the educational system perpetuates class divides. From subtleties like the types of homework assigned to more obvious differences such as the deployment of classroom management strategies, the classroom serves as a platform for the perpetuation of class (Anyon, 2017). And yet, the research on undermatching is surprisingly slim.

When research does explore undermatching and issues of class, the students and families are often seen through a deficit lens. Some of the research goes so far as to suggest that the close ties first-generation students have with their families actually keep the students from enrolling in institutions of higher education (Kiyama, Harper, & Ramos, 2018). Examples of using a deficit lens is contained in statements like: (a) If only the parents had gone to college and could better help their student navigate the enrollment process; (b) If only low-income families understood the process of tuition discounting, they wouldn't be as concerned with cost and; (c) If only low-income working-class students understood their chance of graduating increases, they would apply to more selective schools. The goal of this research was to understand the relationship between a families' influence and the decisions low-income working-class students made surrounding matching to the specific institution they attend.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the ways in which low-income working-class families in the Northeast influence the college-going decisions of their student, particularly regarding the level of institutional selectivity the student chooses. This study was focused on understanding the way that familial perceptions shape and influence the decisions and value low-income students place on institutional

selectivity. This research adds to the growing body of literature addressing undermatching with the goal of improved outcomes in the areas of persistence and graduation rates among working-class students.

Research Questions and Method Overview

The following questions will guide this study:

1. What role do low-income working-class families play in determining which institution of higher education their student will attend?
2. How, if at all, do low-income working-class families help their student understand the level of selectivity best matched to their student?
3. How do low-income working-class families make meaning of the value of higher education, particularly selectivity?
4. How do low-income working-class families understand and communicate the benefits of higher education to their student?

I explored the college-decision making process of ten students enrolled at an institution of higher education categorized as less-competitive (Author, 2019). The study participants entered the institution with high school assessment scores qualifying them for admission to a more selective institution located within the same geographic area. Each of the ten students were in their first year of undergraduate education and were enrolled as full-time students in a liberal arts program. Participants were identified with the help of the study site's institutional research office. Once potential participants were identified, they were contacted regarding their willingness to participate. An email was sent to all students matching the sample criteria from the department of institutional

research as well as the informed consent form. Students interested in participating were asked to send their name and contact information to the researcher for follow-up.

Those who were willing to participate were invited to semi-structured interviews and were asked to complete additional information about their demographic background at the close of the interview. Prior to their interview, the student was asked to identify the family member that influenced, positively or negatively, their decision to attend an institution of higher education. Nine of the family members were contacted and interviewed. The family members provided additional information regarding the relationship between value and selectivity, and how the family member perceived their role in the college-decision process.

Using a phenomenological approach, this study aimed to unpack the complexities of family, class, and institutional selectivity when considering the college-choice process. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. Both students and families were interviewed for this study, and much attention was paid to the students' perceptions and interpretations of their families' involvement, influences and attitudes regarding college-choice. The interviews were transcribed and coded, and the transcriptions and themes were presented to the study participants in member checks to ensure data reliability.

This study was grounded in Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, and attention was paid to the ways in which the educational system engages and at times repels low-income working-class students. By gaining a better understanding of the complexities of class, the study aims to understand the ways in which working-class students make college-going decisions based on their families' involvement and

influence. Additional conceptual theories and empirical research about social class, educational systems, and family involvement are explored in Chapter II.

When researching issues of income and class, shared definitions are important – in part because so few shared definitions exist in the literature reviewed in Chapter II. Below, I provide definitions related to social class, selectivity and undermatching, and familial involvement to clarify how I will use the terms in this proposed study. In the next section of this chapter, I outline the way I have defined some terms central to this study, and I acknowledge some initial assumptions I have made regarding the study.

Definitions and Assumptions

To better assist the reader in understanding how I operationalized various terms, below I provide definitions of key terms or concepts used throughout this study. The following definitions represent the ways in which I will use specific terms for the purpose of this study.

- *Working-Class* is a complicated term to understand and is often interchanged with the term low socio-economic status. Class and economic status are separable terms and need to be considered as such. Class is a social construct which exceeds a measurement of fiscal assets and earnings belonging to an individual. Rather, working-class refers to the social and cultural norms that reflect those individuals having a limited amount of control and autonomy regarding their work function. In many ways, class defines the lens in which we view our societal role and impacts our social interests, clothing, and perspectives. Although the research often blends the terms income, socioeconomic status, and class, they are distinctly different terms. The use of low-income and working-

class as interchangeable terms means I explored literature regarding both low-income and working-class students.

- *Low-Income* is a term referring to the earnings and assets belonging to an individual. For the purpose of this research income was not being used as a quartile measurement, but rather for this study, low-income refers to those students receiving institutional need-based aid, or those eligible to receive Pell Grants (a federal program to support low-income students).
- *Institutional Selectivity* refers to the admissions requirements at a specific institution of higher education and considers the ratio between applications and admitted students. More selective institutions require higher grade point averages and standardized test scores than non-selective institutions. Consequently, highly selective institutions enroll a lower percentage of applicants than institutions categorized as non-selective. Barron's Profile of American Colleges (2019) was used to classify the institutions referenced in this study. The study site was classified as less-competitive while the neighboring institution's selectivity was categorized as most-competitive (Barron's, 2019).
- *Matching* at an institution of higher education means a student's assessment scores and capabilities are a match to the institution's admission requirements. Students that undermatch are those with assessment scores exceeding the admissions requirements of the institution they are attending.
- *Familial Involvement* describes the way families, parents, or mentors engage with the student in their educational experiences. Involvement can include both supporting and discouraging education pursuits and is often measured through the

student's perceptions and interpretations of those interactions. The term familial involvement, rather than parental involvement, will be used to honor the varying ways in which families interact with their students and interact with their communities. The shift away from the term "parents" allows for a more culturally inclusive definition and rejects the notion that most students are raised in dual parent households. In addition, involvement will be explored through the ways in which families engage with their students on topics of education but will not be measured through the educational lens of how often a family member attends school events, volunteers, or provides resources for the school. For the sake of this research, the term involvement is defined widely in scope to incorporate those normalized involvement measures such as volunteering at schools, in addition to involvement measures that are more culturally relevant, such as seeking out college-going information from a church pastor.

During the conceptualization of this study I made some general assumptions.

First, I assumed the students in the sample had the liberty to make college-going decisions based on the educational experiences offered by local institutions. Second, I assumed the more selective institution of higher education would provide educational and programmatic offerings that were of interest to the student. I only interviewed participants whose major was available at both the more and less selective institution, so that major would be less likely to be a reason for choosing one institution over another.

Researcher Positionality

One of the significant differences between quantitative and qualitative research is the role the researcher plays in the collection and interpretation of data. When reviewing

a qualitative study, readers should strive to understand the lens through which the researcher gathered and made meaning of the data. I grew up in a low-income working-class family, and although both of my parents had a college degree, I very much viewed their capabilities as workers and parents from a deficit lens. My mother and father were committed parents, but they were not as involved in my education as my peers' parents. Unlike many other parents, mine were not able to volunteer in the schools nor did they attend after-school athletic events because they were working. I grew up having involved parents, but from my perspective they never appeared to be involved or show up in the same capacity as the other parents, or those who were not working-class.

As previously stated, this study was conducted at a mid-sized private institution on the East Coast. As someone who grew up in Idaho and lived most of my adult life in the Midwest, I needed to be cognizant there may be some regional nuances to the ways in which families interact and engage in the educational system. Although this study does not necessarily seek to understand the ways in which race and gender impact the college choice decision, I do need to acknowledge the data was interpreted through the lens of a white female.

While conducting this research I was parenting two daughters, and I was personally trying to make meaning of the way in which the current educational system perpetuates the opportunity gap and reinforces social and class-based inequities. My daughters spent their primary educational years attending an underfunded urban public school, and in fact they would border cross each day when left their middle-class home and climbed on to the school bus. My daughters experienced first-hand what Anyon (2017) explored in her 1979 study titled "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of

Work.” Anyon explored the classroom environments of five schools in New Jersey. Two of the schools were identified as *working-class*, one school was *middle-class*, the fourth school was labeled the *affluent professional school*, and the fifth school was the *executive elite school*. Although teaching, learning, and education took place in all five schools, it looked very different (Anyon, 2017). The education my daughters experienced in their primary years very much resembled the working-class schools that Anyon studied. Teachers held positions of power without collaboration much like a line lead in a factory, my daughters were asked to complete repetitive dittos rather than develop creative group projects that would help build their problem-solving skills, and their education was primarily focused on “right vs. wrong” rather than understanding why. Then they came home to parents that expected them to understand the “why.” My daughters attended an underfunded urban school, and their education was preparing them for a type of work that was pre-determined based on the socioeconomic classification of the school, a means of maintaining social stratification. I always thought that education was the great equalizer, but my experiences as a parent have taught me something very different.

During the data collection for this study, I was enrolled in a doctoral program while working at a mid-sized private institution of higher education located on the East Coast. I have worked in the field of Student Affairs for over ten years in various capacities. I chose to work at small private open enrollment institutions which attract a high percentage of low-income students. Throughout my career, I have participated in the development and implementation of various support programs such as orientation, first-year experience programs, and bounce back (a required program for students on

academic probation). Due to a lack of institutional resources, these programs were often underfunded and lacked institutional support. The institutions were unable to provide a coordinated and systemic approach to supporting students. The fact that low-income students had poor educational outcomes at these institutions, not providing adequate resources and support programs, made me question why the students chose the institution to begin with.

I began to question why students would choose to attend that specific institution when there were far more selective institutions in the area that were able to provide a more comprehensive approach to educating students. These more selective institutions would have most likely provided better educational outcomes. In Chapter III, I further explore the approaches taken to minimize my personal bias while collecting and analyzing the data.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study was underpinned by the continual increase in the opportunity gap between the working-class and middle-class. Despite the fact that education is seen as a means to achieve equity, that is not the lived reality due to low graduation college rates among low-income working-class students. Low-income working-class students do not attend nor graduate from institutions of higher education at the same rate as their middle-class peers, and this is in part due to the types of institutions they attend. The research indicates if a working-class student attends a more selective institution of higher education, their educational outcomes improve.

Understanding the ways low-income working-class families impact the college-going decisions of their student will help clarify the institutional and systemic reasons

low-income students under-match at a higher rate than their middle-class peers. This data may help administrators shape enrollment and recruitment processes in a way that improves matching and ultimately the educational success of low-income working-class students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has identified that low-income working-class students undermatch at a higher rate than their middle-class peers, and the phenomena of undermatching is directly correlated with poor academic outcomes. Using a phenomenological method, I explored the ways familial involvement influenced the decisions a student made regarding institutional selectivity. If we are better able to understand the ways students and families make decisions surrounding institutional choice, more care may be given to creating systems that increase the likelihood of matching.

The next chapter will explore the current literature surrounding the relationship between class and education, as well as the ways in which working-class students and families make decisions regarding whether to attend an institution of higher education and if so, what type of institution to attend. The literature review will begin by exploring Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and the ways the theory applies to the educational system. Then research regarding how students and families make college-going decisions will be discussed. The chapter concludes by examining family dynamics regarding involvement and adjustment as well as the ways working-class students make meaning of a college education.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A great deal of research exists regarding the ways that class impacts the success of low-income working-class students at institutions of higher education (Bowen et al., 2011; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Hurst, 2009; Martin, 2015). In addition, research exists surrounding the ways that families influence college-going decisions, and how students make-meaning of the value of a college education (Auerbach, 2007; Cox, 2016; Hines et al., 2014; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hurst, 2010; Yosso, 2005). This literature review begins by reviewing Bourdieu's Theory of Social Reproduction and the ways that social and cultural capital may perpetuate undermatching. Then attention will be paid to the ways that students make college-going decisions, first from a middle-class perspective and then through a broader and more culturally responsive lens. The literature review concludes with an exploration of how families and students from low-income working-class families develop strategies to navigate the educational landscape of higher education.

Theoretical Research

Much of this literature review will focus on the relationship between working-class students and families and the educational system. To answer the question of why working-class students undermatch, this literature review focuses on the theories which explain undermatching as a predictable outcome of educational systems designed to

replicate class inequalities. Theoretical research explores complexities surrounding familial involvement, class, the educational system, and college-going decisions.

To understand the ways working-class families border cross when navigating educational processes established through the middle-class lens, Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is reviewed. The theory of social reproduction explains why working-class students are less likely to attend selective institutions of higher education despite the research suggesting their educational outcomes are better when they attend a more selective institution (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). Some research suggests class is merely a reflection of socio-economic status and occupation; this review incorporates a more robust understanding of class that acknowledges the lived experiences of individuals (Freie, 2010). Freie's (2010) research was based in an understanding of class and the ways in which people interact with their environments. Freie (2010) stated, "Social class is lived and practiced and includes social and cultural understandings and identities that go beyond one's relationship to the economy, or one's job and income" (p. 231). Class is about relationships, and educational systems are one place where class is constructed and reinforced.

Theory of Social Reproduction

The theory of social reproduction sheds light on the nuances faced by working-class students and families as they make college-going decisions. Pierre Bourdieu, a Marxist sociologist, developed this theory, which asserts that ruling and intellectual classes maintain their power through social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973). By maintaining control over values and norms, the ruling and intellectual classes de-legitimize cultures and ideas deviating from dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1973). In

addition, dominant groups must ensure those not in the dominant culture are refused access to the cultural knowledge of the dominate group (Bourdieu, 1973). The process of withholding cultural knowledge from those not in the dominant group serves to perpetuate a social hierarchy and may impact the college-going decisions of working-class students and families.

Habitus. An important component of this theory is the concept of habitus, which Bourdieu (1977) defines as the physical demonstration of cultural capital. Habitus is socially constructed and contains culturally/socially developed predispositions (Bourdieu, 1977). In simple form, habitus refers to ways of knowing and acting. For example, the type of music or art one appreciates is part of one's habitus, as it was socially constructed based on exposure and social value.

In addition, habitus includes those behaviors and strategies making someone successful in situations matching their habitus. In other words, habitus is what we know and have learned from lived experience, and one might consider habitus to be social etiquette. When a person is in a situation matching their lived experiences, habitus informs the behaviors and tendencies necessary to be successful. When one's personal habitus does not match the habitus of a specific field, for example if a concert pianist entered a honky tonk bar or a manual laborer walked into a fine dining establishment in their work clothes, the individual can be made to experience "symbolic violence" as their environment will tell them that their existing habitus is wrong or holds no value in this new setting. This concept of habitus plays into the theory of social reproduction as it informs the way people know what they know and how they behave in response to their knowledge.

Cultural capital. Winkle-Wagner (2010) describes cultural capital through the metaphor of a card game. As with a card game you are often dealt cards by no choosing of your own (familial structure/status), often with a card game you are able to interact and exchange cards (education), but in the end the specific card game dictates which cards are important and which cards hold value. However, if the game changes, the value of the cards change as well. In the case of the educational system, the cultural capital held by working-class families has less value in most institutions of higher education than the cultural capital held by middle-class or upper-class families. Perhaps that is even more pronounced at more selective institutions, where the habitus or norms of the institution are more likely to match the more upper-class students who attend (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

Bourdieu (1986) identified four different types of capital which dominant groups can activate to maintain privilege: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Regarding class, Bourdieu (1986) suggested cultural capital is the most important influence because it can be used in connection with economic capital to reinforce a social hierarchy. In other words, Bourdieu suggested that maintaining the social constructs of class is made easier when cultural capital and economic capital are combined. One example of using cultural capital and economic capital in partnership is the financial aid process. A working-class family might not have the cultural capital to navigate the financial aid process at an institution of higher education nor do they have the economic capital to circumvent the financial aid process.

Working-class students highly overestimate the cost of attending an institution of higher education (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Therefore, working-class students are

limiting their educational opportunities based on their cultural capital, and specifically a lack of awareness of financial assistance and the actual cost of attendance (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Students are unfamiliar with the process of tuition discounting, and they may determine they are unable to attend a specific institution based solely on the published cost (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). This is an example of a “lack of knowing” among working-class students who may not have access to tuition rates and information surrounding financial aid and discount rates.

Applying Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction, Oldfield (2007) explained even high-achieving working-class students with the academic ability to attend a highly selective school rarely have the social and cultural capital to navigate through the admissions process. Complex admissions processes are an example of the ways selective institutions of higher education operate as mechanism for reproducing generational wealth for upper-class families who have the social and cultural capital to navigate the college-going process (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Working-class students and families may not always have access to the social, cultural, and symbolic capital valued by institutions of higher education. These forms of social capital are embedded in the process of navigating the college-going process at a selective four-year institution of higher education. Working-class families do not hold the cultural capital valued by the educational system. Based on the theory of social reproduction, one could also extrapolate that working-class-families might not have the capital to predict the negative consequences resulting from undermatching, such as lower graduation rates.

After gaining a better understanding of Bourdieu’s theory of reproduction, and the systemic reasons working-class students navigate the college-going decision differently

from their middle-class peers, I will explore the college choice theories. The college choice model may shed light on the ways working-class students make decisions about which colleges to apply to, and ultimately which institution to attend.

Traditional College Choice Model

Much research has been dedicated to the way in which students make the decision to attend an institution of higher education. One simplistic model for explaining how students make decisions about whether to attend college and which college to attend is the college choice model advanced by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Their college choice model describes a three-phase process in which students make decisions regarding their desire to attend an institution of higher education. The first phase is the predisposition phase, when the student is contemplating their college-going decision. The student may even begin to navigate the initial steps in the application process (Cox, 2016). The second phase of the college choice model is when students begin to “search” for institutions of higher education and construct a list of those colleges and universities that they are most likely to submit applications (Cox, 2016). The third and final step comes in the form of “choice.” The student evaluates those institutions to which they have been admitted and makes decisions regarding their final institution of choice (Cox, 2016). Cox (2016) suggested during the third phase of the choice model, students make choices regarding the institutional type and the best institutional fit for the student.

The traditional college choice model acknowledges the intricate experiences and interactions that occur in each phase. One of the primary sets of interactions is the role families play in each of these phases. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggested parent involvement is a combination of parental encouragement and support. Parental

involvement and encouragement happen in specific phases. For example, parental encouragement occurs in the first phase as parents initiate conversations regarding attending college.

In their work to understand parental involvement in the college planning of African American families, Hines et al. (2014) identified the role of parent involvement in each phase of the college choice model. Parental support became more evident in the second and third phase, as parents saved money for their student's education, prepared for standardized tests, and went on college visits (Hines et al., 2014). Hines et al. (2014) stated, "Parental involvement is a more powerful influence than parents' educational level and student academic achievement. Importantly, this conclusion holds true across a range of families: all race/ethnicities, all socioeconomic groups, advantaged and disadvantaged" (p. 250). Families have a significant influence on their students' decision-making which impacts college-going decisions differently.

Alternative approaches to college choice. Although parental involvement is the most powerful influence on college-going behavior, might the college choice model be too simplistic and narrow in scope? For working-class families that are unable to contribute to their student's educational expenses or participate in college tours, the college choice model does not necessarily fit (Cox, 2016). Cox (2016) suggested traditional college choice models are designed to explain the way advantaged students move through the college-going experience and these models place a significant amount of value on choice. Focusing on choice, without addressing barriers to access, perpetuates the notion working-class students are choosing not to attend institutions of

higher education rather than unpacking the systemic reasons the gap of degree attainment between low-income students and high-income students continues to widen (Cox, 2016).

Moving away from the initial renditions of the college choice model, as suggested by Tierney and Venegas (2009), allows for the consideration of a cultural-ecological model when considering college-going decisions.

As a corrective to the rational choice theory embedded in the college choice model, Tierney and Venegas (2009) have recommended researchers apply a cultural-ecological model, which would enable a more full-bodied understanding of students' lives and how student experience the non-linearity of postsecondary planning. Applying this approach involves developing a detailed understanding of the environments in which students live and interact (including educational, familial, and community); exploring the broader contexts that shape these environments; and investigating students' college-related decisions as they go about their lives within these environments. (Cox, 2016, p. 5)

Ultimately the use of a cultural-ecological model of college-going decisions allows for a clearer understanding of the experiences of low-income students regarding their college going decisions. This model challenges researchers to account for the lived experiences of students including their familial relationships and the way in which their environments impact their college-going decisions. Moving away from the college choice model allows us to understand the way in which working-class students make their decisions regarding attending college and accepts this process is rarely linear in nature. The cultural-ecological model adds relevance to the fact that at different times in their high-school going years, working-class students may be limited in the choices they

have available (Cox, 2016). Working-class students experience changes in the choices available to them, which creates a college-going process that is somewhat fragmented and non-linear in nature based on their family circumstances.

After exploring the way working-class students make decisions regarding whether to attend an institution of higher education, the next section explores the concept of familial involvement strategies. Research has suggested working-class students are less individualistic in nature than their middle-class peers (Freie, 2010; Rondini, 2018). It is important for institutions of higher education and those involved in supporting students' college-going decisions understand the ways in which working-class families participate in their students' education and the implications that may have on whether a student attends college and which institution she might ultimately choose.

Family Involvement in Educational Settings

United States public school systems often measure familial involvement through a middle-class lens (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). While Holcomb-McCoy (2010) reported all students benefit from parental involvement, they found a positive correlation between admittance into a four-year institution of higher education and parental involvement for low-income and African American students. Families that attend teachers' conferences, student events, and volunteer at the schools are perceived by teachers and administrators as being involved in their student's education (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

This type of in-school participatory involvement may not be possible for working-class families. Auerbach (2007) explained the reason behind the discrepancy in involvement by stating the "unequal distribution of economic, human cultural, and social capital constrains parent's involvement options, inclinations, and relations with schools"

(p. 251). Although research has pointed to positive correlations between familial involvement and academic achievement, research involving home involvement has been less conclusive. Barnard (2004) found home involvement regarding household chores, reading, and outings produced no increase in academic attainment. Familial involvement that creates structured learning time and involvement focusing on education attainment has a positive correlation on academic achievement (Barnard, 2004).

Differing forms of familial involvement are important to consider. According to Lee and Bowen (2006), the ways in which families involve themselves in their students' education differs based on demographics. Working-class families with less formal education may be less likely to go to the school to ask questions and may be more likely to ask a family member for clarification. Schools tend to value certain types of involvement at certain times which puts working-class families at a disadvantage in being perceived as involved in their student's education (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Lee and Bowen (2006) explained that "some working-class families may be less able to visit the school for conferences, volunteering, or other activities as a result of inflexible work schedules, lack of childcare, or lack of transportation" (p. 198). Therefore, not attending a school activity is not indicative of familial involvement but may rather represent a scheduling conflict. These examples of a perceived lack of familial involvement represent the school system's perspective, but those same families may be engaged in educational involvement within the home. Educational involvement is occurring, it is just not following the middle-class constructs of familial educational involvement.

In their study of parental involvement based on class, Lee and Bowen (2006) found parental educational attainment did not influence the frequency of involvement

with homework help nor guidance with time management. In addition, their study found although European American families were more involved at the school level, they did less to manage their students free time at home as compared to both Hispanic/Latinos and African American parents (Lee & Bowen, 2006). In fact, the study by Lee and Bowen (2006) found students who participated in the (free and reduced) lunch program were far more likely to have parental restrictions on time spent watching television and playing, and more time was allocated for reading and homework help. This research study relied on applications for the free and reduced lunch program to determine socioeconomic status.

Yosso (2005) affirmed the importance of acknowledging resources utilized by working-class families to navigate the college-going process. Yosso (2005) highlighted the ways working-class families utilize relatives and kinship networks to navigate the college-going process. Rather than seeking out admissions counselors or secondary teachers, working-class families may rely on the experiences of a family member or friend who attended college. Auerbach (2007) suggested working-class families employ different strategies and stated, “In contrast to the economic, cultural, and social capital activated by higher SES parents, the parents in this study employed the resources of moral navigational, and emotional capital to attempt to help their children get to college” (p. 277). The way in which involvement is measured needs to be grounded in an understanding of social and cultural capital. As stated by Oldfield (2012), all demographic groups possess cultural and social capital, but it comes down to the way in which dominant culture values specific capital.

Culture is as much about ragtime as it is about Beethoven, as much about the brilliance of Big Richard or Little Richard. Classical music lovers who impulsively spurn bluegrass or blues are as self-limiting and petty as I was in rejecting the theater without ever having given it a chance. (Oldfield, 2012, p. 7)

Through this quote, Oldfield once again highlights Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction. It is essential for classical music lovers to spurn other types of music to protect the musical hierarchy.

Working-Class Families and Separation Strategies

Since working-class families are navigating the middle-class culture of education, they have adapted strategies for assigning roles of separation. Whereas middle-class families may identify with college attendance as a rite of passage, this is not necessarily the case for working-class families (Renn & Reason, 2013). Both first-generation and working-class families are navigating a landscape of border-crossing and assimilation when they enter the college-going process (Greenwald & Grant, 2009). According to Rondini (2018), this notion of border crossing may be exacerbated when a low-income student attends a highly selective or most competitive institution.

For underrepresented students and their families, attending an institution of higher education is not a rite of passage, but rather a step into the unknown. The family may seek ways of separating from their student. The student and family may identify the only way for assimilation into the academic culture is to cut ties with their communities (Renn and Reason, 2013). Roles of separation are the tactics or mechanisms chosen to address the changing roles between the family and student as the student transitions into a foreign environment.

Because separation is what is expected for the low-income working-class student to successfully transition into higher education, attention must be paid to how families manage this separation. Stierlin (1974) developed psychodynamic concepts regarding the way in which families develop roles to cope with separation. In their initial research, Stierlin (1974) attempted to better understand how schizophrenic adolescents and families adjusted to separation.

Building off Stierlin's work, London (1998) explored the separation strategies employed by first-generation college students and families. Although London's work was established to understand the ways in which first-generation families create separation roles, the work is applicable to working-class families (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). To gain a better understanding of the family dynamics involved in sending a first-generation student off to college, London (1998) provided an explanation of the roles family members assume. London suggested families use three primary role assignments to address this notion of separation: binding, delegating, and expelling.

In the binding role, families try to keep their students locked into the current family structure and may see enrollment in an institution of higher education as counterproductive to the family culture (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). Lucey, Melody, and Walkerdine (2003) explained the reason why some working-class families are in opposition to post-secondary education and may choose to bind their student into the family structure. Social mobility requires low-income working-class students to consider the ways in which they will need to make cultural shifts that may not align with their familial culture.

We demonstrate how the uneasiness of hybridity in terms of social mobility from the difficulties of negotiating the emotions, negative as well as positive, that are aroused when aspiration and success mean becoming and being profoundly different to your family and peer group. (Lucey et al., 2003, p. 286)

Another mode of separation in London's model is delegating. The delegating role is a process of parents assigning value to the college-going decision based on the parent's perception of their own unmet dreams or potential. This type of involvement might be considered a positive parental engagement or as "normal." The parent is encouraging their student to be better than they were and achieve more. However, this may put undue pressure on the student to assimilate to middle-class culture which might be unreflective of the student's dreams and interests (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). Rondini's (2018) research would support the use of the delegating role as a motivator in terms of the families and students sharing a desire to attain upward mobility and seek out educational opportunities, and due to the fact, the students were already enrolled in institutions of higher education might have mitigated those students with differing interests.

Regarding the delegating role, Auerbach (2007) discussed the role parental educational opportunity played in shaping educational expectations for their children. Those parents that spoke of lost educational opportunities due to their own parent's lack of involvement were more likely to try to break familial practices and support their children in attending an institution of higher education (Auerbach, 2007). In the delegating role, those parents that reflected on their own missed educational opportunities were more likely to encourage their child's educational pursuits (Auerbach, 2007).

Lastly, some families in London's model use the mode of expelling their student. Expelling occurs when a family determines a student needs to be pushed away to help the student build greater independence. One important factor to understand regarding expelling is the student is rarely emotionally or developmentally ready to be expelled. Therefore, expelling may have negative consequences on college-going decisions (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007).

Just as first-generation families learn to navigate the higher education landscape and find ways to navigate those experience, working-class families share many of those same experiences. Despite good intentions, the educational system continues to operate from a middle-class lens which forces working-class families to develop strategies to navigate the foreign system. Ostrove and Cole (2003) acknowledged this tension by stating: "schools both attempt to offer opportunity and, whether intentionally or not, often simultaneously reproduce class stratification" (p. 683). The dichotomy working-class students face regarding their family culture, and the expectation to achieve upward mobility, leaves working-class students and families in a tenuous situation.

Much like first-generation college students, working-class students are trapped between the individuality embedded in higher education and a culture that does not promote separation (Hartig & Steigerwald, 2007). Working-class families are expected to navigate class mobility from a place of separation as they send their students away to achieve something different and assumed better. In their research Sullenberger, Hostetter, and Wood (2012) shared the stories of working-class students and familial support. Participants stated that when their parental figures acted as a mentor and provided economic stability, it positively impacted their growth and academic

achievement. The way in which a family separates may have a direct impact on college choice. Families utilizing the technique of binding might limit their student's post-secondary options to schools that are close in geographic proximity or even advocate for two-year colleges. On the other hand, families that use the technique of expelling their student might consider the college selection process as a means for the student to gain greater independence. However, the expelled student may not have the social or cultural capital to self-navigate admissions processes thus limiting their ability to attend an institution of higher education.

Although the research by Hartig and Steigerwald (2017) put the parents in the dominant decision role regarding separation strategies, Auerbach (2007) stated that parents looked to their children for cues regarding wanted involvement in the college-going decision. Parents of high-achieving low-income students viewed themselves as supporters and waited to be asked by their student to engage in the college-going decision. The research suggests that low-income working-class families wait to be invited by their student into the college-going decision process, but once that invitation occurs, the family may take a dominant role in how the process decision making process plays out.

Understanding how working-class families theoretically interact with their children and educational systems is the first step towards understanding college-going decisions. While traditional college choice models and measures of family involvement center a middle- or professional-class experience, emergent research reflects the separation strategies low-income working-class families may employ to support their

student. In the next section, I review empirical research regarding working-class students, their family involvement, and their college-going decisions.

Working-Class Students and Negotiation Strategies

Building on the theoretical foundation of college-choice among working-class students, this section will identify the ways in which working-class students negotiate the post-secondary educational system. Much of the research regarding the experiences of working-class class college students can be divided into two categories: (a) the lived experiences of working-class students as they navigate the middle-class terrain of institutions of higher education and (b) issues of access and barriers under the pretext that attaining a college degree will provide social mobility (Hurst, 2010). These two areas of research position working-class students in both an adversarial and dependent role with higher education.

Research tries to better understand the feelings of isolation and assimilation experienced by working-class students in college (Fry et al., 2012; Ostrove, 2003). In addition, the research also makes assumptions that all working-class students want to obtain social mobility and therefore researchers look for ways to remediate barriers to access such as restructuring financial aid (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). These are important foundational concepts to keep in mind when examining how families not only impact the college-going decision but also the type of institution their student will attend.

According to Hurst (2009), the complex processes involved in selecting and attending an institution of higher education are at the core of the working-class student experience. In fact, stories from working-class students attending institutions of higher education often have a narrative surrounding how they got to college. Even more, these

stories highlight the stumbling blocks that working-class students faced that nearly kept them from attending a post-secondary institution (Hurst, 2009). Without the middle-class knowledge and capital, working-class students tend to make random and less-informed decisions about if and where to attend college (Hurst, 2009).

Lehman (2013) explains the disadvantages working-class students face at many levels. Due to their working-class status, many students face challenges not only with the affordability of college, their lack of relevant cultural and social capital, but as well as in the way in which their habitus conflicts with the middle-class orientation of higher education (Lehman, 2013). The research by Lehman, highlights the way in which class not only impacts the college-going decision, but how the concept of class has a significant impact on how working-class students orient themselves around education. One way that researchers have tried to make sense of how working-class students find value in education is by identifying situational orientations. Next, I will consider two different social orientations identified by Hurst (2010) that help low-income students make meaning of the value and purpose of education.

Hurst (2010) conducted research regarding the conflicting relationship between upward mobility and college degree attainment and identified two types of strategic orientations that working-class students use to navigate higher education. The first orientation is that of the Loyalist. Loyalists develop an idealistic approach to higher education. They believe in the true essence of meritocracy that is removed from class (Hurst, 2010). Loyalists believed students could attend an institution of higher education as a tool for upward mobility (Hurst, 2010). However, Loyalists did not think all students should attend institutions of higher education because education was not the only means

of social mobility. Loyalists entertained the notion that education was removed from class and both “the mechanics and the academics would be equally respected and rewarded” (Hurst, 2010, p. 78). Therefore, obtaining a college degree was not the only means for social mobility it was merely another means for acquiring knowledge just as learning a trade.

Loyalists also recognized that college and the notion of upward mobility was the process of leaving behind their friends and families, and they were not interested in assimilating into middle-class culture (Hurst, 2010). Loyalists that identified as strong students saw their academic work as a craft in the same light as someone that worked in a trade field. The lens of the Loyalist did not place added value on the academic rather than the trades person.

The second orientation Hurst (2010) identified were the Renegades. Renegades see class and college as dependent variables. Renegades believe that higher education is the key to social mobility, and they were eager to gain entrance into the middle class (Hurst, 2010). The Renegades associated more closely with the middle-class, and they approached academic work from a position of trying to prove themselves as worthy of upward mobility rather than as a craft (Hurst, 2010). In addition, Renegades held to the belief that everyone should attend college because those that do not pursue an advanced degree were perceived as lazy or incapable of achieving middle-class status (Hurst, 2010). However, Renegades may be unaware of the cultural challenges they will face as college students. The struggles that Renegades face may be more social in nature than based on academic capabilities. As an example, Oldfield (2007) noted that “for first

generation, poor, and working-class families, surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade-point average” (p. 3).

Hurst (2010) did not indicate whether gender had an impact on the type of strategic orientation a student adopts to make sense of the role of higher education in class mobility. However, Freie (2010) identified some differences in the way in which boys and girls at a working-class high school determined the value of higher education. Freie (2010) found that the girls may have been more Loyalist in orientation as their post-secondary plans were rooted in their life lessons and experiences and less individualistic than the boys interviewed. However, the males in study appeared more Renegade in nature. The boys interviewed recognized that college was necessary for upward mobility and did not connect their future aspirations to notions of struggle or lived experiences (Freie, 2010). In the longitudinal study Freie (2010) noted that the girls studied had identified the need to be a financial contributor to their families and were going to pursue careers. In addition, the girls’ plans were shaped not only by their lived experiences, but also by the lived experiences of their mothers (Freie, 2010). The influence of the mother on the college-going choice of their daughter adds an additional lens which through which to understand a family’s influence on where their student attends post-secondary school.

These orientations established by Hurst (2010) will be important to revisit when considering the ways that families help inform college choice, and they assist in highlighting the ways in which our current educational system seems to be antagonistic towards the working-class culture. One can see parallels between the loyalist and renegade strategies adopted by students and the binding and expelling strategies adopted

by families. Within our current educational context, low-income working-class students are left with the choice of assimilation and cultural abandonment in exchange for educational attainment (Hurst, 2010).

Gaps in the Literature

Existing literature explores how and why working-class students choose to or not to attend institutions of higher education (Freie, 2010, Hurst, 2010). The literature documents a college choice model as well as an ecologically grounded model that incorporates cultural variations. In addition, the literature is rich in the ways in which working-class families support and at times discourage the college-going decision, and the roles that class and social capital can play in making college-going decisions. Although statistics indicate that working-class students undermatch at a much higher rate than their middle-class peers, there is little research to explain the disparity. Indeed, little research on undermatching exists at all, as the phenomenon is more likely to be reported in news reports than in empirical studies.

Current research attributes much of the college-going decision of working-class students to familial attitudes and involvement (Sullenberger et al., 2012). However, the research falls short in identifying the ways that working-class families help their students select specific institutions of higher education. As previously stated, the data suggests that working-class students have a higher rate of persistence and matriculation when they attend more highly selective institutions. The gaps in the literature grow even larger when considering other identities beyond class such as race and gender. Thus, it seems important for educators, advisors, counselors and admissions counselors to understand the factors that contribute to final college selection among working-class students.

Chapter Summary

Working-class students and families face cultural and social challenges when engaging in the predominately middle-class world of education. As Bourdieu (1973) suggests, these challenges are a direct result of the desire of middle-class families to replicate generational privilege through the educational process. Current research explores the ways in which working-class students and families navigate the college-going decision, but few understand the ways in which working-class families contribute to matching.

Further research regarding the process of college selection needs to be conducted to better understand how and why working-class students undermatch at a higher rate than their middle-class peers. This work becomes increasingly important as the research demonstrates the more selective the institution, the more likely the working-class student will graduate.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the methodology used to understand the ways in which familial involvement and influence shapes low-income working-class students' decisions of matching to selective institutions of higher education. In addition, this chapter provides information describing the research design, the research sample, data collection and analysis, and identifies limitations and delimitations of the study. The chapter concludes by addressing ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and positionality.

The methodology for this study was specifically chosen to answer the following research questions: (a) What role do low-income working-class families play in determining which institution of higher education their student will attend? (b) How do low-income working-class families help their student understand the level of selectivity best matched to their student? (c) How do low-income working-class families make meaning of the value of a specific institution of higher education? (d) How do low-income working-class families understand and communicate the benefits of higher education to their student?

Research Design

The following sections will further explore the methodology and methods used to conduct the research. The rationale for using a qualitative research approach, and phenomenology method, is explained. Lastly, information regarding the sample, sample size, and data collection is provided.

A qualitative research approach, using phenomenology as method, was selected to conduct this study. According to Gangnog and Coleman (2014), “qualitative approaches are excellent ways to investigate family dynamics and family relationships” (p. 451). Unlike quantitative research that is geared towards measuring and predicting, qualitative research is interested in understanding how people make meaning and sense of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saldana (2011) also explained that “qualitative research is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life” (p. 4). For the purpose of this study, a qualitative methodology is used to make meaning of how families influence the selectivity of the institution of higher education their students chose to attend. A phenomenological method of inquiry allows for a better understanding of the phenomenon of college-choice among low-income working-class students.

Phenomenology is rooted in a philosophical tradition that aims to understand the lived experience of individuals (Fife, 2015). As such, phenomenology is not only a type of qualitative research, but also a school of philosophy most often associated with Husserl (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Husserl (as cited in Finlay, 2012) explained that philosophical phenomenology requires bracketing of knowledge and the suspension of those things that are known. Husserl concluded that in order to fully understand the phenomena of others’ experiences, one must relinquish their own socially constructed knowledge and way of knowing (Finlay, 2012).

The basis of phenomenological philosophy differs from phenomenological research methods, but the philosophical tradition is embedded within the phenomenological approach to research. Finlay (2012) suggested that phenomenological

research is grounded in the exploration of experiences without interference from what is thought to be known. A phenomenological researcher is constantly reflecting on what is known, how that knowledge came to be, and how that knowledge impacts the data being collected.

According to Fife (2015), “phenomenology generally assumes that humans are interpretive beings that actively make sense of the world around them and come to understand their work through direct experiences or engagement” (p. 209). A phenomenological approach will provide the foundational approach to understanding how students make meaning of their college-going process based on the involvement and influence of their families. Due to the fact that phenomenological studies are geared towards understanding emotion, affective states, and values, this approach is well suited to understanding the influences that families have on college-going decisions.

Research Sample

Student participants were full-time students attending a private four-year institution of higher education located in an urban setting in the Northeast. The study site was categorized as a less-competitive (Barron’s, 2019) institution of higher education. The campus was located near two institutions of higher education that are more competitive in classification. This study site was chosen to mitigate the impact of geographic location in the college-choice process. Therefore, students did not necessarily choose one institution rather than the other because it was closer to home or in a more desirable location. The research location mitigated the notion that the location prevented students from attending a more selective institution. The qualifiers for participating in the study were based on the demographic makeup resembling the majority of students

attending a nearby highly selective institution, with the exception of class or socioeconomic status. The sample of students were full-time, residential students pursuing a liberal arts bachelor’s degree. In addition, the student participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 in their first academic year at the university. This age range mirrors the age of most undergraduate students attending the highly selective institution nearby. Table 1 provides a basic comparison of the differences between the study site and one of the more competitive nearby institutions.

Table 1: Institutional Comparisons between Study Site and Local More Selective Institution

Factor	Comparison University	Study Site
Barron’s Classification	Most Competitive	Less Competitive
Acceptance Rate 2017	7%	88.4%
Average GPA of Incoming First-Year Students	4.0	3.1
Average ACT Score	32	Not Required
Average SAT Score	1470/1510	Not Required
% of Full-Time Students	95%	88.4%
Annual Cost Tuition and Fees 2017-2018 (Rounded)	\$71,000/annually	\$30,000/annually
% of New Students Receiving Need-Based Aid	41%	90%

Note. Data was collected from

www.collegedata.com/cs/admissions/admissions_tracker.jhtml

The sample included 10 students and the family member(s) most engaged in each students’ college-going decision from the students’ perspectives. One student identified his influential family member was deceased. The student’s interview was still explored

to understand the student's perceptions of his families' attitudes toward higher education and the value placed on specific institutional types.

Edwards and Holland (2013) suggested sampling is less about size in qualitative research, but rather sampling is rooted in collecting the necessary data.

Some would argue that even the term sample is inappropriate, given that the focus of data generation in qualitative research is on the process rather than an end point of numbers. In brief, your sample must provide the data you need to produce answers to your research questions, and this process is theory driven. (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 6)

Punch (2006) affirms that qualitative samples are often small as the sample aims to shed light on experiences not statistics.

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed, and participants needed to meet specific criteria to participate in the study. As previously mentioned, the student participants were residential students, between the ages of 18-24, and enrolled in a liberal arts program. The student participants needed to have had entered the research site with a grade point average of 3.5 or higher and they will have needed to have taken the ACT and scored a 25 or higher or the SAT with a composite score over 1150. These admissions criteria were selected because they indicate the students exceeded the admissions standards at the study site, could have attended a more selective institution, resulting in undermatching. Lastly, the participants identified as being raised working-class.

In order to identify potentially working-class students, only students that were receiving need-based aid were pulled by the institutional research office of the study site

for the initial recruitment message. Potential participants were emailed to determine if they were interested in participating in the study. The email was sent from the department of institutional research in order to protect student demographic information and maintain compliance with FERPA. Potential participants who were interested in participating in the study were briefly surveyed to determine if they meet the criteria necessary to participate in the study. Those participants that completed the interviews were provided with a \$20.00 gift card in exchange for their time. Providing a financial incentive was one way to mitigate the potential of only those who have time or resources from participating in the study as well as showing appreciation for the time spent participating in the study.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with study participants. Participants included students and, separately, their family member. Individual interviews were conducted face-to-face with students in various locations on the college campus. Following the interviews with students, I interviewed the family member the student identified as the most influential in their college-going decision. Families were given the option of participating in face-to-face interviews, but other means of conducting the interviews such as phone and skype were offered to best meet the family member's preference. All of the family members chose to be interviewed in a phone conversation.

The use of interviews is well recognized in phenomenological research. In fact, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that, "to get to the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary

method of data collection” (p. 27). In their work, Edwards and Holland (2013) explored the role that interviews play in qualitative research. They found “the interview is probably the most widely used method employed in qualitative research, a central resource for social science” (Edwards & Holland, 2013, p. 1).

Although Edwards and Holland (2013) identified interviewing as a commonly used approach to data collection in qualitative research, they also contended researchers must be intentional and specific in the way they develop and conduct interviews. Semi-structured interviews may be fluid in nature, but they must contain three core components: (a) the exchange of dialogue; (b) a set of pre-determined topics or themes that should be addressed; (c) and an understanding and acknowledgment that meaning is created through context and the process of interacting (Edwards & Holland, 2013). Furthermore, the use of interviews as a method of data collection is supported by Metcalfe (2013) who wrote “you can learn of subjectivity while in an interview with a whole person, but you cannot experience a whole person if you are merely a subject in an exchange” (p. 45). Semi-structured interviews allow the study to capture the whole person rather than merely focusing solely on the variable of socioeconomic status.

Interview questions for this study were centered around the ways familial involvement influences the college-going decisions of low-income working-class students. Important information included demographic characteristics collected at the end of the interview, perceptions regarding the student’s view of their family’s attitude and perceptions of higher education, and the families perceived value of an institution based on selectivity. The interview questions were centered around the relationships the students have with their families, the attitudes and perceptions the students and families

held regarding the value and purpose of obtaining a college degree, and a deeper understanding of how class shapes the lens with which they view higher education and social mobility. By centering the interviews in these themes, the data provided stories of how class and family involvement influenced the way student participants gained an understanding of selectivity and the value specific institutions of higher education provided.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, a post-interview survey instrument was used to collect student and family demographic information, information regarding the student's academic performance and experiences in secondary school, and their post-secondary educational path.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Each of the nineteen interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant and the interviews were transcribed. I used an online transcription service to provide an initial transcription, and then I evaluated each of the transcriptions for accuracy and made the appropriate edits. In addition, I reviewed the audio recordings to make notations of pauses, changes in speech patterns and other speech related behaviors which provided additional data. Each participant was provided a copy of their interview transcription to validate the accuracy of the transcription. Open coding was used to make sense of the data and provided a framework for analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical considerations with this study were aligned with participant confidentiality and researcher positionality. To maintain the confidentiality of participants, the specific institution of higher education was not identified in the study. In

addition, participant names were not used, and the data was coded in a manner to protect the participant's identity. Participants were asked to identify their preferred pseudonyms. Due to the fact that each participant expressed discomfort in providing a pseudonym, one was assigned to each participant. All transcriptions were stored on a password-protected computer and completed surveys were maintained in a locked file prior to shredding.

Although I came from a low-income working-class background, I occupied a middle-class identity while conducting this research. In addition, I was an administrator at the institution I was conducting the research. I was intentional about the power dynamics that might be present when I identified interview locations. Edwards and Holland (2013) recognized when interviewing students at their institution of higher education, researchers need to be aware of hierarchical systems of power such as the hierarchy existing between teacher and student. Identifying an interview location that is comfortable for the participant while maintaining the confidentiality of the participants was an important factor for mitigating some power dynamics. I identified three possible locations to conduct the interviews. One option for an interview location was my office, and in addition I provided two private student-centered locations.

Lastly, I was aware of my positionality as a college graduate when developing interview questions and survey instruments. It was essential to this research that questions were framed in ways not to imply a student made a "bad" college-going decision. Nor did I want questions to insinuate I made judgments regarding the relationship between family involvement and the decisions the student made regarding matching. Undermatching does not imply a student or family has done anything wrong in the decision-making process; however, this study wanted to better understand the ways

families influence matching. I am a social constructivist. I believe knowledge is the product of what one experiences and learns through socialization. Therefore, it is through the lens of social constructivism I will make meaning of the data I collect.

For research to have an impact on practice within a field, the researcher must address issues of reliability and trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To address initial issues of reliability and trustworthiness careful consideration was given to the methodological approach of this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested rigorous methodological design can add to reliability when conducting qualitative research from a constructionist world view.

Another means of establishing trustworthiness was through the use of triangulation, renamed crystallization in response to post-modern research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used multiple methods of data collection to add to the reliability of the data: (a) post interview survey; (b) institutional records; (c) the student interview; (d) and the family member interview will add to the reliability of the data. Lastly, member checks were used to ensure the data analysis adequately reflects the participants' experience. Respondent validation was used early in the analysis process to add additional reliability to the findings. Participants were asked to review the analysis of their interview to ensure the data represented their intended meaning and their lived experiences.

Limitations and Delimitations

One of the limitations of this study was the potential impact of regionality. Regionality might not only have influenced perceptions surrounding educational value, but it may also have impacted familial dynamics. There may have been regional

influences on the ways in which families interact with their student in the college-going decision-making process.

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2016), delimitations are those decisions made in the research design to narrow the scope of the study. Several delimitations existed in this study. The purpose of this study was to understand the ways familial involvement influences the college choice process of low-income working-class students as they transition from secondary education to an institution of higher education. To narrow the scope of this study, only students between the ages of 18-24 enrolled in their first year at a specific four-year institution of higher education were included in the study. The term familial refers to a family member in a parenting or mentoring role. This study did not address familial influences on adult students who choose to return to institutions of higher education later in life. Lastly, a final delimitation of this study was all student participants attended the same institution of higher education within the same geographic area as highly selective institutions of higher education.

The study took place in a geographically specific area, and therefore student and family perceptions of institutions of higher education may have been shaped by regional attitudes and norms. Students and families on the East Coast may value higher education differently than those in other regions, but this study did not address regional differences in perceptions or values of higher education. In addition, students were interviewed during their first year of enrollment when their college-choice process was relatively recent. Interviewing students during their first year helped students to avoid aligning their college-choice process with their college experience. The timing also provided a

better understanding of the perceived role the student's family played in their college-going decision.

Chapter Summary

This qualitative study was based in a phenomenological method of inquiry. Ten first-year students at a private four-year institution of higher education located on the East Coast were interviewed utilizing semi-structured interviews which align with the process of phenomenological interviewing practices. In addition, each student participant identified a family member who most significantly impacted their college-going decisions. Attention was given to protecting the confidentiality of participants, awareness of researcher positionality, and an understanding of the framework of the phenomenological philosophy. Data was interpreted through a process of open coding, and the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings were addressed through the triangulation of data collection and the use of respondent validation.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The overarching goal of this study was to better understand the ways low-income students and families make college-going decisions and determine which institution of higher education the student should attend. In addition, I wanted to better understand the ways low-income students and families make meaning around the value and benefits of pursuing post-secondary education and how they make meaning of institutional selectivity. Using a qualitative research approach and phenomenological analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 19 participants. The participants included ten first-year students attending a non-competitive institution of higher education. Each of the student participants had high school grade point averages and standardized test scores making the student a strong candidate for admission to a highly selective or elite institution. In addition to interviewing the students, I interviewed the family member the student identified as the most influential in their college-going decision. One of the students in the study identified his father to be the most influential person in his college-going decision; however, his father was deceased and was therefore not able to be interviewed.

The student participants were asked open-ended interview questions about when and how they made the decision to attend college, who influenced their college-going decision, how the students determined which institution they would attend, and what

motivated their decision to attend a specific institution. The family members were asked similar questions regarding their role in the college-going decision of their student, their level of involvement in the enrollment process, and the perceptions they had about the value of higher education. See Appendix A for interview protocol.

Although each of the students in the study identified a family member as the greatest motivator as to why they decided to go to college, in most instances the family member was not directly involved in decisions surrounding which institution to apply to nor attend. Instead the students and families relied on college readiness programs and high school counselors to determine the best institutions to consider attending. For the participants in this study, the primary motivators for applying to and/or attending a specific college or university were:

- Does the institution offer my major?
- Can I afford to attend?
- Will I be able to finish and graduate?
- How does the decision impact my family and their expectations?

Table 2 provides some basic information about the student participants in the study and whom they identified as the most influential person in their college-going decision. The student participants all identified as belonging to a low-income working-class family prior to participating in the interviews. All the students in the sample were considered Pell eligible and received need-based aid from their current institution. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, I created pseudonyms based on the request of the participant. In addition, the table includes information regarding the education

level of the family member, and whether the student applied and was admitted to any highly selective or elite institution of higher education.

Table 2. Student Information

Student Pseudonym	Family Member Most Engaged	High School GPA (4.0)	SAT Scores	Applied to highly selective/elite institution
Thomas	Mother/Father	4.15*	1490	Yes
Susan	Mother	4.12*	1405	No
Philip	Father/Deceased	4.0	1480	No
Tina	Mother	4.0	1420	No
Erin	Mother	4.0	1410	No
John	Mother	4.0	1510	Yes
Isabelle	Mother	4.0	1470	No
Kaleb	Mother	4.15*	1405	Yes
Kerry	Mother	4.1*	1550	No
Bryan	Mother	4.0	1490	Yes

*GPA weighted due to honors courses

Transcripts from the semi-structured interviews were used to inform this study. All participants were provided a copy, via email, of their transcribed interview to ensure accuracy. Through the process of inductive coding, the data within the transcripts became quantifiable. The coding process was a multi-step process which began with initial coding. The initial coding process occurred relatively quickly and provided an insight into the data collected through the interviews. Following the initial coding phase,

line-by-line coding was used to dig deeper into the data and the codes became more detailed. Once the codes were established, they were categorized in common groupings leading to the emersion of themes. The next section explores the themes that emerged through the interviews.

Emerging Themes

Through semi-structured interviews with first-year students and the family member most influential in their college-going decision, several themes emerged. The first research question of this study addressed understanding the role the family member played in determining which institution their student would attend. Three themes emerged regarding the first research question: (a) the family helped to develop a college-going consciousness, (b) the family member provided emotional and task related support during the admission process, and (c) the family member and student relied on resources provided by their secondary schools to make college-going decisions.

The second research question was how, if at all, do low-income working-class students and families understand institutional selectivity. Most of the interview questions used were intended to narrow in on the concept of selectivity included questions about the type of institution and institutional reputation. Four themes were identified when interviewing students about the type of institution they wanted to attend. The themes were: (a) students and families wanted to know the student had the skills to finish and graduate, (b) students and families were more concerned with cost and affordability rather than institutional reputation, (c) students were primarily concerned with whether or not the institution offered their intended major and, (d) both students and families made a value distinction between two-and four-year institutions.

The third research question was geared towards better understanding how low-income working-class students and families make meaning of the value of higher education and whether institutional selectivity has an impact on the way an institution is valued. Multiple themes emerged from interviewing students and families about the value of education. The three themes that emerged were: (a) students and families perceived a college degree as a means to success, (b) students believed graduating would make their parents proud, and (c) parents and students identified the college degree as a means to something different or better than what the parent had experienced.

The fourth and final research question focused on the ways the family members identified and communicated the benefits of attending an institution of higher education to their student. Although similar themes to research question number three arose, there were some additional themes identified: (a) students and parents believed a college degree was a means to a “good job,” but also shared going to college was also about the experience and (b) parents believed their children would grow emotionally from the experience of attending an institution of higher education.

Discussion of Research Question One

Both students and family members spoke about the “sense of knowing” the student would attend an institution of higher education but did not necessarily consider the institutional type nor specific college or university the student would attend. In addition to family member support, both the students and family members relied on school counselors and pre-collegiate college readiness programs to narrow the schools the student would apply to. Three themes arose for research question number one: sense of knowing, family support, and the role of guidance counselors.

Sense of knowing. The data gathered from this study replicated research conducted by Rondini (2018) regarding the impact of familial attitudes and strategies on the educational attainment of low-income first-generation college students. “The data illuminate a particular strategy employed by low income parents in cultivating worldviews conducive to high educational aspirations and strong motivation for academic persistence for their children” (Rondini, 2018, p.29). Whether attributing this strategy to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus or whether applying London’s theory of separation, the families and students utilized their cultural knowledge and lived experiences to develop attitudes surrounding educational attainment. Student participants shared this “sense of knowing” they would attend an institution of higher education, and every student participant was quick to identify the parent who set the tone for them aspiring to attend an institution of higher education. The students and family members in this study led the students to aspire for high educational attainment and fostered the sense that obtaining a college degree was the next step for a better life. For some students their “sense of knowing” came from subtle messaging and conversations with their family member, while others shared their family members instructed them to attend college. The participants shared an interdependence in wanting to earn a college degree not only for themselves, but for their family members because they were meeting the familial expectation of high educational attainment. Several participants like Thomas were able to articulate this “sense of knowing” college was in his future. When Thomas was asked how he knew his parents expected him to go to college, he could not really identify when or remember if his parents ever told he must go to college. Thomas stated,

I've always known that I wanted to go to college mostly because it was always inferred that we, my siblings and I, were going to attend college. My parents never attended college and my dad was in the military for a short time, but we were not allowed to join the military because he didn't want us to go through the same stuff that he had to go through. And, so the only other option for us was really college and higher education. It was just in what form like deciding what type of school to go to. And they never really pushed us towards one school or another. It wasn't like they were asking, well what do you want to be and how are you getting there? They were just like let us decide on our own. And it was never a conversation between us, like alright you got to be ready for college it was more of self-motivation. Of us just knowing that we have to be ready for college. There were no other options.

Philip had a similar experience to Thomas knowing the unspoken expectation following high school he would go to college. Phillip enjoyed school, so college was a natural next step following high school graduation:

I think it was just kind of always understood that I would go, and I was perfectly OK with that because I like learning. I really do. I've always loved it. So, I always just thought college was kind of the natural next step. My parents just kind of always assumed I would go as well. And so, I just continued on. It was like no question. So, it's not like it was a plan laid out for me it was just the next step because I want to be philosophy professor.

Not all the participants in this study saw their future leading to college when they were in high school, and therefore the messaging from their family member was far more

direct. For two of the participants, Kaleb and Susan, family members stated both students needed to be told to go to college. Kaleb was a bit ambivalent about whether to go to college and would often shrug his shoulders when I asked him why he ultimately enrolled in college. He shared his parents believed he had to get a college degree in order to find a successful job, so he knew he had to give it a try. It was clear that Kaleb still had not determined if his parents' assertions were correct, as during the interview he shared some of his other interests such as attending trade school or getting a job in the construction field. Susan shared although she performed well academically in high school, she really did not enjoy academics and did not want to attend college. Her mother could not understand why Susan would waste her opportunity to go to college and the chance to get ahead. Susan shared,

So. I hated high school. I did. I really didn't like going to class. I hated going to school and it was weird because like my mom didn't understand. She'd be like okay but you're like in honors classes and you're doing fantastic. Like what do you mean you don't like it. I was doing well because I wanted to do well. I wanted the grades to look great, but I didn't actually like doing it. It's like a chore. Like I don't like school, so I didn't want to keep going. I told my mom for all of high school that I'm not going to college and just want to get a job. She said it was a waste. Like you're one of those people, you know like, she would say you're so bright. Like you're the kind of person that should go and get a degree. You know like why are you wasting it? Sometimes she would like beg me to just go try college.

Susan really struggled with her mother's expectation for her to attend college when she was not sure what she wanted to study. Susan thought paying for general education as an undeclared student was a waste of money. She would have rather entered the work force, but she did not want her mother to think she was wasting her life, and she reluctantly applied to college. For each of the participants, London's strategies for separation more specifically demonstrated the role of delegating is at play. The family members shared the perceived missed educational opportunities with their students to encourage their student to attend an institution of higher education.

Family support. "Parental involvement in children's education has been consistently encouraged and is widely accepted as a positive form of support, particularly during the precollegiate years" (Kiyama, Harper, & Ramos, 2018, p. 209). Beyond creating a college-going culture for their student, each family member in this study played different roles and participated in the college-going process of their student differently. Some family members attended campus visits with their student, others acted as a sounding board when it came time to decide where to apply, and others laid some ground rules and then prompted their student to meet deadlines. Although the way in which the family members participated in the college-selection process looked differently, one thread was apparent when interviewing the students. The students felt supported by their family member. In addition, family support was apparent when discussing the process of applying and preparing to attend an institution of higher education.

Kerry shared that her mom was a big supporter as she was making the college-going decision. She shared, "I think my mom's always just been like really big supporter

and all that and to just remind me to do what's going to make me happy". She went to talk about the ways that her mom was able to participate in college visits. Kerry stated,

Oh well my mom came with me on all my tours because you know my dad couldn't come because he has work and things like that. So my mom was able to be on all three tours with me and she didn't want to influence what school I went to she wanted me to tell her what I thought of every school and then she would kind of help me make sense of what I'm thinking.

Kerry's mother also identified her role was a cheerleader and support person, but she did not want to influence Kerry's institutional choice. Kerry's mother stated, "She is paying for it [school] so she needs to be happy with her decision. It was not my decision to make."

Although family members tended to support the use of counselors in determining which colleges to attend, family members continued to support their students in the admission process. The family members in the study shared they supported their student by listening and asking questions, but ultimately it was the students' decision to determine which schools to apply to. Family members recalled reminding their student of deadlines or tasks that needed to be completed at the same time the family member reinforced their student was responsible for applying and getting admitted to college.

The FAFSA served as an intersection between the students' independent process of applying to schools, and their dependence on the family member during the application process. Both Tina and Thomas shared they were responsible for their college admissions materials and process and had felt nervous and concerned about relying on their parent to complete the FAFSA. Both Tina and Thomas were confident their parents

would get it done on time, but they felt as though this was one important part of the college-going process out of their control. In addition, the students spoke of the FAFSA as an unknown entity something they did not fully understand. Although these students had attended college readiness programs, the FAFSA remained a part of the process that seemed to be an unfamiliar part of the admissions process. Thomas described how he tried to work with his parents when he needed their help with items such as the FAFSA as well as providing health insurance information to the college. Thomas shared:

I would catch them there sitting down on the couch, and I would plop down next to them with the laptop. And then I would say alright, I need the insurance information, or I would ask about the taxes. I needed their help with these things, but for the most part everything else was on me. All the other stuff, I can do and so it was on me to do it.

John's mother recalled he was anxious about getting his application materials submitted on time, and at times he became pushy. John's mother recalled,

There were times I just wanted to relax, but he would want to talk about the taxes or the FAFSA or need some bit of information. I knew how important it was to him and he was nervous, but sometimes it felt like he doubted whether or not I would turn in the paperwork.

Erin also shared the FAFSA was one of the ways her mother participated in the college-going process. She said,

She really left it up to me. She likes me to be independent. She's like, do whatever you want and let me know whatever I need to help you with. She did a lot of financial stuff. Because I don't know anything about that.

Isabelle's story about completing the FAFSA was very similar to Erin's story. Erin shared,

I think my biggest setback with all of them (application forms) was the FAFSA and taxes and all that. Thankfully my dad was a great dad and helped me through all of that because I wouldn't have known how to do it. But that was the biggest thing for me because I was applying for scholarships and financial aid and all that.”

The family members shared differing perspectives about completing the FAFSA. Some of the family members saw it as a task to complete while some of the others found it to be a more daunting process. Despite the emotion surrounding the completion of the FAFSA, the family members all recognized that it was an important part of the process they could assist with, and it allowed the family member to help their student with the enrollment process.

Role of guidance counselors. “Relationships with teachers and faculty affect youth's access to institutional resources, which can enhance not only their academic experience but also their mobility prospects thereafter.” (Jack & Irwin, 2018, p. 142). The data collected through the interviews suggested that it is not just about forming relationships with teachers and counselors, but the knowledge and level of understanding of college admissions is important as well. Both the students and family members put significant trust in the counselors to assist their students in selecting which colleges the student might attend.

All the students interviewed in this study stated they were enrolled in some type of pre-collegiate program through their high school. Therefore, the students

acknowledged their counselors played a significant role in suggesting the colleges and universities the students should consider applying to. One student that I interviewed, Erin, explained that her counselor helped her to make a list of “reaches and safeties.” When I asked Erin to explain the meaning of “reaches and safeties,” Erin explained the reaches were those schools she might get admitted to, and the safeties were those schools she would most definitely gain admittance. During the interview Erin acknowledged her counselor got it wrong, as the current institution she attends is too easy and she believes it should have been considered a safety rather than a reach. In her own words, Erin shared, “I remember working with a counselor and he kind of helped me. He looked at my classes, my GPA and whatever else he needed to consider, and he suggested schools that I should apply to. He also asked about my intended major.” Erin was asked in the interview if she thought her counselor got it right, and after a long pause while avoiding eye-contact with me she said, “no, and I think I am wasting my money because I am not learning much. The classes are too easy, and teachers let us get away with not doing all the work.”

John also relied on his high school counselor to help him identify which colleges to apply to. During the interview, John relayed that his counselor was skilled at matching students to colleges and would give them access to a website that helped students find the “right college.” John describes the way he narrowed down which schools he would apply to with the help of his counselor:

So, around halfway through our junior year we all went on collegeboard.com and looked at colleges and just found colleges with a major that we liked and put them all on the list. And eventually throughout the course of our junior year we

narrowed it down to like four or five choices with dream colleges in one category, colleges that we'd probably get accepted to in another, and then colleges that are like backup choices.

When I asked John how he determined which colleges were dream colleges versus backups, he was not able to answer immediately. After a long pause, John responded he wasn't really sure, but he knew which colleges some of his friends had gone to and assumed that he would get admitted to those schools as well. I asked John if he identified or applied to a dream school and he did share the name of an ivy league school that he applied and was accepted to.

Both John and Erin's mothers, communicated they thought the counselors were the best people to help their students understand which schools they should apply to. These mothers felt they had a responsibility to make sure their students followed through with the application process, but not to involve themselves too deeply in the decision of which school to attend. At one point in the interview as a side comment, John's mother did share she "questioned whether he should be applying to better schools" but when she asked John about whether he should apply to better schools, it made him angry and so she didn't ask again.

The experiences of the students in this study indicate that different approaches are taken by counselors to match students with institutions of higher education. For some of the students and families, it appears that the match was unsuccessful while for others they found institutional fit at their current university. Regardless of institutional fit, the process of selecting colleges and universities was often described as a process that took place at school and did not include family members. Although the family members were

excluded from the conversations between the counselor and student, they conceded to the decisions made between the student and counselor.

Discussion of Research Question Two

In order to better understand how students and families made meaning of institutional selectivity, a series of questions were asked about the “type” of institution the student or family member would like to see the student attend. This line of questioning focused on how the student and family member decided which institutions were better than others. I considered the term institutional selectivity to be a term used by those in higher education and therefore did not include the term in the interview protocol. Rather, the interviewer asked questions that would allow the student and family members to share how they find value in specific institutions of higher education.

None of the students nor family members indicated institutional reputation had a positive nor negative impact on their perception of a school. In fact, often both the student and family member shared they did not know much about the schools they were applying to until they went to visit. or in some cases, until they attended the orientation of their current school. During her interview, Erin shared, “I’m gonna go ahead and tell you that I knew nothing about this school before I came. So, I didn’t really have any expectations. I didn’t like that it was in the city which is a big no no for me. But I got here, and I like it.”

Students and families found value in institutions they thought (a) they were able to graduate from, (b) they could afford, (c) offered their intended major, and (d) were four-year institutions. These four factors were repeated throughout the interviews as the primary considerations when selecting an institution of higher education, while

institutional selectivity and reputation were not factors in the college-going decision process. Four themes emerged for research question number two: perception of preparedness, ability to pay, course offerings, and institutional type.

Perceptions of preparedness. For many of the students in the study, the decision to apply to an institution of higher education also included the students' own perceptions of whether the student thought they were smart enough to graduate from the institution. Several of the students shared their fear of not being ready or smart enough, and those fears played a deciding factor in where they decided to go to college.

Philip acknowledged he was confident he would be successful at his current institution and when he was applying to schools he only wanted to apply to schools where he knew he was capable of graduating. However, after his first two terms he was beginning to question whether that was a good decision to choose less-rigorous schools. Philip shared:

Personally, I'm not challenged in my classes. I am trying to determine if I can test out of some of the classes. I find it a lot easier than it should be. It's not the worst thing because it helps my GPA. It's one of those things now officially doing this and it is disappointing to not be challenged. I am not sure it is worth my money.

I will have to see the results to say whether or not it's worth my money.

Susan, like other students interviewed, experienced self-doubt about whether she was really prepared to attend college. Susan shared she had gotten good grades in high school, but she dismissed her achievements based on her perceptions of the quality of high school she had attended. During her interview she reflected on her first terms on campus and seemed surprised by her success.

I didn't realize till I came here, but I went to a more challenging high school than I had figured I did. When I came here, I came in with enough credits that I was two trimesters ahead. In winter this year, my first year here, I was a sophomore already. I realized how well my high school prepared me for a lot of things like academically.

When Susan was asked how she viewed her performance on standardized tests, she shrugged her shoulders and indicated that she was more focused on her GPA and the quality of high school she attended. Susan shared she wanted to attend an institution that would challenge her, but one she could graduate from.

John described his thought process when choosing to apply to his current institution. He shared his approach to picking his current institution.

Well I knew that here, I don't want to sound bad, but I knew that I was qualified. I could get in and graduate. I knew that I could get into the university based on extracurriculars and my grades. And that it wasn't going to be something where I had to cross my fingers and hope I get in and graduate.

The participants in this study shared their vulnerability and self-doubts surrounding the process of being accepted to an institution of higher education while at the same time considering whether they thought they possessed the academic capabilities to graduate. Susan shared her doubts, "I was thinking like I'm okay at math. I'm okay at writing. I am okay at most things. But like I don't have that one thing like oh, I'm great at science. I'm going to be a scientist kind of thing. I didn't know what to do."

While the students were concerned with their academic preparedness and ability to perform, the family members were more concerned with whether their students were

ready from a maturity standpoint. John's mother shared stories about all the shopping and work she put into preparing her son for college because she was not sure he would know what type of bedding to purchase or if he would think to stock medicine in case, he gets sick. Kaleb's mother was more direct and stated, "he is smart enough for college, but I am not sure he knows how to take care of himself."

Ability to pay. In her research, Hurst (2020) asserts, "We thus have a higher education system today whose costs look different depending on the sector and selectivity of the institution" (p.118). As a result of habitus, the differentiation between cost and affordability was not entirely clear to the participants in this study. Although the cost to attend a selective or elite institution of higher education might have been cheaper than the less-selective institution they are attending, participants often considered the sticker price when determining if an institution was a "safety or reach." The sticker price did impact the participants decision to apply and participate in the financial aiding process. Hurst (2020) goes on to assert that "for many low-income (and some middle-income) students, it is less costly to attend a college with a much higher sticker prices, as their net cost will be much lower" (p. 118).

When participants were asked about how they made decisions regarding which institution they or their student would attend, they consistently answered first with "it had my major and I could afford it". Earlier, John shared the way he used the internet to determine his dream schools, but it was not until late in the interview when he explained he was constantly looking at the cost of tuition. John took pause during the interview and responded with a quiet revelation. "My dream schools were not really 'dream schools,' they were the best of what I thought I could afford with the exception of the Ivy".

Bryan was a participant who did apply and was accepted to an Ivy league school. In his interview he mentioned that he wasn't even going to apply based on the cost, but his high school counselor spoke with him and his family and encouraged him to apply. The counselor suggested Bryan and his family apply to any schools that interested him, and then wait to see what happened with financial aid packages.

And then when acceptance letters came in, once I knew I was accepted to this university, I wanted to say yes, but my family told me we'll wait for numbers. I didn't wait for all the numbers because I wanted to commit, and this university was the first to give me the numbers. I said let's do it. I made the final decision before I had other numbers.

Although Bryan and his family were given some guidance on the importance of waiting for financial aid packages, they still made the decision regarding the institution he would attend prior to having received the financial aid package from the Ivy League school. Kaleb had a similar experience, but he and his family waited for all the financial aid packages. Even with all of the information in front of them, Kaleb and his family were distrustful that the aid would remain consistent throughout his enrollment at the Ivy League. Once they received all of the aid packages, they were concerned about the legitimacy of the aid package from the elite institution due to the high discount and scholarship rate. Kaleb shared:

I knew we had to keep with the cheapest option. So that's what I wanted. This institution was the least expensive. I did get more, like in terms of, scholarships, grants and aid from the other school. But I wasn't sure whether like you know if I

was going to get that money like the amount of time I would be studying there or if it was just one year. This school said it was a four-year deal.

Kaleb's mother also shared her concerns that "if something went wrong with K's grades at that other school, he would lose all the money and he would have to quit school. It felt better to go with the sure thing".

Isabelle's experience was very similar to Kaleb's experience. For her family it came down to the amount of scholarship she would receive. She shared, "I had other schools that I preferred, but I ended up getting a lot more scholarship from here and that really helped. I think my whole family was just happy with the scholarship and the fact I was happy going to this school." When I interviewed Isabelle's mother, she stated, "It came down to the money. I knew there were other schools she liked more, but we had to make the smart decision and I think she made the right choice."

Course offerings. Mullen (2018) explores the class implications of choosing a career. "Choosing a major is also one of the most important decisions students make influencing not only what they will learn in university but, to an extent, their possible graduate school opportunities, career trajectories and potential earnings. Not inconsequentially, the choice of major corresponds to a student's class and gender" (Mullen, 2018, p.234). One of the main qualifiers for whether a student in this study applied to a specific institution was based on whether the institution offered their intended major. All of the student participants were able to clearly articulate what profession they planned to enter upon graduation and had made college-going decisions based on their future occupation. Mullen (2018) explored the ways that students make

decisions regarding areas of study and suggested that in fact there are two different paths, or tracks, that are often differentiated by class.

These patterns suggest a set of tracks running through the higher education system. In one track, students attend more prestigious institutions, major in liberal arts fields, and then continue their education with a graduate of professional degree, a package leading to lucrative and high-status jobs. In the other track, students study applied fields at less prestigious institutions and then take their acquired skills directly into the labor market.” (Mullen, 2018, p. 234)

The students in this study were following the second set of tracks, and the decision of which career to pursue was made prior to entering an institution of higher education. Tina shared her current institution offered her preferred major. She said, “the university goes hand-in-hand with my major goals regarding what I want to study and being close to home.” The student participants in this study used their intended major as a primary deciding factor in which institutions they would apply to.

Kerry shared that she planned to use her business degree to earn a job at a hotel or resort, and she is also considering a job in marketing or sales. Kerry’s spent her summer working at a resort and believed she had a good chance of getting a full-time position once she graduates with her business degree. She said that she chose her school based on whether it offered her preferred major and then she considered the cost of attending.

John picked the institution based on the major offerings as well. He shared in his interview: “My major is cyber threat defense and intelligence which is basically cyber security. I hope to go into either the cyber security field or I’ve done a lot of computer programming.” John’s mother was excited about her son’s interest in computers, and

because his future career plans were so specific she agreed that it made sense that he selected the school based on the availability of the major.

Institutional type. There was an implied value distinction between two and four-year colleges made by the students. After the students shared which schools they applied to, I followed-up with: “did you consider applying to any two-year schools,” and the answer was consistently no with exception of Tina. John described that his sister was attending a community college and it was “the right thing for her,” but he indicated it wasn’t what he was looking for in a college education. John acknowledged two-year colleges were less expensive and, in some cases, free, but was quick to state that “they (community colleges) wouldn’t get him where he wanted to go.”

Thomas shared that neither he nor his parents thought a two-year college was the right choice for him; however, Thomas’s mother said she would have been okay with neither of her children attending college, if they could find a “respectable” way to support themselves. She laughed at the end of the statement and suggested there was no other way to earn a respectable job than to first earn a college degree. She stated she did not pressure either of her children to attend one institution over another. Thomas’ mother shared her youngest daughter is currently studying communication at a community college. Thomas’ mother spoke of Thomas’ academic achievements, and shared he is capable of so much more. She hoped for something better for him than attending a community college.

Although this study found that institutional selectivity and reputation were not factors in determining the value of a specific institution, there was a value distinction among the students in this study regarding the value of a two-year vs four-year degree.

The students and family members placed more value on the degree and experience resulting from a four-year college than that of a two-year or community college. Despite any concerns of preparedness, the students in this study did not consider two-year colleges as a viable next step after high school.

Discussion of Research Question Three

The third research question in this study attempted to understand how the participants made meaning of the value of a college degree. For both the student and family member, value was found in the hope that a college degree would provide for success, students find value in a college-degree because it would create pride among their family members, and for most in the study there is value in the college degree because it has the potential to reshape the family narrative and right the missed opportunities of the past. While research question number three focused on the what the college degree would provide, students and families added value to those institutions that were in a closer proximity to the family home. Four themes emerged for research question number three: (a) finding a job, (b) sense of pride, (c) going somewhere new, and (d) institutional location does matter.

Finding a job. The narrative shared by most in this study was the importance of a college-degree in order to get a good job and have a better life. Interestingly, a better life was typically quantified by having a good job. This sentiment of a better life and good job was shared by both students and family members, who often spoke about higher education as a means to an end regarding issues of employability. Erin shared her reason for attending college was primarily to learn the necessary skills to earn a good job. Erin shared:

Well I'm all about like my career. So like school is because I want to get a really good job. So really the skills that I want to learn or whatever will make me successful in my career, so my classes are mostly business classes obviously and they're teaching me a lot. I've gotten multiple certifications that I probably never would have gotten otherwise. So yeah, it's really the skills I want.

When speaking with Erin's mother, she shared Erin was motivated to go to college and get a good job for as long as she could remember. Erin's mother attributed her motivation to graduate and get a job to keeping her focused on her classes, and therefore, Erin was earning good grades.

Sense of pride. It was clear through the interviews with both the students and family members that there was an underlying expectation that the student would attend an institution of higher education. There was an emergence of pride among the students when they thought about graduation and shared how they would feel on graduation day. Although the students were initially motivated to attend college based on familial expectations, the students were also motivated graduate. The students wanted to make their family proud by finishing the educational journey and earning a degree. At times in the interviews, the students shared the pride their family would feel when they graduated, and for others they predicted their family would be proud when they earned their first job. In her interview, Kerry touched on this concept of pride:

She (her mother) always just pushed me to do what's going to make me the most successful and she wants me to be more successful than she was. You know so she really admires how me and all my siblings push ourselves and we face the challenge and we succeed a lot. We want to make her proud.

Family members interviewed shared a more near-sighted sense of pride. They acknowledged the pride they felt by knowing their student was attending college. Tina's mom mentioned how much she loves wearing the shirt from Tina's school. Tina's mom shared, "every time I wear it and someone asks about it, I can say my daughter goes there."

Going somewhere new. Throughout the interviews with both the parents and students it was clear that the London's framework of separation was a tool used by both the student and family member to make meaning of the college-going decision and allow for separation. Both the students and family members shared stories of their past to explain the necessity for the student to attend an institution of higher education and earn a college degree. For the students and families in this study, they used what London described as a "delegating role" of separation. The missed opportunities, or perceived short comings, of the parent were a primary motivator for both the student and family member to seek out a college degree. London's framework of separation is not something that occurs at the time when the student is leaving for college, but rather it is a framework for understanding the ways that low-income working-class families develop the college-going consciousness in their student.

John shared his understanding of his mother's college-going decision, and why he needed to follow a different path. John shared,

Yeah. My mom went to college and it was very messy. How she went to college. She just chose a college that her friends were going to and didn't worry about the money at all and didn't care about what field she was going into. She basically taught me that I need to think about my future and to stick with something. To

make sure I could afford it and that it was right for me so that I would finish. She never graduated and still regrets her decision.

During her interview, Erin shared a conversation she had with her mother when she was in high school about taking a different path towards a college degree. Erin shared a conversation she had with her mother:

You have to go to school. She had a really hard time finding really good jobs.

And like she found really good jobs, but they wouldn't give them to her. She didn't have a college degree. She's like you have to get a degree no matter what.

She said, I don't care where you do it just get the degree.

Missed opportunities on behalf of the family members not only impacted the overall college-going decision, but more specific decisions such as where to reside while attending school. Family members and students recalled missed opportunities due to commuting rather than living in the residence halls, and how those experiences impacted the students' decision to reside in on-campus housing. All the student participants in this study were currently living in on-campus housing.

The importance and value of living on campus was clearly stated in many of the interviews. Tina's mother recalled that commuting back and forth from college was the primary reason she did not finish school. During her interview, Tina's mother stated that she "never really fit in to the college scene because she didn't have time to make friends or go the library." It was important to her mother that Tina had the opportunity to live on campus and have the college experience. Tina shared a similar sentiment in her interview. As Tina reflected on the conversations she had with her mother while deciding which institution to attend she recalled:

So, she [Tina's mother] was like I want you to have that college experience that I never had. And she said that she would support anything that I did. And she really wanted me to stay on campus because I originally wanted to go to a community college because it was cheaper and then transfer over into university. And she was like no, I want you to enjoy your freshman year have that experience of being with friends and living on in a dorm.

Kaleb shared a similar story about his mother's struggles as a commuting student, and he thinks that is one reason that she did not earn her college degree.

I mean she had to go back and forth and that probably did it for her. My mom said you know you don't want to go back and forth too much. That is one reason why I like to live on campus too. I am close to my classes and I'm not distracted. It's much easier to focus when you live on campus. My mom said it would be a problem if I were to commute, and she reminded me of all of the distractions at home. For me home is a distraction because I do not have a door that I can close. We have a lot of animals, so it is like a petting zoo at my house. Then I have, like you know, brothers and sisters. So, home is kind of chaotic.

The students and family members in this study believed a college-degree would provide a better life and a good job. The participants believed the student should follow a different path than their family member regarding their educational choices. However, the decision to attend an institution of higher education was not made without consideration to the family. For many of the students and families, proximity to home was an important factor in deciding which institution they would attend.

Location matters. For the majority of the participants proximity to home was an important factor in determining which college or university to attend. Although proximity to home didn't impact decisions surrounding institutional selectivity, this factor is an important consideration when looking at enrollment behaviors and college-going decisions of low-income working-class students. Some of the participants indicated that they had responsibilities at home that they needed to tend to, and therefore needed to choose an institution that provided easy access to home. Tina, for example, not only chose the institution but also her residence hall based on the proximity to the train station.

I wanted to stay close to home because my mother has like a lot of health issues along with my brother. So, it was easier for me to go back home when I was needed. My residence hall is really close to the train station, and there is train station stop behind my house. It makes it easy for transportation.

Tina shared that she does go home every weekend, and sometimes she wished that she had more time to spend with her new college friends. Tina laughed and shrugged as she explained the desire to be a normal student like her roommate that could just focus on school. During my interview with Tina's mother she shared her gratefulness that Tina listened to her advice and stayed closer to home as it has been the best thing for the family.

Other participants, both students and family members, made the decision to choose a college or university closer to home based on the fear that something might go wrong. John never even considered moving away from his home state because he has always been close with his family. However, for the sake of this research it is important

to note that there are several elite institutions within the same city of the student's current institution. Therefore, the students could have attended more selective institutions without moving further away from their families.

I definitely wanted to stay close to home. I am not sure I can give you a reason why (pause, grin, wringing hands). I haven't really thought about it too much, but I've never really gone anywhere out of the state. Like I've been to Florida for a family vacation when I was young. But that's about it. So, I didn't really consider going far away nor did I like the idea of moving far away. I might need my families help and they might need me. Plus, I like staying close to my family. Pretty much all my family is in the state. So, I thought I would stay here at least for college. Maybe after college I will be more like my roommates and try to go somewhere further from home.

Unlike many of the student participants Thomas made the decision to move nearly thirteen hours from home. When asked about that decision, Thomas grew quiet and clearly reflected on the void that his presence has caused in his family. Thomas shared,

Deciding to leave my family was hard. For one, I cook every meal and so much of their lives have been the what the kids are doing. My sister is older, and she's moved out of the house and has her own stuff going on. It's really just my younger brother at home now. So, I think it's hard for them (his parents). Now there are two less children in the house and who's cooking the meals now? I have no idea if anyone knows how to cook. I think they go out to eat all the time. I have always cooked the meals for my family.

Although it might not have been the ultimate deciding factor, distance from home was a concern shared by both student and familial participants during their interviews. For two of the participants distance from home was not a “qualifying factor”; however both the mothers and students acknowledged they had logistical discussions surrounding the affordability of getting home in the event of an emergency, the frequency of family visits, and the costs associated with moving further away from home. Kerry shared that she wanted to stay close to home because “being here it's just a lot more convenient if I need to go home for something or if I forget something or I'm in a pinch. Or if I just miss my family I can go home.”

Discussion of Research Question Four

The fourth and final research question tried to better understand how both the student and family member thought the student would benefit from attending an institution of higher education, and how they communicated those benefits to their student. The research question sought to determine if any of the perceived benefits of a college experience/degree would be impacted by institutional selectivity. Throughout the interviews, the student and family member often seemed aligned in their thoughts and stories. However, in this section there were some differences in the perceived benefits of a college degree. Two themes arose for research question number four: future success and emotional growth.

Professional success. Research question number three addressed the value of attending an institution of higher education and the perceived value of earning a college degree. In the final research question, Question 4, I was trying to better understand the perceived benefits beyond obtaining a good job. In his interview John spoke often about

his motivation to get a good job. I asked him what it means to have a good job and how does that make you more successful. John responded with:

The money really. I really want to be set up well in life. It's just not going to college, but the degree provides so many opportunities and people who go to college on average have higher salaries and more fulfilling and happy lives because of going to college and the experience and the more money.

During the interviews, students were asked what they think their family member wants them to gain from attending college. Every student answered “a job” or “a career” and often the answer was followed with a comment about the need to pay off loans and “make it worth it.” However, the family members shared a different perspective. Yes, they all wanted to see their student earn a degree and find a good job, but they also spoke to the growth and experiences they hoped for their student while attending college. In the following section, additional attention will be given to familial expectations beyond getting a job.

Emotional growth. “I want him to find a little bit of courage. Courage to make his own decisions and the courage to know he is capable of a different life.” This was a quote from John’s mother when asked what she hopes her student gains from his time in at the university. For some of the parents such as John’s they perceive that one of the benefits of going to college is building some independence or courage. The family members identified that one benefit of attending college was to help their student grow emotionally as well as intellectually. The college experience is beneficial to the overall growth of their student.

Kerry's mother said she believed that the university setting will provide her student with opportunities to network and build connections. Kerry's mother shared she is continually encouraging Kerry to talk to her teachers and work with the career center to see if there are opportunities for internships. She believes through interacting with teachers and applying for internships, Kerry will build some skills and connections that might help her get a job when she graduates.

For some family members, they wanted their student to have the social experience they never had. As shared earlier Tina's mother was an advocate for her student having the true residential experience, and Tina's mother acknowledged that their current family situation was impeding on her student's opportunity to spend the weekends on campus and socialize with peers. Tina's mother shared the frustration she felt that her daughter was living two lives because she was coming home so frequently.

Chapter Summary

Chapter IV provided data and discussion surrounding the ways in which high-achieving low-income working-class students make college-choice decisions. The students and their family members considered higher education to be the means for social mobility and therefore family members created a college-going culture for their student. Students and their family members were concerned with affordability, whether the institution offered their major, and the perceived likelihood of student success as measured through graduation when selecting a specific institution. Although the family member was invested in whether their student attended an institution of higher education, the family members would concede decisions surrounding institutional choice to their student and guidance counselors. Neither students nor their family members were

concerned with institutional selectivity nor institutional reputation; however, there was a perceived value add in attending a four-year vs. two-year institution of higher education.

CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The focus of this qualitative study was to understand the role that low-income working-class families play in helping their student determine which institution of higher education to attend. Specific attention was given to whether students or their families considered the benefits of institutional selectivity in making a college-going decision. Similar to much of the literature regarding college-choice for low-income working-class students, the participants of this study focused more on if and where they would go to college, rather than focus on institutional selectivity. Participants considered whether the institutions offered their major, the likelihood of student success at the institution, and affordability when determining where the student would go to college. Institutional selectivity nor reputation were considered by the participants when determining institutional choice. According to an article by Fain (2016) selective institutions of higher education want to increase class diversity on their campuses, but low-income and working-class students just do not apply at the same rate as their high-income counterparts. Currently, high achieving low-income students account for fewer than three percent of students enrolled in highly selective institutions. Research also suggests that without altering SAT or ACT standards, highly selective institutions could increase their enrollment of low-income students by over thirty percent (Fain, 2016).

Using a qualitative methodology and phenomenological approach this study

considered the college-choice experiences shared by low-income working-class students and their family member to provide insight into the human experience. Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and the concept of habitus, London's theory of separation, and college-choice models were used as a conceptual framework to explain the phenomena of college-going decisions among the participants (Morrisey & Higgs, 2006). Ten low-income working-class students as well as one of each of the students' family members participated in semi-structured interviews to share their experiences and the factors that contributed to their college-choice decision. Understanding the experiences of both the student and influential family member in college-going decisions may assist in the class diversification of highly selective and elite institutions of higher education.

Through the analysis of the experiences of the students and families in this study, institutional selectivity was not a priority in the college-going decision process. Students and families considered three primary components when choosing which institution to attend: (a) affordability, (b) majors and academic offerings, and (c) perceived likelihood of graduating.

In the following sections, the findings will be explored in further detail, and explanation will be given to how these findings contribute to the growing body of literature regarding the experiences of low-income working-class students and their college-going decisions. In addition, recommendations for practice will be provided to address the findings in the study. Lastly, consideration will be given to the limitations of this study and additional recommendations for further research.

Summary of Significant Findings and Recommendations for Practice

This section will explore the major findings from the semi-structured interviews with students and the family member who most impacted the student's college-going decision and choice. In addition to highlighting the significant findings, recommendations for improved practices will be provided to decrease the phenomenon of under-matching among high achieving low-income working-class students. Each of the students in this study were high achieving low-income working-class students that had the capability of attending a highly selective/elite institution of higher education but opted to attend a less selective institution of higher education. Although the findings of this research support the existing literature on college-choice among low-income working-class students, this study contributes to the knowledge of how both low-income working-class students and their families navigate the college-going process as well as their understanding of the value of institutional selectivity.

Earlier in this study, I suggested for low-income working-class students entering an institution of higher education is a step into the unknown rather than the rite of passage experienced by their middle-class peers. In the following discussion, attention and recommendations are made which incorporates the habitus of low-income working-class students and their families in the college-going decision process. Rather than creating recommendations that continue to reinforce social reproduction and ignore the social capital and habitus of low-income working-class students, the recommendations are intended to bridge the gap between the educational system and the social capital of low-income working-class students.

Pricing Practices

This study confirmed through the semi-structured interviews that due to a lack of social capital, low-income working-class families do not have the necessary information to understand the cost/value associated with institutional selectivity. Having not attended nor graduated from an institution of higher education, the family member shared that at times they would question how best to support or encourage their student. The family member would often provide support by reminding their student of the tasks to be completed, served as a listening ear, and would assist in the completion of paperwork such as the FAFSA. Although the students identified the ways the family member supported them in the college-going process, the students often shared the sense it was up to them to “make it happen”. Students and the family members seemed to align in the belief that it was the students’ responsibility to complete the application and selection process.

The students and family members often referred to the “cost” of attending as a deciding factor as to if they would apply or not to a specific institution. The results of this study mirrored research by Stanberry and Burnett (2014) that reported that cost of attendance was a concern for low-income students. When exploring the ways the student and family member determined cost, they often referred to the information shared on institutional websites or college search websites. The students and family members based the cost of attendance on the advertised sticker price not always knowing about opportunities for institutional scholarships nor tuition discounting. In some cases, neither the student nor the family members waited to consider the institutional financial aid packages from elite colleges because they had already assumed it would still be too

expensive or there would be a catch. In addition, some participants shared concerns about potential changes to the financial aid package throughout the course of attendance at the institution. Students and family members shared their concern about affordability throughout the duration of attendance, not just the first year. McKinney and Novak (2012) concluded that due to a lack of social capital, low-income first-generation students are often unaware of the opportunities for federal financial aid, institutional discounting, and other means to decrease the out of pocket amount they would actually pay to the college or university.

Based on the interviews, colleges and universities did not communicate the differences between sticker price (advertised price) and the actual cost of attendance to the participants in this study. If information regarding tuition discounting was shared with the students, the information did not get translated to the family member. Low-income working-class students and families who do not have the experience nor knowledge of differentiating sticker price from the actual cost may end up spending more money for tuition at less selective institutions. The students and families don't have all the necessary information to make an informed decision based on their habitus. Many of the students in this study made the decision of whether to apply to an elite/highly selective institution based on the published sticker price, and therefore never received a financial aid package from a more selective institution.

First and foremost, institutions of higher education need to rethink their pricing strategies to help students and families understand the difference between sticker price and the net cost of attendance. Educational systems should not rely on low-income working-class students to act as translators between the institution and their families. In

addition, institutions of higher education can do a better job of packaging costs based on degree programs and implement strategies to lock or freeze tuition, to ensure students and families have a true understanding of the cost of a degree. Some colleges and universities are creating award packages that include all the costs associated with attendance and rather than locking tuition they agree the student will pay a pre-established cost with institutional aid covering any increases in tuition or fees (Supiano, 2009).

If institutions packaged the cost of a degree rather than annual tuition, it would allow students and families to make a more meaningful cost analysis of the affordability of the institution rather than the perceived cost published on institutional websites and publications (Supiano, 2009). For example, if a student is planning to study business and the student is given the actual net cost of completing a business degree at the institution, the student and family can analyze the cost based on predicted salaries upon graduation.

This type of upfront packaging of aid creates an opportunity for students and families to not only evaluate the true institutional cost, but it also provides an opportunity for the student and family to make meaning of the value of the degree upon graduation which may impact the career paths and job aspirations of low-income working-class students.

Lastly, for those students in the study that did apply and get admitted to a highly selective institution, they often did not wait to receive their financial aid awards but rather made the decision to attend the less expensive school based on the advertised cost. There was a clear sense the student believed they could never afford to attend the selective institution. This realization suggests colleges and universities need to be communicating actual costs early in the admissions process.

The Role of Guidance Counselors

In her research on low-income first-generation students, Rondini (2018) found that low-income students and families utilize their habitus to develop aspirational goals surrounding education for their students. Students and families make meaning from their lived experiences, and those experiences of hardship and financial struggle can act as an agent of combining education attainment with mobility (Rondini, 2018). Once the college-going consciousness was established, the students in this study made decisions regarding which institution to attend based on their perception of affordability, degree offerings, and perceived likelihood of successfully graduating.

The student participants in this study relied heavily on counselors to determine which institutions to apply to for admission. It appeared counselors were involved at various levels in the decision-making process. The counselors provided access to college admissions criteria, and the counselors helped the students to identify which colleges and universities were a potential fit. The students in this study concluded their counselors had the greatest influence on where the students chose to apply to college. The families did not indicate they were a part of selecting the specific institution their student would attend. Two of the mothers said they should not play a role in influencing institutional choice, only one mother shared the experience of challenging their student's choices in colleges. For those in this study, the decision of institutional selection was left to the school counselors and the students.

Several of the student participants shared during their interviews they are not academically challenged at their current institution and questioned whether their counselor appropriately matched them to various colleges and universities. The student

participants seemed to grapple with whether their current institution is worth the money, even though it was among the least expensive institutions they considered. The perception of institutional value seemed to be changing for the students as they are attending classes and experiencing college at a less selective institution.

As previously mentioned, all students in this study participated in some type of pre-college readiness program, and every student worked with high school counselors to determine their safeties and reaches with the ultimate goal of making a college-going decision. This finding is significant to the study as it brings into light the potential for partnerships between students, family members, and high school counselors. Although the family members in this study often conceded to the recommendations by the counselors, they were rarely involved in the discussions that took place between their student and the counselor on issues surrounding institutional choice. Students and their family members were unaware not all four-year colleges and universities are the same, nor did they have information about the benefits of matching at the highest selective institution the student can achieve.

Lastly, the students in this study knew what they wanted to do for a career and considered the college-degree as a means by which they will get a job. Career exploration and decisions about work were made early in high school, and the students were looking for institutions that could meet their career aspirations. However, one could argue that their career aspirations also might have been a limiting factor to where the students chose to apply. All of the participants in this study had a career plan and were not considering a liberal arts education but considered the college process as a means of being prepared to enter the workforce.

Throughout their interviews, students shared their experiences of visiting colleges and universities as part of their high school's college readiness programs. The students often stated they would tour two-year colleges and technical schools. In addition, the students described their career planning as taking aptitude tests rather than being exposed to various fields and professions. The process by which these low-income working-class students made career plans may have discouraged them from considering attending a more selective liberal arts college.

There is no way based on the data from the interviews to ascertain whether the high school counselors lacked information regarding college admissions criteria or whether the students' apprehension regarding their preparedness led to under-matching. Regardless of the reason, programs need to be developed to assist low-income working-class students in gaining exposure to colleges and universities of increased selectivity. Currently, Bridge Programs are used to acquaint underrepresented groups of students to college campuses prior to the start of an academic year (Douglas & Attewell, 2014). The programs often take place in the weeks leading up to the academic year and focus on college-readiness skills and acclimating students to the college campus (Douglas & Attewell, 2014). The exposure of working-class students and families to college environments prior to the college-going decision, might positively impact the matching process by increasing comfortability and the understanding of college admission processes. Some might also suggest that colleges and universities should do more to engage low-income working-class students and families from an earlier age. Once again, making institutions of higher education more accessible to low-income students.

Colleges and universities could use the bridge program model to develop a College 101 course for high achieving low-income working-class high school students starting in 9th grade. This program would focus on career exploration and broadening the scope of potential careers low-income working-class students are exposed to, offer guidance to students and families about financial aid processes, and provide additional insight into the cost and value of specific college degrees. Students would be exposed to different institutional cultures and experience the level of academic rigor at specific institutions prior to making decisions about which institution to attend. If these types of bridge programs were offered throughout the four years of secondary school, students would have the opportunity to “try-on” various institutions for fit.

One important component of the bridge program would need to be the development of inclusive practices that allow family members to better understand the differences and benefits of attending one institution over another for their student. Rather than focusing on college-readiness skills, the bridge programs could focus on cost planning and career planning for both the student and family member supporting the college-going choice. This type of comprehensive program would balance the influence guidance counselors have on the college selection process and allow students and families to have more autonomy in making college-going decisions.

Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, or one’s way of knowing, was apparent in each of the interviews with the student and family member. Through their habitus and lived experiences, both the students and family members valued education as a means of social mobility, and therefore saw opportunities for mobility tied to education. The family members shared their desire for something “more” for their student and the students

shared a similar desire to have a better or easier life. Student participants also shared a sense of responsibility for changing the familial trajectory and making their family proud. In the end, this type of bridge program would support an inclusive approach to involving low-income working-class families in the college-going decisions their students are making and de-mystify the college-going experience to those who have not experienced it.

Perceptions of College Preparedness

In addition to navigating the financial complexities of financing a college degree, both the students and family members had doubts regarding their students' level of preparedness. The students not only chose colleges that they knew they would gain admittance, but they also chose colleges that they believed they were "smart enough" to graduate from. The students were aware that they had strong high school portfolios when asked directly, but the students seemed to doubt the legitimacy of those portfolios based on the high school they attended. Doubting their level of preparedness, is another significant finding in this study as it shaped the college-choice process for many of the student participants in the study.

The family members also shared doubts on their students' level of preparedness, but those doubts were often steeped in whether the student could care for themselves and function as an independent adult. Unlike the students, the family members shared little if no doubt in their students' ability to be academically successful in college. The family members shared no concern regarding the academic preparedness of their students, as long as they were able to focus on their education.

The students in the study doubted their level of academic preparedness despite their high-grade point averages and strong performances on standardized tests. The students did not believe they were academically prepared for a highly selective or elite college or university (which they often referred to as an Ivy). Therefore, students were reluctant to apply to more selective institutions, and for those participants that did apply it was based on the nudging of a counselor or teacher. This finding suggests that more work needs to be done to help low-income working-class students understand their level of competency and likelihood of success at more selective institutions of higher education. One way for students to gain a more realistic understanding of their capabilities is to expose them to collegiate courses while in high school. Currently in the united states enrollment in dual credit courses is on the rise (Valdez, 2012). According to a study conducted by Valdez (2012), students are more satisfied with dual enrollment courses than they are with advanced placement courses. One reason for the higher level of satisfaction with dual enrollment courses is that students felt like it was a real college course (Valdez, 2012). Exposure to dual enrollment programs may assist working-class students to better understand their capabilities regarding academic rigor prior to applying to colleges.

In a brief scan of the literature, it appears that many community colleges offer dual enrollment opportunities, but little research existed on dual credit courses at more selective and highly selective institutions of higher education. Public schools can increase programs that allow students to take college-courses for high school credit and encourage elite institutions of higher education to form partnerships with underfunded schools in the colleges geographic area. This type of partnership has the potential to act

as a natural funnel to increase class diversity on highly selective college campuses, while reinforcing the capabilities of high-achieving working-class students.

Limitations of Study

This study was based on the experiences of ten high achieving low-income working-class students and their family members who most influenced their college-going decisions. The interviews were conducted at an institution on the East Coast and therefore regional attitudes may have contributed to some of the data. The study did not consider the role gender nor race played in the experiences of the participants. In addition, the sample size for this study was relatively small.

Recommendations for Future Research

Overall, this study's findings were consistent with theories included in the conceptual framework. The theories London's theory of separation, Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction and college-choice models are clearly at play based on the themes that emerged from the interviews with students and family members. The literature on working-class and low-income student college-choice is growing and, as with this study, additional emphasis is being placed on the family members experience rather than the students' perception of the family members role. As more selective institutions focus on increasing low-income student enrollment and diversifying their campuses based on class, more research will need to focus on the ways that colleges and universities communicate the cost and value of a degree. In addition, evaluating the ways colleges and universities communicate to low-income working-class families their likeliness of success at the institution during the recruitment phase.

Currently, much of the research focuses on college-choice models regarding whether a low-income working-class student will attend, but less attention is focused on where the student will attend and how the student makes the decision of which school to attend. This lack of understanding regarding matching continues the perpetuation of low-income working-class students to attend less selective institutions in which their likelihood of graduation is diminished.

Although there is growing interest among campus administrators in the diversification of student demographics, the peer-reviewed literature does not yet include large amounts of significant research on the success of low-income students in selective or elite institutions. As more low-income students pursue degrees in higher education at more selective institutions, it is important for scholar-practitioners to assess the experience of these students and programs from pre-collegiate programs, recruitment materials, orientation and on-boarding as well as financial aid packaging. More research is needed to explore the specific connections described in the present study's findings such as the role of pre-collegiate programs, family members, institutional recruitment and marking on the ways low-income working-class students make college-going choices surrounding institutional selectivity.

Further research should be conducted regarding the ways in which pre-collegiate programs set priorities regarding college-choice. Currently the goal for these programs is primarily based on access and acceptance rather than focusing on whether students are attending the best or "right" school for them. In addition, attention should be paid to high the pre-collegiate programs utilize inclusive practices to engage not only the student but also the family members in the selection process. The participants in this study shared

the importance of pre-collegiate programs in making college-going decisions. These programs are often trusted by students and families as the gateway to a college degree, but little is known about the ways in which these programs promote college selection to low-income working-class students.

Although this research did not specifically look at the ways in which gender, race, nor ethnicity impacted the familial role nor the college choice decision, these are important areas for further research. Due to the small sample size, I was unable to draw inferences based on gender, race nor ethnicity; however, some interesting trends emerged throughout the interviews and data analysis. Through the interviews conducted, the mothers often expressed the importance of continuing to help at home to their daughters. Most mothers of daughters spoke of their “missed opportunities” by not attending college or dropping out, while mothers of sons spoke more about the missed opportunity to realize fiscal independence. Although mothers of sons and daughters expressed the “delegating role of separation” the reasons for the delegation were different.

Lastly, additional research in secondary and post-secondary collaborations may help shape programmatic efforts and assist pre-collegiate programs and counselors to better communicate the value and benefits of attending more selective institutions. After all, not all four-year colleges and universities are created equal.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT

Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Students

Introductory/Foundational Questions:

1. What are you currently studying? How do you hope to apply your degree when you graduate?
2. Describe your experience so far at X University. Has it met your expectations? What types of disappointments or challenges (if any) have you faced?
3. Are you happy with your decision to attend X University?

College-Decision Questions:

1. When did you start thinking about attending an institution of higher education?
2. Why did you decide to attend an institution of higher education?
3. What skills/knowledge are you hoping to gain while in school?
4. Describe your college search process
 - a. How did you decide which colleges to apply to?
 - b. How many colleges did you apply to?
 - c. What priorities did you set when choosing which colleges to apply to?
 - d. Did you have any challenges gaining access to information while applying to college? If so, what were they?

Familial-Involvement Question:

1. Was there a specific family member that was most impactful in the college-going decision? If so, who?
 - a. Follow-up questions will seek to understand the experience and/or what the student might expect the experience to be if they didn't have familial involvement.

Questions for Those with Involved Family Member:

1. How did your family member participate in your decision to attend college?
2. How did your family member assist you in the application process?
 - a. Did your family member influence the institutions you applied to?
 - b. Did your family member have the same priorities as you regarding what you would gain from going to college? Explain.
3. Did your family member have a role in your final decision making? Describe the process of making your final institutional decision.

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FAMILY MEMBERS

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Family Members

Introductory/Foundational Questions:

4. How have you adapted to your student being in college?
5. How do you think their experience has been so far?
6. What skills experiences do you hope your student gains while in college?
7. Did you attend a college or university?
8. Are you willing to share how you feel about your decision to attend/not attend an institution of higher education?

College-Decision Questions:

5. When did you start thinking about what path your student would pursue after high school?
6. Did you both have similar ideas regarding the post high school path?
7. What did you think your role was in helping in making those decisions regarding life after high school?
8. Describe how you participated in the college search process
 - e. Did you have preferences regarding which institutions your student applied to? What were they and why are those preferences important?
 - f. Do you think that you and your student shared the same priorities?
 - g. How many colleges did you think your student should apply to?
 - h. Did you or how did you help your student narrow in on the universities they should apply to?
 - i. Did you have any challenges gaining access to information while helping your student apply to college? If so, what were they?

Familial-Involvement Question:

1. How do you describe your role in helping your student make a college-going decision? Do you think you should have been more or less involved?
2. Is this the first student you have assisted in making a college-going decision?
 - a. Are there things you learned for helping your student enroll in an institution that you wish you would have known before hand?
 - b. If this is not the first time you have assisted in this process how was it similar and/or different to your previous experiences.
3. How do you think that your previous experiences with education shaped or framed the way that you helped your student in the enrollment process?