

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS FOR  
FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AT A SMALL,  
PRIVATE, RELIGIOUS AFFILIATED INSTITUTION

by

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## ABSTRACT

College accessibility is a common topic amongst higher education professionals in today's society. One specific example of an underserved population of students that can greatly benefit from the concept of college access is first generation college students. Previous research shows that first generation college students are often at a disadvantage compared to their peers in regards to college enrollment. In order for high schools teachers and guidance counselors as well as higher education administrators and admissions personnel to fully assist these students with their college enrollment, we must be knowledgeable about the factors that influence their college choice process.

This qualitative research study investigated the college choice process for first generation college students at a small, private, religious affiliated institution. Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice, this study examined the three-stage college choice process including predisposition, search, and choice. Interviews were conducted with 31 first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University. Each participant was asked a series of 11 questions that coincide with the three stages of the college choice process. The data collected throughout the interviews was analyzed and coded to develop a thematic structure of the findings.

The study resulted in three overarching conclusions. First, the aspiration to attend college was the first theme that was apparent during the predisposition stage of the college choice process. The majority of students revealed that they aspired to attend college at an early age in their life. Second, the theme of support from others was prominent in the research. Many

of the participants revealed their appreciation for their parents, family members, teachers, and other adult figures that assisted them with their college enrollment. Finally, the obstacles that these first generation college students had to overcome was a prevalent theme in the data. These students handled many challenges throughout the college choice process from their socioeconomic status to their parents' lack of knowledge about higher education. Though faced with adversity, the first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University utilized available resources to successfully enroll in post-secondary education.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

College access is a common topic in America's higher education system. Today, there are websites that promote college access to all students such as [collegeaccessnow.org](http://collegeaccessnow.org) and a College Access Challenge Grant Program sponsored by the United States Department of Education. These websites and programs are aimed at low-income students in order to empower students to enroll and graduate from college. Recently, Americans have been presented with higher education as a topic in many political discussions including the 2016 State of the Union address from President Barack Obama, and the concept of the free community college was recently introduced as a nation-wide topic. With a universal emphasis on college access for everyone, there is an increased focus on colleges and universities to recruit and assist underprivileged and disadvantaged students through the college enrollment process.

A particular subpopulation of students that will benefit from the increase of college accessibility in higher education is first generation college students. Over the past several years, there has been an effort for post-secondary institutions to sponsor programs designed to increase college access and enrichment opportunities for historically underserved, economically or educationally disadvantaged students (Shaw et al., 2009). First generation college students are often disadvantaged and underprivileged as it pertains to enrolling in higher education (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Bryant & Nichols, 2011; Engle, 2007). While these students may have supportive parents that encourage college enrollment, they do not have the advantage of having parents who are college graduates. This study reveals a broad overview of qualities of many first

generation students including socioeconomic status, parental influence, and academic preparedness, among others. Since approximately one-fourth of high school students are potential first generation college students it is important that the sub-population of students assisted through the college choice process (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011).

Whether students are the first in their family to attend college or they come from generations of college graduates, all students planning to enroll in college undergo the college choice process. Prior to the conclusion of secondary education, students may determine what will be the next phase in their life. For some students, the next step in their lives is entering the workforce or the military. For many students, the next step toward their future is attending post-secondary education. Approximately 68% of high school students immediately enroll in college upon high school graduation (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011). Once a student decides that enrolling in college will be the next phase of life, the student makes the decision about which college to attend, commonly referred to as their college choice process. The process can be lengthy and includes the time when the student is preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in college (Chapman, 1981; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982).

The college choice process for a first generation student is distinctively different when compared to a student who has the advantage of having at least one parent or guardian who has successfully completed a baccalaureate degree. There are multiple steps the students must take when experiencing the college choice process. The student must determine if college enrollment is the route they want to take; then, the student will determine which institution they will attend. While the process does not seem like a lengthy process, there are many factors that influence the

college choice process. “A student’s journey from high school to college is more complex than it may appear on the surface” (Renn & Reason, 2013, p. 28).

Higher education institutions within the United States are divided into six categories according to the Carnegie Classification: (1) Doctorate-granting Universities, (2) Master’s Colleges and Universities, (3) Baccalaureate Colleges, (4) Associate’s Colleges, (5) Special Focus Institutions, and (6) Tribal Colleges (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2011). For the purpose of the study, the researcher investigated students who chose to attend a Baccalaureate College even more specifically Shorter University, a religiously affiliated, private, liberal arts institution.

Experiencing the college choice process is something many college-going students encounter during their adolescent years. The college choice process can be quite daunting, from the idea of attending college to actually enrolling in college, especially for students from families where the parents or guardians do not have a college degree. With a steady increase of first generation students entering college, it is important for higher education administrators and admissions personnel to be familiar with the challenges and roadblocks that these students experience. The characteristics of first generation students along with the multi-faceted nature of the college choice process are discussed in the study with a particular focus on the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students.

### **Problem Statement**

Research reveals that first generation college students are at a disadvantage in comparison to their continuing generation peers because they are the first in their family to attend post-secondary education (Shaw et al., 2009). In the study, the definition of a first generation student is a student for whom neither parent has achieved a bachelor’s degree from a

four-year institution (Pascarella et al., 2004). When parents do not possess a college education, their children are less likely to have the desire to attend as well (Chen, 2005; Hill & Jepsen, 2007; Tucker, 2010). Generally, they do not have the familial support, socioeconomic status, or academic preparation that many other students possess making them less likely to persist through college. First-generation college students are qualitatively different with respect to their pre-college characteristics, college experiences, and college outcomes as opposed to their continuing generation peers (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). Additionally, first generation college students are often faced with many disadvantages and lack the resources that prepare them to be competitive college applicants (Berger, 2000; Smith, 2008; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). According to a 2012 study, more than one-third of K-12 student population, approximately 16 million students, are first-generation students and the number of these students that select to enroll in college will continue to increase (NCES, 2012).

Aspelmeier et al. (2012) has demonstrated that first generation college students' aspirations and expectations about college may be different from students whose parents have a bachelor's degree from a post-secondary institution (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). Scholars found that parental education expectations most greatly influence the students' college predisposition (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) found that the education level of the parent played a pivotal role in the student ability to gain qualifications for enrollment in higher education. For higher education institutions to fully understand the subpopulation of students, it is beneficial for the administration and admissions officers to be aware of how and why their new students are choosing to attend the respective institution, and they must be sensitive to the first generation students who are at a disadvantage due to their parents' education level. Research which investigates how college predisposition, if formed, assists diverse student

populations as they embark on the college choice process (Hurtado, Inkelsa, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997).

Bergerson (2009a) has acknowledged that understanding college choice has “implications for practice, policy and research” (p. 1) and concluded that understanding the processes students use to determine their institutional selections is important for the institutions to be cognizant of. In order for admissions personnel to better understand how to recruit first generation college students to their particular institution, they must recognize what influences these students’ college choice process. For the investigation, the researcher determined what influences a first generation college student’s college choice based on Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-stage college choice model which is one of the most well-known and most popular college choice models (Bergerson, 2009a; Bergerson, 2009c Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Ceja, 2006). Additionally, the model was selected for the study because it is comprehensive, empirically studied, and put into practice (Renn & Reason, 2013).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to determine the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students who select to attend a small, private, religious affiliated institution. First generation college students are often categorized as disadvantaged as opposed to their continuing generation peers in regards to college enrollment (Shaw et al., 2009); however, the study investigated the factors that influence these students’ college enrollment in order to better understand and assist these students. An understanding of the college choice process for students’ institutional selection is necessary (Bergerson, 2009a). Although there is an abundant amount of research on first generation students and decades of empirical knowledge

on college choice, there is not as much research conducted on the college choice process for first generation college students.

The investigation seeks knowledge on first generation college students during their college choice process in order to determine the factors that influence students during the important time in the shaping of their future. Institutional budget cuts within American higher education has increased the need for target marketing and recruiting efforts to maintain enrollment figures (Bergerson, 2009a). With the continued increase in first generation college students at American colleges and universities, there is a need to fully understand the college choice process for these students. Hossler and Palmer (2008) acknowledged, “It is critical for admission professionals to understand factors that shape the college decision-making process and the stages students move through as they make decisions” (p. 43).

Additionally, the results from the research provided administrators, teachers and guidance counselors in secondary education with knowledge on how to assist these students through their college choice process. In a K-12 environment, teachers, counselors and other supportive adults can assist in creating an encouraging atmosphere that fosters achievement, engagement, and motivation (Horn & Nunez, 2000).

### **Significance of the Study**

The data collected from the study assisted in advancing literature and research on the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students. There are several prominent areas of significance of the study. The first is to add to the areas of research available for higher education leadership and admissions personnel to fully understand the college choice process for first generation college students. The second area of significance is to

assist first generation college students through the college choice process by utilizing the findings in order to better understand the experiences of these students.

The first area of significance of the study is to advance higher education research regarding the college choice process for first generation college students. Inman and Mayes (1999) have acknowledged that an understanding of first generation college students will assist higher education institutions with focusing more on recruiting which is important for admissions professionals. Additionally, knowing what are the most relevant factors to a prospective student when they are making a decision on which college to attend allows institutions to determine the key elements involved. These elements can then constitute the foundation of a comprehensive enrollment management plan (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). The study seeks to assist higher education admissions professionals and institutional leadership in becoming more knowledgeable on the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students.

The study also provided administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors in secondary education with the information on the factors that influence the college choice process for their students that become first generation college students. Teachers and other supportive adult figures, such as guidance counselors, can assist in creating a positive, encouraging atmosphere that fosters achievement, motivation, and engagement in positive behaviors (Hardré, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ludden, 2012). While it is important, for secondary educators to assist all students through the college choice process, it is even more essential to provide support and encouragement to first generation college students.

## **Research Questions**

The study seeks to explain the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students that selected to attend Shorter University. The following research questions guided the study:

- 1) What factors impact the three stages of college choice;
  - a. Predisposition stage;
  - b. Search stage;
  - c. Choice stage;
- 2) How did these factors impact student decisions to attend post-secondary education;
- 3) How did these factors impact student decisions to attend Shorter University, a small, private, religious affiliated institution;
- 4) At what point, did the student determine that he/she would attend a post-secondary institution; and
- 5) At what point, did the student complete the college choice process by choosing to attend Shorter University, a small, private religious affiliated institution?

## **Summary**

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduced the general problem and research questions that were investigated during the study. Additionally, the purpose and significance of the study, overview of methodology, and limitations and delimitations are stated. The second chapter includes a comprehensive literature review of college choice and first generation college students that lays an empirical foundation for the study. Also, the theoretical framework is explained. The third chapter describes methodology including research design, research questions, data collection procedures, researcher bias, and

data analysis. The fourth chapter presents the results from the study. Finally, the fifth chapter presents a summary of the findings and results from the study as well as provides recommendations for practitioners and areas for further research.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review explores relevant research and theories related to college choice, particularly for first-generation college students that choose to attend Shorter University, a small, private, religious affiliated college. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section presents an exploration of literature on college choice theories including Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982) with a particular focus on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. The second area discussed is an investigation of first generation students. Finally, the third section is an examination of literature concerning small, private, religious affiliated institutions with a focus on Christian colleges and universities. While there is a dearth of literature on first generation students, analyzing the research that does exist provided insight about the subpopulation of students in conjunction with their college choice process. Moreover, the added component of studying first generation students at a small, private, religious institution helps one understand a specialized institution type.

### **Models of College Choice**

A large majority of families and institutional policymakers in the United States believe everyone should obtain some form of postsecondary education and training. In fact, a college degree remains to be viewed as the path to personal contentment and financial achievement, and the decisions students make regarding their post-secondary career have a lasting influence on their lives (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). The college choice process is taking place as a student determines to continue their education by enrolling in a college or university.

Information about the college choice process has increased dramatically over the past few decades. College choice is known as the process of preparing for, applying to, and enrolling in a respective college or university (Chapman, 1981; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982). For high school students in the midst of the college choice process, there are many decisions to make, such as which institution type, where the institution is located, which academic program, among others. There are various routes a high school student may choose to take upon high school graduation. Some choose to enlist in the military; some choose to enter directly into the workforce while others make the decision to continue their education at a post-secondary institution. Today more jobs require education beyond high school than ever before. Research suggests that if the job market remains the same, in 2018, there will be more available jobs that require a college degree than qualified people to fill them in the United States (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012).

The final college destination of each student is the result of a process of college choice that usually begin in the early high school years and ends with the selection of their college they will attend (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). In some cases, their parents have helped lay the groundwork for what is next in their lives; however, for many students, their parents did not have the opportunity to attend college upon completion of high school. These students are classified as first generation college students. According to Pascarella et al. (2004), first generation college students are described as a student in which neither parent has obtained a college degree from a four-year institution (Pascarella et al., 2004). These students are portrayed as having a disadvantage regarding the college choice process in comparison to students who have parents that have

completed a four-year college degree (Choy, 2001). Therefore, the literature review is going to examine the disadvantages of this subpopulation of students in order to help provide families, mentors, high school guidance counselors, and admissions officers a more realistic view on how to work with these students through the college choice process.

Throughout the decades, there have been multiple theories of college choice. The first models of college choice were developed more than thirty years ago. These models of college choice have increased the knowledge and understanding of the process of choosing to pursue post-secondary education. Some prominent models include the Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The primary model of college choice for the investigation is Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model; however, it is imperative to understand other models of college choice for framing the study. The section of the literature review discusses these three models to provide a foundation for comprehending college choice.

Chapman (1981), Litten (1982) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) all provide process college choice models that use elements of students, their institutional characteristics, and the college application process (Henrickson, 2002). Bergerson (2009a) has acknowledged that process models of college choice research have provided a foundation continuing research. While there are differences in the structure of these three models as described in these sections, all three of these college choice models are considered developmental in that each stage of the process is associated with cognitive and affective outcomes which ultimately result in college enrollment (Henrickson, 2002). While there are other models of college choice since Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model, many emerging college choice models are built on the foundation laid by Hossler and Gallagher (Bergerson, 2009a).

## **Chapman Model of College Choice**

In the early 1980s, theorists began investigating behavioral theory regarding how students select a college. Chapman (1981) was one of the first to establish a foundation for college choice with his Model of Student College Choice. The model was based on the factors that affected the student's decision of which institution to attend and demonstrated how characteristics of the students and how external factors influence their enrollment decision (Bergerson, 2009a).

Chapman (1981) launched a behavioral model of college choice that included five different stages of determining the path of college selection. Those five stages are: pre-search behavior, search behavior, application decision, choice decision and matriculation decision.

Pre-search behavior begins when a student first begin to think or has an initial desire to attend college; this usually takes place for an extended amount of years and often begin prior to high school. Search behavior is when a student has determined college enrollment will take place and the student begins to contemplate a list of different colleges; this usually takes place while the student is in high school. Once the student applies to a college, or colleges, the application decision takes place. The choice decision occurs once the student is admitted to the colleges; the student considers the colleges where admission has taken place. The choice decision ends when the student has chosen the institution to attend. The final stage in the model is the matriculation decisions which typically occurs when the student officially enrolls in the institution (Chapman, 1986).

The model was one of the first endeavors to describe the college choice process (Ceja, 2006; Paulsen, 1990). Chapman's primary objective was to assist college administrators in a deepening of the understanding of how student's made the institutional choice to attend college in order to better recruiting practices; he argued that understanding the complex process would

assist with institutional efforts to communicate to students through the recruiting process (Chapman, 1981). Because the model was one of the first models, it did not address timeframes in which these stages take place in a student's life. Due to the insufficiency, among others, scholars and researchers have made adaptations to Chapman's Model of College Choice.

### **Litten Model of College Choice**

Litten's Model of College Choice was developed in 1982 and explains college choice as a continuing process with five steps (Cresswell-Yeager, 2012). Litten (1982) built on the foundation of Chapman's model (1981) and described how college choice differs for students based on the student's race, gender, parent's education, geographic location, and ethnic group (Bergerson, 2009a). The model's five steps are described as a linear approach with the first step being deciding to attend college or college aspiration. The second step is developing a list of colleges to explore, the third step is gathering information then moving on to the fourth step through applying to the colleges. The fifth and final step is to enroll at the college. Because of the linear approach, each step moves on to the next and the process is often compared to a funnel. There are many different influences that affect the process including the high school, family members, characteristics of the student, as well as characteristics of the college and higher education in general (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Because of the complexity of the five-step model and the distinguishing factors based on race, ethnic groups, etc., the researcher conducted further research to search for a model that was more practical for the qualitative study.

### **Hossler and Gallagher Model of College Choice**

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Model of College Choice is one of today's most widely known and most popular models in college choice (Bergerson, 2009a; Bergerson, 2009c; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Ceja, 2006). The model is known for the conceptualization of the

college choice process with an emphasis on a three-stage model (Bergerson, 2009a; Bergerson, 2009c). The three stages of the model include 1) predisposition, 2) search, and 3) choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). These three stages move from the student's aspirations about college to the student's actual selection of a college. The first stage, predisposition, involves educational aspirations; the second stage, search, includes gathering materials and information; the third stage, choice, involves choosing a college for enrollment (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). The following section will discuss each stage in depth and provide empirical research related to each stage. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is known as a developmental model in that students develop as they mature while moving from stage to stage (Bergerson, 2009a).

The college choice model was selected for the study because it reflects college choice as an ongoing process through the three stages rather than a decision made at one-point in the student's life (Bateman & Spruill, 1996). Additionally, with the developmental nature of the model, there is a tendency to assign age ranges to the stages throughout the model that assists in tracking the progression of the college choice process. According to Cabrera and LaNasa (2000), the college choice process begins in seventh grade and concludes at the end of the twelfth grade when they enroll in an institution of higher education.

**Predisposition.** The first stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice theory is the predisposition stage. The stage consists of the development of the student's aspirations and expectations of college (Bergerson, 2009a). According to Smith (2008), the predisposition stage refers to the time from birth to approximately the ninth grade where students acquire a palate for or disposition about college. The stage is shaped by a number of background characteristics, cultures, and influences and can differ significantly based on the individual student (Bergerson, 2009b; Ceja, 2001). During the predisposition stage, students decide to

continue, or not to continue their education after high school graduation (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). It is also important to note the difference in educational aspirations and actual educational attainment. Many students of color have aspirations to attend post-secondary education, but may lack in the actual attainment of a college degree (Bergerson, 2009b). Just as students of color, other minority groups and first generation college students may be placed in the category. While the predisposition stage is not the stage where the student actually enrolls in post-secondary education, it is a critical first step in determining if there is a desire to attend college. Choy (2001) asserted that as early as the eighth grade, first generation students report lower education expectation than their peers. Other influential factors are the influence of peers, student achievement, and the involvement of students in high school organizations and activities (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

Parental influence plays a critical role during the predisposition stage of the college choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Creswell-Yeager, 2012; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Scholars acknowledge that a key component in a successful college choice including application, admission, and enrollment is parental involvement (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1998; King 2012). Smith (2008) asserted that

Parental involvement in college choice is a collection of parent-generated school and home-centered activities that collectively contribute to a student's ability to prepare for, apply to, and enroll in four-year colleges and universities. Parental involvement in college choice is a process by which parents help map out an educational plan and communicate a dependable protocol for their children to follow in order to be successful. (p.148)

Additionally, scholars report that for traditional-age students, parents play a crucial role in their student's college choice and decision-making process regarding college attendance (Ceja, 2006; Choy, 2001; Smith, 2008). The parents' educational level as well the educational level of

siblings and extended family reflects on the student during the predisposition stage of the college choice process (Bergerson, 2009a).

Teachers and other supportive adult figures can assist in creating an encouraging atmosphere that fosters achievement, motivation, and engagement in positive behaviors (Hardré, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Ludden, 2012). The adolescence period in a young person's life is such an impressionable time. The mentors and role-models that the individual aspires to be can truly impact the future of the young person's life. Hutchins and Akos (2012) explained how parents, teachers, friends, and other adult-figures play an important role in assisting adolescence through the transition to adulthood and provide them with knowledge on future career plans. Furthermore, students from rural schools, or smaller schools, tend to have closer student-teacher relationships (Hardré, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009; Hutchins & Akos, 2012). High school counselors can also play a large role in the life of a high school student especially when the student needs additional assistance in applying to colleges. According to Belasco (2013), the high school counselor is the most important school professional in providing college knowledge especially for disadvantaged populations such as students with low socioeconomic status.

Socioeconomic status is another influential factor that plays an important role in the disposition stage of college choice (Bergerson, 2009a; Bergerson, 2009c; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). When a student originates from a low-income household the expectation of attending college may be discouraged due to financial restraints. Hoxby and Avery (2013) acknowledged that many students from low-income families do not attend college or when they do they drop-out, do not complete their degree in a timely manner, or even attend institutions with poor resources to assist the student in being successful. These poor college outcomes can

derive from the low-income student not being academically prepared for college and being less able to pay for college. With tuition costs for higher education in the United States continually increasing, many low to moderate-income students are not positioned with the ability to be able to financially afford post-secondary education.

In 2002, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance recounted that over 400,000 students, or almost one-half of qualified low- and moderate- income students, would not be capable of attending a four-year college or university because of financial barriers (Beasley, 2011). Many of these students from low to moderate socioeconomic status families may be first generation students. In fact, almost half of first generation college students come from a low socioeconomic background (Bryant & Nicolas, 2011). Furthermore, first-generation students report they chose to pursue a college degree to financially assist their family after college, which can contribute to added stress while they are trying to complete a college degree (Bui, 2002).

**Search.** The second stage of the college choice theory is search which allows the student to explore different types of higher education institutions to determine where they will attend college by forming choice sets and explore which institutional characteristics are important (Bergerson, 2009a). “During the search and choice stage of the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), students use information and consult peers, family, and high school and higher education sources as they define their choice set, narrow it to reasonable options, and make decisions of where to apply and enroll” (Bergerson, 2009b, p. 75). Throughout the stage, students are actively searching for different colleges and universities that they have interest in attending (Griffin et al., 2012; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Parental involvement can also play a major role during the search stage. Tierney (2002) suggested a redefinition of the phrase “parental involvement” because of the extended network of many

family members and supportive adult figures that can assist the student in college enrollment plans especially for students of color, minority groups or first generation students. Parental support involves tangible activities such as attending campus visits, saving money for college, and assistance completing admissions documents (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Additionally, students are not primarily concerned with financial factors at this point of the college choice process; financial concerns arise later in the decision-making process (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). However, parents are typically involved with gathering information on college costs and the availability of financial aid (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). Paulsen (1990) pointed out that the search stage in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model is the least studied of the three stages.

For many prospective students, the search stage is the time to visit websites, request information, conduct campus visits, attend preview days, etc. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the central element of the search process is information gathering which takes place in a variety of ways. Today, many students are utilizing the web and social media for college search. In fact, students searching for college information by utilizing social media led to self-efficacy about applying to college and college admissions procedures (Won et al., 2013). However, not all students can easily navigate their college search via web and social media.

Our first-generation college students, even if they have high-speed internet still struggle through the college application process because they do not have the same frame of reference and knowledgebase when it comes to things like college search websites. If you do not know what it is you are looking for or how the process is supposed to work, you are probably not going to be accessing the wealth of information available through technology meant to assist you. (Fleming, 2012, p.14)

Despite the increasing ability for students to access information electronically, printed materials distributed by college and universities to interested students remains an important source of information during the search process (Hartley & Morphew, 2008).

There is contradicting information about the role of high school teachers and guidance counselors during the search stage. Researchers acknowledge that high school personnel can often assist low-income students with the information gap during the search stage (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001); however, Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) found that high school personnel have a limited role in assisting the general student body with their college search. Most importantly for the study, Cabrera and LaNasa, (2000) suggested that high school personnel, such as counselors and teachers, are an important source during the college search for low-income, first generation students. Nevertheless, many high school counselors put the responsibility on the student to be aware of college deadlines, admission processes, and scholarship deadlines. In fact, many students do not feel they receive sufficient assistance from high school counselors (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996).

Campus visits are another important component to the search stage. According to an Eduventures survey of high school juniors and seniors, 71% said a campus visit was the most trusted source of providing information during their college search process (The Campus Visit Experience, 2011). As Grier (2014) pointed out, college admissions officers visiting the high schools is important for a student's college search, but not as good as the student experiencing the college firsthand through a visit to the campus. In many cases, first generation college students may not have the accessibility to visit institutions they are interested in. For some students, their parents may not have visited college campuses during their adolescence so they do not encourage or provide resources for the student which is an important component of the search process. In 2009, a Zinch.com study investigated high school seniors that had already made their college selection; these students signified that the college visit was the most important factor in making their decision to attend that college (The Campus Visit Experience, 2011;

Cohen, 2009). A visit to a college campus can consist of a scheduled private campus tour or simply attending a campus preview day. Sheehy (2013) recommended students attend a preview day at a local or neighboring college even if there is no intention of applying; this is extremely helpful for first generation students because it will expose them to a college environment.

During the search stage, students begin to rely more predominately on peers and on representatives from college and universities, as well as college admissions materials, as they proceed through the search process in order to make the final college decision. Outside of searching various institutions, the students will also take college entrance examinations and complete admissions applications of the institution on the final choice set. When looking at the model through a developmental lens, the students will be ready to move to the final stage of the college choice process by the middle of the senior year (Bergerson, 2009a).

**Choice.** The final stage in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice is choice. Although it is accepted that the process of college choice involves multiple stages, the choice stage has been the focus of the most empirical work of college choice (DesJardins, Ahlborg, & McCall, 2006). While the final stage has been empirically researched the most, for the purpose of the study, the researcher investigated each of the three stages of the college choice process in order to determine the influential factors of the college choice process for first generation college students. The choice stage is defined as the time when the students make their final decision on which school to attend (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). This stage of the college choice process usually takes place when the student is in the eleventh or twelfth grade (Bergerson, 2009c; Griffin et al., 2012; Smith & Fleming, 2006). By the time the high school student has entered the eleventh or twelfth grades, the choice of where he will attend college is made and he should be making plans for attending college. Studies have shown that overall, the

choice stage is primarily composed of when the student applies for admissions to the institution(s) and makes the final choice of which institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Smith & Fleming, 2006).

Students develop robust preferences among the institutions in their choice set, evaluate their personal qualifications for admission, and contemplate how they will finance their education during the choice stage (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). Some of the most important decision makers for the choice stage are costs, institutional characteristics, parental encouragement and student's aspirations (Bergerson, 2009a). Regarding sources of information during the choice stage, the roles of parental figures and peers decrease during the time while the role of the institution increases as it directly influences the student institutional choice (Bergerson, 2009a). While parental figures may not serve as sources of information during the stage, parental encouragement does affect the enrollment decision (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000).

As discussed in the search stage, students were not particularly concerned with the cost of attendance or financial aid availability; however, once in the senior year, financial aid is an area of interest for the students (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper (1999). According to Choy and Ottinger (1998), the student's ability to finance enrollment is one of the primary considerations that contribute to matriculation. Perceptions of financial aid availability at the institutions positively affect students during the choice stage, and they indirectly influence students to select a particular institution type based on total cost of attendance for the student (Choy & Ottinger, 1998; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2011). Students from lower socioeconomic status are significantly more likely to be concerned about cost of attendance and financial aid availability when selecting the institution to attend which results in

using financial aid as the primary factor in making a final college decision (Berkner & Chavez, 1997).

Institutional characteristics such as reputation, proximity, curriculum, social opportunities, and sense of fit are among the factors that play a role in the students' enrollment decisions (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006). A study conducted by McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, and Perez (1998) indicated that the reputation of the institution played a role in the students' decisions to enroll. The study investigated the importance of college rankings in college decisions and found the majority of students do not use college rankings in their college choice decision, but that the academic reputation of the college "is a powerful influence on students" (p. 533). In a study conducted to investigate the effects of student characteristics and institutional factors of college choice, DesJardins, Dundar and Hendel (1999) found that location and curriculum play an important role in the college choice decision. They found that students will typically select an institution that has a desired program offering. Additionally, DesJardins, Dundar, and Hendel (1999) have acknowledged that the distance from the students' home "appears to be negatively associated with the likelihood of student application or enrollment" (p. 126). Social opportunities as well as honors programs and study abroad programs are other institutional characteristic that plays a role in students' college choice (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Nora, 2004). Institutional fit, or a sense of fit, is also very important when making the choice of where to attend college for many students especially for first generation students.

During the choice stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, students' academic achievement is an important factor related to their college decision (Bergerson, 2009a). High school rank and students' test scores play a role in college choice options (DesJardins, Dunbar, & Hendel, 1999). Students with high levels of academic achievement are often presented with

more options of higher education (Teranishi, Allen, & Solorzano, 2004). Additionally, high achieving students have access to more information about enrollment in higher education (Hurtado, Inkelsa, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997) and these high achieving students from high socioeconomic status families often hire personal college counselors to assist them through the college admissions process and the college choice process (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). The students' families' level of social capital and socioeconomic status also relate to academic achievement (Bergerson, 2009a; Goddard, 2003). Finally, the context of students' high school can affect their enrollment decisions (Bergerson, 2009a). The size of students' high school and their graduating class can play a role in college choice options (DesJardins, Dunbar, & Hendel, 1999). Other factors of the students' high school that influence their college expectations are the high schools' engagement and impact on parental involvement (Perna, 2008) and the relationship between the high schools and institutions of higher education (Wolniak & Engber, 2007).

While many different factors influence the choice stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model, the importance of these factors vary for students from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Bergerson 2009a, McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998). In order to explain the differences in enrollment by ethnicity and race, Perna (2000) developed a model of college enrollment investment decisions. Perna (2000) discovered differences in the decision of college attendance in different ethnic and racial groups. Another study found differences in the students' proficiency in weighing the costs and benefits of college enrollment by gender, socioeconomic status, and race (Beattie, 2002).

In summary, the section presented empirical research on three college choice models with extensive discussion on each stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model.

College choice models are often described as a complicated process that spans a period of time influenced by multiple factors (Creswell-Yeager, 2012). Predisposition occurs early in life through the early high school years. Search is the second stage that occurs once the student begins to research and inquire about various colleges and universities. The final stage is choice, which takes place when the student makes the decision of the college or university that the student will attend. Within the framework of the college choice model, several key concepts were discussed including: parental influence, socioeconomic status, influence of high school teachers and guidance counselors, institutional fit, among others. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model served as the conceptual framework for the study of first generation students during the college choice process in while making the choice to attend a small, private, religious affiliated university. After reviewing literature about college choice, the next section focused on a review of literature on characteristics first-generation students and influences that affect college choice.

### **First Generation Students**

With an increasing emphasis on college access for everyone, research on first generation students over the past couple of decades has increased significantly. A movement for campuses to sponsor programs designed to increase college access and enrichment opportunities for historically underserved, economically or educationally disadvantaged students has taken place over the past several years (Shaw et al., 2009). The phrase "first generation students" is very common in higher education especially in the realm of enrollment management, academic success services, intercollegiate athletics, and among higher education professionals in general. For many students, the next step upon high school graduation is to attend college; however, for first generation students that next step may not be as easily attainable as portrayed. According to

scholars, first generation college students often lack the advantages and resources that prepare these students to be competitive college applicants (Berger, 2000; Smith, 2008; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001)

### **What is a First Generation Student?**

The phrase “first generation student” has existed for many years; however, there are various ways to define the subpopulation of students. Since the formation of the concept “first generation” was originated by Fuji A Adachi, there have been many studies of first generation students (Rood, 2009). For the purpose of the study, a first generation student is defined as a student where neither parent has obtained a college degree from a four-year institution (Pascarella et al., 2004). When parents have not attended college, their offspring are less likely to attend as well (Chen, 2005; Hill & Jepsen, 2007; Tucker, 2010). Because they are the first in the family to attend college, they often are less knowledgeable about college costs and college admissions procedures (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Research shows that first generation students are more likely to come from a lower socioeconomic status, be an ethnic minority and more likely to speak a language other than English at home. Additionally, first generation students tend to have lower grade point averages and lower SAT scores (Cho et al., 2008). Overall, the subpopulation of students seems to be at a disadvantage for college success as compared to continuing generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004). However, according to Bryant and Nichols (2011) first generation college students are less likely initially to consider college, but are inclined consider enrolling in postsecondary education over time. They also tend to be older in age and face both financial and familiar pressures that decrease their likelihood of academic success in college (Rood, 2009).

Understanding the college choice process for first generation students assisted in determining the predisposition of why these students are less likely to initially consider college.

Each year the majority of high school graduates enroll directly in a college or university. In fact, approximately 68% of high school students immediately enroll in college upon high school graduation (Bryant & Nicholas, 2011). There are many different subpopulations of these students that immediately enroll in college, and for the purpose of the study, first generation students were investigated further. As of 2012, of the five to seventeen year olds in the United States, more than one-third of them are first-generation students, and among college-going students, first generation students are typically underrepresented minority groups (collegeboard.org). When evaluating the percentages of students that enroll in college, it is imperative to fully understand the influential factors that affect the college choice process especially for first generation college students being they compose approximately one quarter of college students.

According to Engle (2007), first generation students are likely to delay college entry, need remedial coursework, and drop out of college. Approximately 25% of college students drop out after their first semester and the attrition rate for first generation college students by the end of their first year is almost 50% (Ishitani, 2005). An expanding number of colleges and universities are increasing efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate students who are the first in their families to attend college (Tucker, 2014). According to Rood (2009) much of the research of first generation college students is quantitative in nature (e.g. Horn & Nunez, 2000; Chen & Carroll, 2005); however, there is some qualitative research that has been conducted (Orbe, 2004).

## **Differences between First Generation and Continuing Generation Students**

Studies of generational status comparing first generation and continuing generation college students are founded upon the assumptions that these students are qualitatively different with respect to their pre-college characteristics, college experiences, and college outcomes (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). While there are similarities between these two groups of students, there are countless inequalities. First generation students in comparison with continuing generation students are less likely to attend college in the first place; when they decide to attend, they are less likely to persist to graduation (Choy, 2001; Rood, 2009). While both groups may have access to necessary college access information including college fairs, admissions representative high school visits, the internet, virtual tours, college view books, college visits, parent and teacher expectations, these essential components are not enough unless they are harmoniously connected as an established part of a college access culture (Klug, 2009).

It is critical for first generation students to have support to create the college access culture that may not be present in their lives due to the inadequacies of their family culture in regards to college completion. According to a 2001 study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics, 82% of continuing generation students enrolled immediately in college after high school while only 54% of students whose parents had only completed high school and only 36% of student whose parents that did not have a high school diploma (Choy, 2001). Almost half (43%) of first generation college students who attended a four-year institution dropped out without earning a degree within a period of six years (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009). After six years, 55% of continuing generation college students earned a bachelor's degree compared to only 11% of first generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). According to

the data previously stated, first generation students are faced with grim enrollment and college completion statistics in comparison with their counterparts.

### **Academic Self-Efficacy and Preparedness**

While there are a multitude of reasons that prevent students from attending college, a lack of academic self-efficacy and preparedness is a contributing factor. The National Center for Education Evaluation (2009) identified two issues related to college student attendance as being 1) ensuring students are academically prepared and 2) guiding students to take the appropriate steps for entrance into college. Many believe first generation students need and require special attention and consideration to ensure a successful college education. The underrepresented group of students tends to have more negative attitudes about their academic potential; reporting lower academic self-efficacy (Aspelmeier et al., 2012). ACT publishes a pamphlet that is specifically intended for first generation college students. The article provides resources for students who may need some additional support and encouragement in order to promote self-confidence for these students to enroll in college. One piece of motivational encouragement the article provides is “remember that your number one fan should be you” (ACT, 2007).

Many studies show that first generation college students are at a disadvantage when deciding to attend college (Choy, 2002). As previously mentioned, these students are academically underprepared in comparison with continuing generation college students (Choy, 2001). Many first generation college students also have limited access to college preparatory courses and advanced placement courses because of the lack of offerings at their high schools (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). According to Weldon (2009), of all of the high schools in the United States, more than 40% of them failed to offer these rigorous courses to their students. According to the Horn and Nunez (2000) first generation students are less likely to

take algebra in high school, which is considered the gateway of math courses for future enrollment in college. In fact, only 14% of first generation students took algebra in eighth grade compared to 34% of students whose parents did attend college (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Not only does the subpopulation of students lack in advanced placement and rigorous high school courses, they lack support and preparation in one of the key pieces of the college admissions puzzle, standardized testing. Standardized testing is categorized as a critical component of social and cultural capital that many underrepresented students are not prepared for and may not have access to (Walpole et al., 2005).

There is a persistent gap between students who are college bound and those who are less likely to attend college. Multiple characteristics and factors play a role in the distinctive gap; among the student group less likely to attend college are first generation college students. In order to alleviate the gap, federal and state governments have implemented programs to provide access to all students and promote academic preparedness (Rood, 2009). Programs aim to endorse path to college programs, promote academic preparedness, and encourage students to decide to attend college (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011). Many programs are aimed at promoting access and college enrollment for disadvantaged students. There is currently a nation-wide emphasis on college access. Educational policy makers are calling for an increased number of students to obtain a college degree in the United States (Matthews, 2010; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; Obama, 2009). It is evident that there is a need to provide additional resources to traditionally underrepresented student populations.

In 1998, Congress developed and implemented the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) program. The grant program was implemented to increase low-income student's enrollment in post-secondary education by

preparing them to enter and complete their degree. Additionally, GEAR UP provides college scholarships to low-income students (Cates & Schaeffle, 2011). Another government program to assist disadvantaged students are the federal TRIO programs. TRIO, which began with three programs, now includes eight specific programs targeted to serve and assist low-income students, first generation students, and disabled students to promote the progression of education from middle school to post-secondary education (Walsh, 2000). According to Engle (2007), TRIO and GEAR UP are the two most well-known and long-standing federally funded programs that aid in assisting first generation students. In addition to the previous mentioned federal programs, there are also nationwide programs that aim to increase college completion such as the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), the nation's largest charter school organization (Angrist, et al., 2010). KIPP schools target low-income and minority students and reinforce what some call a no excuses program including extended school day and year, strong student work ethic as well as selective teacher hiring. Many of the low-income and minority students that KIPP caters to are classified as first generation students (Carter, 2000).

### **Socioeconomic Status**

A student's college matriculation is positively correlated with their family's socioeconomic status (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005; Tucker, 2010). Historically first generation college students have been associated with coming from families of lower socioeconomic status (Rood, 2009). Johnson (2010) claimed, "Children from impoverished circumstances and those who have no family history of college attendance require special attention and support to assure that they have access to higher education and a reasonable chance of success" (p. 11). With the tuition cost of higher education in the United States continuously and rapidly on the rise, there is great concern for providing access to traditionally

under-represented students that come from families of low socioeconomic status. However, if the student low-income family is an academically high-achieving student, the student may have the opportunity to attend a highly selective institution for little to zero out-of-pocket cost. In 2005, Harvard implemented a policy that resulted in zero cost for a student whose annual family income level was \$40,000 or below which was quickly imitated by other institutions such as Yale, Princeton, etc. (Hoxby & Avery, 2013). While the information is comforting for low-income high-achieving students, the number of these students is minimal in comparison with other low- to mid-achieving, low-income students.

Consequently, many of these students from low socioeconomic background also attend K-12 schools in low-income and minority areas. In fact, a large amount college knowledge is provided to students through the high school counselors and in the case of low-income and minority schools, there may not be adequate access to counselors. In some cases, these high school students in particular have decreased access to counselors, which leads to decreased access to college information (Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz, 2012). McKillip, Rawls, and Barry suggested that students in the most need of assistance from the high school counselors typically have the least access to them (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012).

In addition to accessibility to high school counselors, many students from low socioeconomic status have limited resources to obtain information about colleges. Limited access to information may affect students from low-income families as they are already positioned as disadvantaged which could lead to explain disparities in college enrollment among these under-represented students (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Hill, 2008; Perna, 2006). Even when students from low socioeconomic status have access to information about college, visit days, scholarships or admissions representative visits at the high schools, research shows that

these sources of information about college may be inadequate and it may take additional effort from the high school counselor or teachers to encourage higher education (Cross & Burney, 2005).

Another quality of first generation college students that come from low socioeconomic status families is that they tend to come from rural areas (Couregge, 2011; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). According to a study in 2003, the United States Department of Agriculture found that 14% of individuals from rural areas, approximately 7.5 million people, live in poverty (USDA, 2004). “Herzog and Pittman (1995) argue that modern American society does not value rural environments or the economically disadvantaged, creating prejudices against these populations” (McCoullough, 2011, p. 51). Rural students, as opposed to students from metropolitan areas or urban students, have limited access to college preparatory courses, career planning and counseling especially students in low-income communities (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). Many students from rural areas tend to have lower career aspirations due to extenuating circumstances. “Youth growing up in impoverished rural communities face numerous developmental challenges that can adversely impact their development and adaptation to early adulthood” (Irvin, et al., 2011, p. 1226). According to scholars, there are few studies that have been conducted to examine the rural students’ access to post-secondary preparation activities such as college visits, speaking with college admissions counselors, and so forth (Irvin et al., 2011).

One may question why the pursuit of knowledge about first generation student enrollment in post-secondary education is necessary. The answer is because college can oftentimes benefit disadvantaged students the most. A recent report found that students that would typically be considered the least likely to go to college because of their academic and demographic

backgrounds procured the largest jolt in income from their college degree (Johnson, 2010). It is imperative for society to determine ways to assist underrepresented students in finding resources and avenues to obtain higher education. In a recent study by the Educational Longitudinal Study Project, researchers tracked a cohort of 15,000 high school sophomores to determine academic achievement, college entry, and college graduation. Of all of the students surveyed, 70% stated they planned to obtain a bachelor's degree. When the group was divided into quarters based on family income, of the bottom quartile, 58% stated they planned to obtain a bachelor's degree. Thirteen years later, only 14% of the bottom quartile students had actually obtained a bachelor's degree (Dynarski, 2015).

### **Parental Support**

When researchers study first generation students that have successfully obtained a baccalaureate degree, scholars found that parental support is a critical contributor (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Ceja, 2006; Choy, 2001; Smith, 2008). It is important for key players in the education system whether secondary or post-secondary to fully understand the importance of parental involvement in the college choice process for many students especially first generation students. College aspirations and access are closely related to the parent's education level while having parents that did not attend college creates an increased likelihood of not going to college (Choy, 2001). Regardless of the parents' lack of college degree, the single most important factor in predicting educational plans is parental encouragement (Ceja, 2006; Choy, 2001; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). In fact, a study showed that 47% of first generation students reported that parental encouragement was a very important reason for them enrolling in college compared to 43% of continuing generation college students (Saenz et al., 2007)

Consistent patterns throughout the college choice model for first generation students are family support/encouragement, academic unpreparedness, technology, financial status, and institutional fit/cultural acceptance. These factors all affect the first generation student through the college choice process. Once the college choice process for first generation students is understood by all constituents, there can be better support for these students. As Cabrera, Lopez, and Saenz (2012) described, “navigating the college choice process is akin to knowing the “shape of the river. There are a number of unexpected twists and turns, and to effectively maneuver one must possess knowledge to effectively chart a course to college” (p. 235). According to research, it is essential to find ways to support traditionally underrepresented students including first generation college students, low-income students, and students from Black and Latino backgrounds, in their preparation for and pursuit of post-secondary education (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). Because of the increased attention on first generation students over the past decades, there are many resources available to these traditionally underrepresented students. There are multiple websites targeted specifically to assist first generation students with the transition to college including information on financing one’s college education, how to select the college that is the best fit, as well as social networking opportunities (Sheehy, 2013). Many of these sites even include information for parents since the college admissions process is unfamiliar to them as well. The Center for Student Opportunity has developed *I’m First*, [www.imfirst.org](http://www.imfirst.org), a national nonprofit that provides scholarships for students who are the first in their family to attend a four-year institution. Additionally, the website, [firstgenerationstudent.com](http://firstgenerationstudent.com), provides students and families’ assistance with the college process from beginning to end.

A review of empirical research proves that first generation students are at a disadvantage in comparison with their peers. However, a recent study found contrary findings regarding first generation students. Donovan and Johnson (2005) asserted that these findings concluded that these students did not have difficulty entering or studying in college. The authors noted that the study was conducted using students who had been participants of programs aimed at serving first generation students in order to ease their transition to college. The study reinforces the idea that these types of programs are successful in assisting first generation students through the college choice process and the actual enrollment and matriculation of the student. Nonetheless, there still remains an information gap in regards to first generation students and their experience in choosing and enrolling in college especially at small, private colleges (Rood, 2009).

### **Small, Private Religious Affiliated Institutions**

While many famous American higher education institutions are private, the majority of college students in the United States attend public colleges and universities (Carnegie Classification). Consequently, the number of students attending public institutions has steadily increased over the past half century. The private sector of American higher education is structured into several different categories. At the top of the hierarchical academic pyramid are the prestigious institutions, which are highly selective and have large endowments. Another category is religious affiliated institutions that range from top-ranking institutions such as Notre Dame and Georgetown to small Bible colleges and even struggling liberal arts colleges. Additionally, there are many private colleges and universities of the secular nature throughout the United States. Other categories of private higher education include for-profit institutions and specialized private institutions (Altbach, 1999).

According to the Latin proverb *vitae, non scholae discimus*, a prospective college student's primary goal should be to seek the best knowledge source they can possibly get (Kogic & Poturak, 2013). When a student is in the process of making the decision of their college career, one might question whether they should attend a public or private institution. While there are advantages to each of these institution types, one must determine which the best institution for that individual. There are well-known private institutions as well as widely recognized public institutions. According to Dunner, Moorhouse, Walsh, and Barry (2012), the world's ten best universities are all private. Kogic and Poturak (2013) performed study of the factors that influence a student's decision of whether to attend a public or private institution. They found no significant relation between gender and a particular institution type that was chosen. They concluded students with higher academic achievement typically chose to attend a public university. Students who chose to attend a private university relied more heavily on scholarship awards as opposed to students who chose to attend a public university. When directly evaluating factors that affected these students college decision, parents contributed equally to students who chose to attend both institution types, and teachers more heavily influenced students that chose to attend a private university. According to the results, private universities have better media and advertising strategies and campus visits, facilities, and equipment all played a large role in students deciding to attend a private university. Finally, the study surveyed the students on their satisfaction level once enrolled and found that 70% of the students at a private university were very satisfied while only 49% of students at public universities were very satisfied (Kogic & Poturak, 2013).

Private institutions of higher education across the United States are very diverse in their institutional characteristics and offerings. The majority of private colleges and universities are

tuition-driven meaning that they depend on student tuition revenue for survival (Altbach, 1999). According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education and for the purpose of the study, small, Baccalaureate institutions were the area of focus for investigating students who made the decision to attend the small, private, religious affiliated institution. Institutions in the category of “Baccalaureate Colleges” were included if the institution awards at least 10% of all undergraduates degrees in the form of bachelor’s degrees and fewer than fifty master’s degrees. These institutions are predominately residential and have a FTE enrollment of fewer than 4,000 students. Nationwide, there are 271 higher education institutions classified as a Baccalaureate Colleges-Arts and Sciences. There are twelve classifications for size and setting for four-year institutions. Institution size is based on fall semester FTE enrollment that ranges from very small, small, medium, and large. The study looked specifically at “small” institutions ranging from 1,000-2,999 students. Institutional setting is based on primarily nonresidential, primarily residential, or highly residential. For the institution setting, the study looked specifically at “highly residential” at least half of the degree-seeking students living on campus and at least 80% at a full-time status (Carnegie Classification).

When exploring the idea of college choice, one may question how a student determines the type of institution they select to attend. The reasons they choose two-year college, four-year private college or a four-year public college are still to be determined. In fall of 2013, there were approximately 17.5 million undergraduate students attending a degree-granting postsecondary institution within the United States while 60% of those students attend four-year institutions and 40% attend two-year institutions (NCES, 2015). One tendency of first generation students is to predominantly enroll in two-year institutions (Ceja, 2001, Phillippe & Valiga, 2000). However,

it is evident that first generation students attend a variety of institution types based on a variety of reasons.

In addition to the institutional type and size, students may select the college they choose to attend based on its mission. Each higher education institution has a distinct mission and mission statements remain a necessity for framing the structure, values, culture, and personality of the organization. The mission of the institution can be viewed as a roadmap or blueprint to provide a sense of direction and supplies a common ground for everyone in the organization to be committed to and support (Topor, 1983; Woodrow, 2006). Historians found that religion, specifically organized Christianity, played a role in the establishment of eight of the nine pre-Revolutionary colleges in the United States (Woodrow, 2006). When a student considers attending a religious affiliated institution, the mission of the institution should be considered to ensure the institution's values and beliefs are aligned with the student's. For many Christian colleges and universities, the missions should offer to change the lives of the individuals involved, make a distinct difference in the lives of its people, offer deep meaning, and most importantly, be something everyone can believe in and to be something they know is right (Woodrow, 2006). According to a study conducted on the institutional missions of member institutions of the Council for Christian College and Universities, each of the 105 member institutions publish and communicate the Christian missions of their institutions. The study found many similarities and differences among the mission statements of the institutions and most importantly, validated the perceived value of Christian higher education institutions (Woodrow, 2006).

When investigating a student's link to enrolling in postsecondary education, their parents' education is only one component of many that contribute. Analyses show that academic

preparation, peer influence, family income, and educational expectations also greatly influence a high school student's likelihood of enrolling in a four-year institution (Horn & Nunez, 2000). With the factors previously discussed including low socioeconomic status families, parental support, academic preparedness, along with a host of other factors, one might wonder why first generation college students choose to attend Shorter University. In fact, some may deem it counterintuitive for these students who are historically from low-income families to attend private institutions, which typically have a higher costs (Rood, 2009). However, private institutions enroll approximately the same percentage of low-income and underrepresented students, including first generation students, as their public university counterparts. In fact, the average family income of a student at a public institution is higher than at private institutions (Nugent, 2015).

While the primary objective for most college students is to graduate and achieve a successful career in their chosen field, in many cases students that attend small, private institutions have the opportunity to complete internships and service work to enhance their resume prior to obtaining a bachelor's degree. According to a 2000-2013 study from the National Center for Education Statistics, the unemployment rates for individuals, ages 25-34 years old, who did not complete high school (15.1%), for those who completed high school (12.1%), and for those with some college education (8.0%) were also higher than the unemployment rate for those with at least a bachelor's (3.6%) (US Department of Education, 2014). Higher education institutions of all types pride themselves upon their job placement rates. Jones (2015) pointed out that

A recent social media survey conducted by Evangel University, Springfield, Missouri, reported a 91% placement rate of their students in either jobs or graduate programs related to their vocational interest. Similarly, a survey of the class of 2013 at Gordon

College, Wenham, Massachusetts, revealed that 95% of graduates were employed (full-time, part-time, or self-employed) or studying for an advanced degree. (p. 69)

While all colleges and universities desire to advertise high job placement rates, Jones (2015) discussed the advantages of small, private institutions that pertain to higher job placement rates for their students.

Over the last decade, faculty at Christian colleges and universities have begun making the transition from being teaching-focused to adding the component of scholarship. Many presidents and chief academic officers are increasing the research activity to increase the level of scholarship on their campuses. While the challenges are great with the culture shift from teaching to scholarship, the level of expertise in their fields will be increased. Students attending these colleges and universities will be greatly impacted by the culture shift as they will be presented with opportunities to assist their faculty and learn from their scholarship (Mallard & Atkins, 2004). In fact, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities emphasizes the importance of faculty scholarship to its member institutions. The Council provides scholarships for the faculty of member institutions to further explore scholarship opportunities. While many Christian colleges and universities are not research institution, these scholarships provide faculty with resources that they might not otherwise have available.

A major factor in determining which college a student will select to attend is the cost of attendance. A number of recent studies show that tuition and cost of attendance are major components of college choice with financial aid and cost of attendance being related to college enrollment (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006). According to a study conducted by Johnson and Stewart (1991), cost was considered by 80% of the students in the study indicating it to be important in their college considerations. As research dictates, many first generation students descend from low socioeconomic status families so one may ask why these students choose to

attend private institutions where in many cases tuition is more expensive than other public institutions. In fact, first generation students are likely to know the least about the price of attending college (Choy, 2001). “For the 2012–13 academic year, annual current dollar prices for undergraduate tuition, room, and board were estimated to be \$15,022 at public institutions, \$39,173 at private nonprofit institutions, and \$23,158 at private for-profit institutions” (US Department of Education, 2015).

While the cost for private nonprofit education is over double that of a public institution, it is important to note that many private institutions have significant discount rates that ultimately lower the sticker price of education. According to the 2013 National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) Tuition Discounting Report, the average tuition discount rate for first-time, full-time freshman for 2013-2014 was 46% (NACUBO, 2014). US News and World Report Education released an article in 2013 that quoted a first generation student who had chosen to attend a private university because of the extensive amount of scholarships and grants that were awarded even though the sticker price of the institution was over \$57,000 per year (Sheehy, 2013). Not only is tuition cost a key factor in college choice, student debt is also a major concern of prospective college students and their families in today’s society. More than one-third of graduates from small, private liberal arts colleges have no student debt or less than \$10,000 of student debt at the time of graduation (Nugent, 2015). While this is not the case at all small, private institutions, it is possible for the institution type to be affordable due to tuition discounting.

One primary reason for students to choose to attend a small, private religious affiliated institution is because it is simply a religious affiliated institution. College serves as a particularly important time where many young adults contemplate questions of faith and religion (Rennick et

al., 2013; Small & Bowman, 2011). Many scholars argue whether college students display an extensive decline in their religious faith ((Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno 2003) or whether college serves as a time to formulate religious beliefs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Small & Bowman, 2011). Other research designates that college students demonstrate evidence of increased interest in religion and high hopes for spiritual development throughout their college years (Astin et al., 2011; Rennick, et al., 2013).

Because of the importance of this stage in a young adult's life in regards to religious association, many students of strong religious faith prefer to attend a religious institution to reinforce that sense of spirituality while obtaining a college degree. In addition to the student's aspirations, many parents and/or family members of a strong faith, in particular Christianity, encourage enrollment at a religiously affiliated institution. The data from two national studies as provided by Small and Bowman (2011) reinforce the contextual importance of college years in regards to religiosity.

In a survey of 3,680 students, first-year college students were shown to become less likely to attend religious services, to pray or meditate, and to discuss religion while in college (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno 2003). In a survey of over 30,000 students, seniors reported becoming less religious relative to their peers since starting college. (Saenz and Barrera, 2007, p. 155)

Many religious students and families want to surround themselves with a campus community that is inundated with spirituality and religiosity to avoid becoming one of the statistics previously stated.

It is understandable that not all students are attracted to a religious college or university; however, these institutions types do provide a niche for recruiting and marketing to students aspiring to obtain their higher education with a spiritual emphasis. For example, a devout Catholic may only be interested in attending one of the many Catholic colleges or universities.

While there are various types of religiously affiliated denominational specific and nondenominational institutions, a recent study conducted by the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities showed that the majority of students identify themselves as Christian as opposed to a specific denomination; in fact, the student's college choice is rarely based on the denomination of the institution as opposed to the fact that it is identified as a Christian college or university (Davignon & Rine, 2013).

Students may also choose a specific college or university because of its geographic location. Some students are eager to move away from their current hometown, while other students prefer to stay close to home to pursue their college career. According to scholars, first generation students tend to apply to less selective colleges that are closer to their home (Engle, 2007; Inman & Mayes, 1999). They also are more likely to work while enrolled in college and live off campus possibly even at their home if location permits (Rood, 2009; Saenz et al., 2007). While living at home may not provide the full college experience for the student, it can lead to a major cost savings in the end. The typical college room and board cost, according to a study from the 2014-2015 academic year, was on average \$9804 (Supiano, 2014). According to these figures, living at home could potentially save approximately \$40,000 for a student's four-year college career. Aside from the student's intentions of where the student wishes to enroll in college, parents also play a role in where the student decides to enroll. Regardless of the student's socioeconomic status, many parents desire for their student to attend college and graduate with a bachelor's degree; however, some parents encourage their students to move away to attend college while other parents encourage their students to stay close to home to obtain their four-year degree (Turley, 2006)

An added benefit of choosing to enroll at a small, private institution is the individualized attention that students receive when attending a more intimate campus environment. Many first generation students desire and need extra attention while choosing to attend college due to their deficit-based attributes (Green, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Because of the lack of support these students may receive in other areas of their life, an extra component of encouragement from representatives from the selected campus, whether from admissions professionals or others, can ease the fears of the unknown for these students. Choy (2001) asserted that first generation students are less likely to receive help from their high schools in applying to colleges. In situations as previously mentioned, a student may be inclined to choose a college that provides extra guidance and support that they most likely have never received before. Furthermore, private institutions typically provide more individualized attention in the classroom as well. Generally, private colleges and universities have class sizes that range from ten to fifteen students per class.

Prospective college students often research graduation rates, retention rates, job placement, etc. when deciding which college to attend. These factors are especially important for underrepresented first generation students to determine which institution would be the best institutional fit for resources to promote academic success. According to the US Department of Education, all students, especially low-income and first generation that attend small, private liberal arts institutions have graduated students at higher rates and in a shorter amount of time (Nugent, 2015). It is also prevalent to consider the learning experiences that occur throughout a student's college career. According to scholars, small, private liberal arts education often provides a conducive environment for enhancing cognitive development for its students (Astin 1999; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In a recent study by

Pascarella, Wang, Trolan, and Blaich (2013), they found that students at small, private liberal arts institutions experienced better exposure to well-defined and organized classroom instruction as well as more integrated and reflective learning experiences than students at research universities or public regional institutions. Researching academic qualities and characteristics of particular colleges and universities is an important component of the college choice process especially for first generation students.

### **Summary**

When exploring college choice and first generation students, there is a wealth of information that must be considered when researching what factors influence the college choice process for first generation students in particular for those students who choose to attend a small, private, Christian institution. While college choice is a process that all college-going students experience, the process can be substantially different for first generation students in comparison with continuing generation students. From contemplating the idea of attending college to actually enrolling and attending college, the process can be quite daunting especially for students from families where the parents or guardians do not have a college degree. With a steady increase of first generation students entering college, it is important for higher education administrators and admissions personnel to be familiar with the challenges and roadblocks that these students experience. Inman and Mayes (1999) acknowledged that an understanding of first generation students will assist higher education institutions with focusing more on recruiting, program development, retention and graduation efforts.

The study delved into Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model as the conceptual framework to study first generation students' thoughts and actions as they choose to attend a small, private, religious affiliated university. Throughout the literature review, there

was an explanation of various college choice theories including Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982) while thoroughly discussing Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model. With a thorough discussion of empirical research on each stage of the college choice model, it was concluded that the model is a compilation of characteristics that span many years of a young adult's life. The discussion of the predisposition stage is composed of literature about parental influence, the role of teachers, counselors, and mentors as well as a section explaining the socioeconomic status of families. The search stage details literature that describes retrieving college information and campus visits. The final stage, choice, depicts the time when students make the decision of which college to attend.

An examination of research in relation to the characteristics and individualities of first generation students was also conducted. The literature review discusses a broad overview of qualities of many first generation students including socioeconomic status, parental influence, and academic preparedness, among others. Furthermore, there is an investigation of the reasons why a college student would choose to attend a small, private religious affiliated university. While research provides a variety of explanations pertaining to the institution type, the study revealed why first generation students choose to attend a small, private, Christian university. A comprehensive examination of literature pertaining to the previously mentioned topics allows for a qualitative study of first generation students to determine the factors that influence their college choice.

### CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The present study examined the college choice process for first generation college students that choose to attend Shorter University, a small, private, Christian university, to understand what factors influence the college choice process for first generation college students. The investigation evaluates the students' college choice process using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model. While there are various models of college choice, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model was selected as the organizational framework because it is comprehensive and reinforced both in practice and empirically (Renn & Reason, 2013). Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model for the investigation allows the researcher to comprehensively delve into the college choice process by applying a researched and practical model. The three-stage model is perhaps the most widely cited and used process model in the area of college choice literature as many researchers focus on testing and critiquing Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model (Bergerson, 2009a). Additionally, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is ideal for the qualitative study because of the developmental structure of the model in that each stage is associated with cognitive outcomes that ultimately lead to college enrollment.

The methodology for the investigation was a basic qualitative study. Qualitative research is a process for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups assign to a problem of social or human nature that involves developing questions and procedures, data from the participant's setting, data analysis, and the researcher interpreting the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009). The primary motivation of selecting a basic qualitative approach for the study

was to explain the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students. One approach to qualitative inquiry is a single institution qualitative study, which was selected for the investigation.

In order to understand the college choice process for all students considering college enrollment, the researcher interviewed first generation college students who chose to attend Shorter University. The investigation assisted in determining what factors influenced their college choice process to attend the particular institution type. Participants in the study were interviewed in order to better understand their college choice process when choosing to attend a small, private, religious affiliated institution. After reviewing transcripts and coding, the researcher developed themes from the responses revealed during the interviews. These methods of data collection and analysis provided research on the college choice process for first generation college students with the purpose of providing knowledge on the influential factors of the college choice process for first generation college students.

For the study, the participants were first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University. At the beginning of the fall 2015 semester, there were 64 first generation college students. The researcher sent email invitations and a hand-delivered invitation to all of the students to participate in the study. Additionally, the research was a flexible and emergent design due to the fact that the study may change or shift its focus once the collection of data begins. Creswell (2013) acknowledged that the initial plan for research needs to be flexible in that questions may need to be changed and data collection forms may need to be altered once the study begins.

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## **Research Questions**

The questions for the study focused on the factors that influence first generation college students to choose to attend Shorter University, a small, private, religious affiliated institution. These questions were universal for all participants in the study and were focused on gaining an understanding of the central problem in the study. The major research questions are as listed as follows:

- 1) What factors impact the three stages of college choice;
  - a. Disposition stage;
  - b. Search stage;
  - c. Choice stage;
- 2) How did these factors impact student decisions to attend post-secondary education;
- 3) How did these factors impact student decisions to attend Shorter University, a small, private, religious affiliated institution;
- 4) At what point, did the student determine that he/she would attend a post-secondary institution; and
- 5) At what point, did the student complete the college choice process by choosing to attend Shorter University, a small, private religious affiliated institution?

Investigating the areas listed in the research questions assist in achieving further insight into the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students who have specifically chosen to attend a small, religious affiliated institution.

## **Setting**

Creswell (2013) acknowledged that qualitative researchers often use the site where participants experience the issue in order to collect data in the field. Shorter University is

located in northwest Georgia at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains and is geographically positioned within a two-hour drive of Atlanta, Georgia, Chattanooga, Tennessee and Birmingham, Alabama. Founded in 1873, Shorter University is one of the oldest higher education institutions in the state of Georgia. The university is affiliated with the Georgia Baptist Convention and prides itself upon its Christian heritage and continued dedication to its Christian mission. Shorter prides itself on adhering to its motto, “Transforming lives through Christ,” and the university is committed to hiring committed Christians to serve as faculty and staff to serve its students. Shorter University has approximately 2000 students composed of traditional programs, online programs, and adult and professional programs. There are 40 degrees programs available for traditional students with the majority of the students being students majoring in the fields of business, biology and nursing. Additionally, Shorter participates in NCAA Division II athletics with 21 athletic teams and approximately half of the traditional student population being student-athletes. The majority of students who attend Shorter come from within a 100 miles radius of the institution, which is primarily northwest Georgia and the metro Atlanta area.

Shorter University was selected for the study to research first generation college students that attend the small, private, religious affiliated institution. The study provided higher education leadership and admissions professionals with further knowledge of the factors that influence the students’ decision to attend Shorter University. The research also provided high school counselors, teachers, and administrators with the background and knowledge on the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students.

## **Participant Selection**

For a qualitative study, the method of selecting participants aided in providing the researcher with the specific information necessary to understand the process, answer the research questions of the study, and accomplish the purpose of the study (Calabrese, 2006). Participants were specifically chosen in response to the students' self-reporting of first generation college student status on their college admission application. For the purpose of the study, a first generation college student is defined as a student where neither parent has obtained a college degree from a four year institution (Pascarella et al., 2004). The selection of participants for the qualitative research was strategic and premeditated. Purposeful sampling is the singular characteristic that distinguishes qualitative research from other forms of inquiry (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher used purposeful sampling for participants for the study from the freshman class at Shorter University. The sampling of students that was selected for the study was the population of first generation college students from the freshman class. To obtain a sampling of the first generation students in the freshman class at Shorter University, participants were sent email invitations and a hand delivered invitation to participate in the study. Participants were selected from the freshman class because these students most recently experienced the college choice process. There are currently 49 first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University.

Of the pool of first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University, 31 students participated in the study. There were 64 self-reported first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University at the beginning of the academic year, which is 24.6% of the freshman class. Forty of the students were female and twenty-four were male. Fifty-three students were from Georgia, four were from Florida, four were from

Alabama, one student was from Wisconsin, one was from Maryland, and one was an international student from Australia. Twenty-three students participate in varsity athletics. Eighteen students were commuting students that do not live in the residence halls; these students live within 50 miles of the campus.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher identified participants among the first generation college students to be selected for the study. Interviews were scheduled with each interviewee for one hour. A one-on-one format is the most common type of interview, which allows someone to provide information from one to another (Merriam, 1998). An introductory period was allowed for the researcher to explain the purpose of the study and disclose interview protocol to the participant (see Appendix A). The participant signed a consent document for the interview and for the audiotaping of the interview prior to the interview beginning (see Appendix B). Sixty minutes was allotted for the structured, oral interview format in order to allow sufficient time to fully engage the interviewee. Interviews took place on the campus of Shorter University in the Office of Admissions, which served as a quiet location that was free of distractions. The office space was also conducive to audiotaping the interview. The researcher took field notes and recorded the interviews with an audiotaping device to ensure accurate data collection. While collecting the data, the researcher observed thematic saturation that occurred throughout the interviews with the same responses presented frequently during the interviews. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher wrapped up by thanking the individual for their time and offered to provide the interviewee with a copy of the report.

The data collected during this study remained confidential throughout the duration of the study and analysis. The researcher was the only individual that had access to the data and data

were kept private and under lock and key. Each participant had the option of declining their participation in the interview, and the study aimed to provide an open atmosphere of communication between the participants and the researcher during the interview.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher was the instrument of data collection and data analysis by interviewing the participants. The researcher used an interview protocol to assist in conducting the interview. According to Merriam (1998), the interview protocol may be a list of questions that the interviewer uses to guide the structure of the interview also known as an interview script. The interview script included a series of eleven interview questions to spark a conversation with the students selected for the study. The eleven questions chosen for the interview script are deemed necessary to reveal information that relates to the intent of the study. The interview script began with a question designed to determine the college choice process for the students in reflection of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model; a specific question was asked to inquire about the student's experience during each of the three stages of the college choice model- disposition, search, and choice. The interview's general purpose was to gauge the factors that influence the first generation college student's college choice process and to specifically determine what factors influence the student's decision to attend Shorter University as opposed to another institution. Each question during the interview was intended to provide the researcher with imperative information on what factors influence the college choice process for first generation college students.

### **Quality Considerations**

Researchers should have several options through how they may determine their viewpoints and methods to ensure the quality of their study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The

researcher must be able to persuade the audience that the findings from the study are worthy of paying attention to and taking account of due to the demonstration of believability and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to provide reliability, internal validity, and external validity, the researcher used three research techniques. The techniques triangulation, audit trail, and member checking (Merriam, 1998).

Triangulation was accomplished by obtaining several forms of data collection. During the interviews field notes were taken, audiotaping was conducted, the interviews were transcribed and finally the interviewee was able to confirm the accuracy of the interview. The researcher performed an audit trail. The information included contact information of the participants, data from the interviews (fields notes, interview transcripts, audiotapes), and documents from the data analysis. After the interviews were conducted, member checking took place in order to check with the participants for feedback. The interviewees were asked to review the study to address any misunderstanding that may have occurred. Each of the participants were emailed the interview transcript for final approval of the data. The step took place to ensure accuracy in reporting the data collected during the research.

### **Assumptions**

There were a couple of assumptions made in the study. First, the researcher assumed participants were honest and descriptive in their responses to the interview questions. The researcher assumed participants were not embarrassed or ashamed of being classified as a first generation college student to the extent that it might hinder or alter responses in the interview. Second, the study assumed Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model accurately aided in framing the college choice process for the participants. These assumptions

helped guide the research study of investigating the college choice process for first generation college students.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

There were several limitations to the study's research design that restricted the scope of the study. First, the study was limited to students at one institution to determine what factors influence a first generation college student's choice to attend Shorter University. Therefore, the small, private, religious affiliated institution limited the scope. Ultimately, these generalizations may not be applicable to all first generation college students at other higher education institutions. Second, the research was conducted at one point in time; therefore, the research did not provide data that were collected over an extended length or series of time. The interviews were conducted during one point in the students' first year of college. Third, the participants in the study were no longer in the midst of their college choice process as they were already enrolled in the college. The interviews were positioned to allow the student to reflect on their college choice process.

The study had several self-imposed boundaries by the researcher to delimit the scope of the study, also known as delimitations. First, the study was conducted at a single, small, non-profit, religious affiliated, four-year private, baccalaureate, liberal arts institution. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized for all institutions of higher education. Second, the population was self-reported first generation college students from Shorter University. Other students at the institution were excluded from the study. Third, the survey was voluntary. As a convenience sample, the research relied on the participants' willingness to participate. These three delimitations narrowed the scope of the research and the application of the results.

## **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis includes compiling and organizing the data for analysis then dividing the data into themes through the process of coding (Creswell, 2013). The data collected during this study was compiled and analyzed using content analysis. Qualitative data analysis is a continuing process that includes reducing the data into purposeful categories to examine the data (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The first step in data analysis was categorizing the data by organizing the files including the interview transcripts, field notes, and other documents. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim which illustrated the exact words used in the interview. After organizing the files, the researcher read through the texts from the interviews and made additional notes about the data being evaluated. The data were cut into segments in order to closely examine the data by breaking apart or reducing the information for data analysis (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The next step in data analysis was to describe, classify, and interpret the data identifying codes and themes. Aggregating the data from the interview transcripts and field notes was imperative to categorize the data in order to determine results of the study. Categorical aggregation assisted the researcher in establishing themes and patterns. The researcher used pattern coding to analyze the patterns and frequency of terms and phrases that were presented in the data then establish rules for categorizing the data. Additionally, Saldana described “in vivo” coding as a source for breaking down the data to use the participants’ own language in order to answer the research questions (Saldana, 2009). Once the content was analyzed and data were categorized, the researcher determined themes that emerged from the data. After coding took place and themes were extracted from the data, interpreting the data were essential in qualitative research.

Interpretation of the data in qualitative research involves abstracting beyond coding and themes to find the larger meaning of the data (Creswell, 2013). Through using direct interpretation of the data, the research began to develop naturalistic generalizations of what was learned through the investigation. The final step of data analysis was to present an in-depth portrayal of the investigation specifically focusing on the first generation college student's discussion regarding their college choice experience. The representation and visualization of the data were reported using narrative to explain the results of the study.

### **Researcher Positionality and Bias**

I currently serve as an administrative officer at the institution where the research was conducted. I hold the position of Vice President for Enrollment Management at Shorter University and have served in this role for approximately three years. By serving in this capacity, I distantly work with prospective students and their families through the admissions process. I also work closely with high school counselors and teachers who often assist the high school students in the process of college choice. Additionally, I am classified as a first generation college student being the first member of the family to obtain a bachelor's degree. Merriam (1998) stated, "The researcher thus brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people's constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 22-23). The personal and professional experience I possess provides a unique point of view when exploring the college choice process for first generation college students. In order to alleviate researcher bias, I adhered to the interview protocol during the interviews.

### **Summary**

As outlined in the chapter, the methodology chosen for the investigation was a basic qualitative study. A single institution basic qualitative study was conducted to determine what

factors influence the college choice process for first generation college students that have selected to attend Shorter University. The results of the study added to the deficiencies in the literature on the college choice process for first generation college students. This is a worthwhile area to research as college admissions officers have a better understanding of the college choice experience for these first generation college students. Additionally, high school teachers, counselors, and administrators also benefited from the information in order to provide better support and guidance for these students during their college choice process. Research collected assisted in providing insight into why and how first generation college students chose to attend college and which institution they select to attend.

## CHAPTER IV:

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students at a small, private, religious affiliated institution. For first generation college students who choose to attend colleges and universities like Shorter University, this research helps us better understand the factors that influence their college choice process. In order to thoroughly examine the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students at Shorter University, data were collected from interviews with first generation college students in the freshman class.

The interviews provided an opportunity to discuss the college choice process for these students in order to paint a picture of the factors that influenced them during this process. This chapter focuses on the data analysis and findings including the participants' demographic information. The chapter summarizes the findings that emerged by categorizing the data into themes related to the three stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. The thematic structure of this section is arranged by dividing the college choice model into the three stages, predisposition, search and choice. The subsections of these three stages are used to describe the findings associated with each stage of the college choice process.

#### **Description of the Participants**

The students participating in this study were all first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University. The students come from various backgrounds and locations. Table 1 shows each participants race, gender, and place of residence. The information

about gender, race, and place of residence was gathered in each interview. There were 31 participants in this study, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym to honor confidentiality. There were a total of seven students that responded to the invitation to participate in this study by declining participation in the interview.

Table 1

*Participant Information*

Student	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Place of Residence
Stacy	Female	White	Alabama
Carley	Female	White	Australia
Anna	Female	White	Florida
Tina	Female	White	Georgia
Amy	Female	Hispanic	Georgia
Kayla	Female	Hispanic	Georgia
Ada	Female	White	Georgia
Diana	Female	White	Georgia
Allison	Female	Hispanic	Georgia
Jessica	Female	White	Georgia
Elena	Female	White	Florida
Harley	Female	African	Georgia
Casie	Female	White	Georgia
Bonnie	Female	White	Georgia
Kara	Female	Hispanic	Georgia
Amanda	Female	Black	Georgia
Mary	Female	White	Georgia
Marla	Female	White	Georgia
Jacey	Female	Black	Georgia
Lane	Male	White	Alabama
Timothy	Male	White	Florida
Davis	Male	Black	Florida
Chase	Male	White	Georgia
John	Male	White	Georgia
Tyler	Male	White	Georgia
Drew	Male	Hispanic	Georgia
Ethan	Male	Black	Georgia
Gabe	Male	Hispanic	Georgia
Ian	Male	Black	Georgia
Danny	Male	Black	Georgia
Chris	Male	Filipino	Maryland

## **Race and Gender**

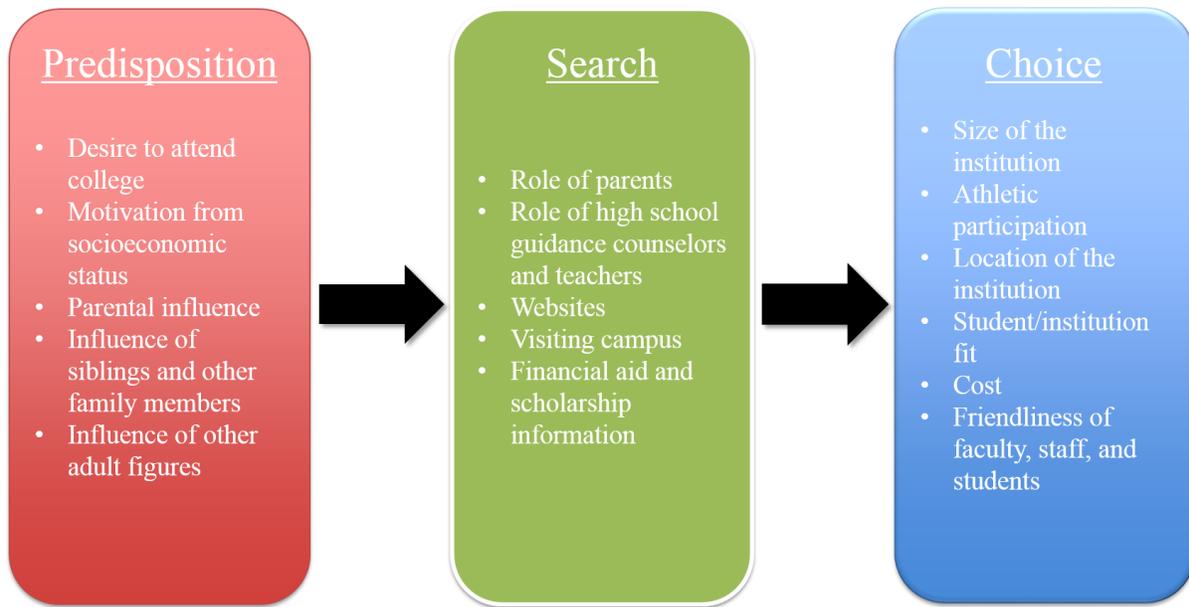
While the majority of the participants identified as White, there were Black and Hispanic students represented as well as one Asian/Pacific Islander. Seventeen of the participants (55%) defined themselves as Caucasian. Seven participants (23%) selected African American, six participants (19%) selected Hispanic, and one participant (3%) described himself as Asian/Pacific Islander. One student identified herself as “African”; however, she is not an international student. She and her family had recently moved to Georgia with permanent residency status from Africa. When evaluating the gender of the participants, the majority were female. Of the 31 participants, 19 participants (61%) were female and 12 participants (39 %) were male. While the percentage of female students at Shorter University is higher than males, the campus population is currently 51% female and 49% male which does not mirror the heavy female percentage of participation in this study (Shorter University, 2016).

## **Place of Residence**

Thirty of the participants were domestic students and one was an international student from Australia. Twenty-four (or 77%) of the students reside in Georgia. Many of the Georgia residents stated their home is “about an hour from Shorter.” In fact, 20 of the 24 Georgia residents reside within a 100-mile radius of Shorter University’s campus. Three (or 10%) of the students live in Florida and two (or 7%) live in Alabama. One (or 3%) student lives in Maryland and, as previously discussed, the one (or 3%) international student resides in Australia. The breakdown of the places of residence is fairly indicative of the student body of Shorter University with approximately 79% of students enrolled in 2015-2016 being residents of Georgia (Shorter University, 2016).

### **Factors that Influence the College Choice Process**

Using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice, I categorized themes that emerged from the findings to organize the factors that influenced their college choice. The findings are organized by dividing the college choice model into the three stages, predisposition, search and choice. In summary, Figure 1 illustrates the three stages of the college choice process by displaying the factors that influence each stage. In the first stage, predisposition, the responses were categorized by their desire to attend college, their motivation from the socioeconomic status, their parental influence, the influence of sibling and other family members, and the influence of other adult figures. During the search stage, the themes that emerged from the data included the role of parents, the role of high school guidance counselors and teachers, websites, visiting campus, and financial aid and scholarship information. In the choice stage, the determining factors in their final college decision related to size of the institution, athletic participation, location of the institution, student/institution fit, cost, and friendliness of faculty, staff, and students.



*Figure 1.* Factors that influence the three stages of the College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987)

### **Predisposition Stage**

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the predisposition stage consists of student’s aspirations and expectations to attend college that can occur from birth up until early high school years. This is the first stage in the college choice model where the student determines if he/she has a desire to attend college. The themes that emerged during the data collection from the interviews in relation to the predisposition stage are discussed below.

**Desire to attend college.** Thirteen of the students described that they had “always wanted to go to college” or that they “always thought they would go to college.” Many of these students said they could not remember an actual point in time they decided they wanted to attend college; they simply described that “since I was a little kid, I always knew I would to go college.” Three of these students explained how they had a desire to be a doctor, nurse and veterinarian at an early age so they recognized they would have to have a college degree for their desired career. Anna explained her collegiate and career aspirations. She said,

I have always wanted to [attend college] from a very young age. When I was four years old I wanted to be a vet; that was like the first job that I wanted to do and I got really excited about, so because that requires college I guess I always knew I wanted to go to college.

Some students, such as Jessica, had career aspirations from a young age that required a college degree. She stated, “I kinda always knew like that I always wanted to go to college because I’ve always had a dream of being a doctor, some type of doctor- a general practitioner is kinda what I’ve decided now.”

Four students specifically stated they realized their desire to attend college in elementary school, once again contradicting research previously stated about first generation college students. Diana described the time in her life when she recognized her aspiration and potential to attend college. She stated,

The first time that I wanted to go to college was probably around 5<sup>th</sup> grade that was the first year that I made straight A’s. I was at the top of my class and I finally realized my self-worth in a way and because of that everyone said I had the world at my fingertips and that I could do anything. When your 11 and you hear that you are like, okay let’s go for it, let’s do anything I can possibly do, so that is when I first started realizing I can grow up and be a doctor or grow up and do great things in the world.

Five students described their initial desire to attend college that occurred during junior high school. John went through significant moment and a time of hardship in his life, which caused him to evaluate his future. He stated,

It’s actually been for a while, I suppose it was probably when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I kind of went through some issues. Well, my mother passed away when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and I didn’t have much guidance in my life. I realized I had to do something with my life so I wouldn’t end up like the majority of my family- I have 4 biological older brothers; 2 dropped out of high school, 1 graduated from high school and one went to community college but didn’t graduate. I wanted something better for my life.

Chris explained how one of his coaches in junior high school inspired him to want to go to college. He said, “When in my junior year of high school, our lacrosse...our lacrosse coach told me I could play lacrosse at a higher level so then I pursued it. I had not thought about college

before. But then he let me know that I would be able to play in college so I was interested in going to a university.”

Four students revealed their desire to attend college was not realized until high school. In particular, three of these students said it was not until their junior year when they realized they wanted to continue their education in a post-secondary environment. In contradiction to Smith (2008), when the predisposition stage occurs from the time of birth to ninth grade, these students didn't encounter the predisposition until later in high school.

Tyler explained that he did not have a desire to attend college until his junior year. He said,

I really didn't think about until my probably around my junior year. I always wanted to be a fireman so I never had to think about going to college. But at the same time, my dad really didn't give me a choice. It was either college or military so I didn't really want to go into the military cause my dad was in the military so I didn't want to do that.

**Motivation from socioeconomic status.** The socioeconomic status of a family is often considered during the college choice process. The majority of the students interviewed described how they were intrinsically motivated by the external pressures they face in life due to their parent's lack of education. Consequently, this resulted in a desire to obtain a college degree in order to have a more successful career and higher socioeconomic level.

Stacey's childhood consisted of her relocating frequently as her mother tried to find jobs in order to support her daughter. Stacy said,

My mom didn't even graduate from high school. We moved a lot because she was always trying to find better jobs. I knew I didn't want to end up like that; I had to do something different. My mom has always encouraged me to go to college so I could be better than her. I experienced that life and I know I never want to go through that again. I want to be able to provide for my family with a stable job and salary.

Chris described a family environment that motivated him to overcome his childhood experiences. He stated,

I would let you know that my dad he used to be a drug addict. He used to sell cocaine out our basement and that did influence me a lot too, like I don't want to live down that lifestyle where I have to make easy money. My mom...my mom always told me drug money is easy money. My mom always told me drug money was easy come, easy go so I didn't want to live that lifestyle so I told myself I'd go to college and get a good job and not ever have to worry about that. He's still in my life now but he's- he's clean now, which is really nice that he got clean but that- that was really a big part of my life cause that separated my family for three years and in that three years I barely went to school because I- we kept moving around from house to house and I really couldn't get settled at a normal school.

Because of the hardships they have experienced in their life, a common refrain was that each student wanted to "better myself." Diane explained how her parent's financial status inspired her desire to enroll in college.

I watched them [parents] grow up struggling, my dad dropped out of high school and my mom is a bartender and so watching their struggles growing up, I was like, I don't want that for my family. I don't want to have to live paycheck to paycheck and wondered if we were going to be able to pay our house payment or if we were going to have food on the table that week or watch my mom go out and work until 2 in the morning and see here wake up at 6 in the morning to get us ready for school on time and be crabby which happens when you don't have sleep. Don't get me wrong I love my life and I love my parents and they are great people. They've done as much as they possible can with what they have been given. I wasn't deprived of anything in life; I was still given as many opportunities in life. I love them and I love my life and I wouldn't trade it for the world, but I don't want to have to hide behind closed doors and cry because I don't know if I have money to buy my children food. So I am determined to not do that. I want to have a good financial security and have a decent job and actually have something I can build a foundation on that I can build up instead of having everything crumple down on the foundation.

**Parental influence.** While students experienced their desire to attend college at various time in their lives, the majority of students acknowledge how their desire to attend college was driven by their family's lack of advanced degrees including Danny's remarks about who influenced his desire to attend college. Danny stated,

I think my parents because they wanted me to do better than they did. Obviously they didn't got to college and nowadays you can't get a good job without a degree so they really pushed me to go to college.

Lane expressed how influential his father was during his college choice process particularly in contributing to his aspirations to attend college. He said,

My dad, he didn't go to college, and my mom didn't either, my step mom did and through her I saw where she was having success after she graduated. My dad wanted me to go to college cause he didn't want me to work as hard as he did and I saw how hard he worked and I see that if I do go to college that I would be able to make more money plus I would be able to have a field to where I enjoy working in. I would know more about that field and it would come as good experience for being successful.

For several of the students, there was an expectation, whether verbally and directly discussed or indirectly displayed, from their parents to attend college. Since their parents did not have a college degree, the parents expected their children to obtain a college degree. Bonnie described how her parents influenced her. She said,

I think both of my parents combined really influenced me to strive to want to get an education because they hadn't got one for themselves and they had trouble finding jobs that paid well and everything. They really encouraged me to go to college and get the education that I needed to get a good job that would pay well and as well that I would enjoy.

According to some of the participants, their parents encouraged them to pursue career paths that require a college education. Marla explained,

Both of my parents really encouraged me to go and I guess it was in middle school I knew that I wanted to do something medical and that would involve me going to college. It was just the fact that cause both of my parents were paramedics I knew that I kinda wanted to stay in that field and that would involve me having to go into college. So I decided to major in nursing because of my parents' encouragement.

The predisposition stage was an important element to their college choice process. Their predisposition regarding college attendance was vitally important in establishing a new precedence in their family because they would be the first person in their family to obtain a college degree.

**Influence of siblings and other family members.** The influence of siblings and other family members can directly affect a student's predisposition. Several of the participants discussed how their siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents encourage their college enrollment. Two of the students specifically contributed their desire to attend college to their siblings. Amy had older siblings that acted more as parents in encouraging her college enrollment and furthermore, financing her college education. Amy stated, "My brother and sister are the reason I thought about coming to college because they are passionate about me continuing my education; they see me as the little one and want me to get my education."

In contrast to Amy's situation, Kayla has younger siblings that indirectly encouraged her desire to attend college to be able to provide for her family. Kayla is currently the legal guardian for her younger siblings and feels tremendous pressure to provide for them. Kayla stated,

My family [influenced my desire to attend college], well just my younger brother and sister. Me and my family went through a bad situation; my parent are no longer in the country and my guardians were not going to pay for it. My younger brother and sister are inspirations to me. I strive to be better to help them.

Allison explained how her grandfather inspired her desire to pursue higher education. He always encouraged her to be the first person her family to graduate from college. She said, "I want to make my grandfather proud of me." She described how her entire family performs laborious jobs to "put food on the table," and how her grandfather constantly reassures her that she can "be better than that." Allison said,

He didn't go to college but always told me he wants me to do what he didn't do. He told me he would be so proud of me for me to graduate from college. Making sure I would make him happy and to make sure I was his first granddaughter to graduate from college, I knew it would make him happy.

Other students commented that other relatives played a key role in influencing their desire to attend college. Drew described how his uncles influenced his desire to attend college.

Drew stated, “They [uncles] had gone to college so they encouraged me to want to go. They were kind of like my mentors to help me since my mother didn’t know anything about going to college. They were really influences to me.”

Many students had influential adult figures outside of their family. Some students expressed that teachers, coaches, and even church members played a role in encouraging college enrollment. Marla explained that she did not consider continuing her education after high school until a teacher questioned her on if she was going to attend college. She stated, “My teacher...she was my English teacher in high school. She always pushed me to be a better person and she saw my potential. She told me to chase my dreams and made me feel like I could do it.”

Whether it was parents, siblings, grandparents, or other family members, the participants frequently commented on how their family played an influential role in their aspirations to attend college. Additionally, some participants listed teachers, counselors or other individuals as influential factors in their desire to attend college. The influence of family members or other adult figures were primary factors that influenced the predisposition stage along with the students’ motivation that stemmed from their socioeconomic class.

### **Search Stage**

During the search stage, students gather information, consult family members, teachers, guidance counselors, their peers, and develop and narrow their list of prospective institutions. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) explained that students are actively searching for higher education institutions to develop their choice set and narrow the list to feasible options. Throughout the data collection participants explain the factors that influenced their college search as well as described how they conducted their college search.

**Types of advisors.** While many of the students acknowledged their parents assisted in their desire to attend college, not as many students discussed their parents when describing about how they conducted their college search. Many students alluded to the fact that they were solely responsible for searching for colleges to attend. Ian commented, “It was mostly just me who looked for different colleges to go to.” Casie described, “You know my parents didn’t go to college so they didn’t know much. I searched for colleges myself kind of from what I knew in my hometown and from what I heard from my friends.”

However, some students recognized their parents’ assistance with searching for colleges. Kara commented on how her mother was there with her the entire way through searching for colleges to attend. She stated,

I didn’t know anything about paperwork but she knew all about the paperwork that needed to be done. She told me she would help me while I looked for a college. Um she helped me schedule the SAT testing, she helped me do the FAFSA because I didn’t know what FAFSA was.

High school guidance counselors and teachers can play a vital role in the college choice process for first generation college students. Elena expressed her appreciation for her relationship with her high school counselor. She described meeting with her counselor for help during her college search.

In high school, we had to meet with a counselor to go over the different options of what all you do after high school, what can you do, and um, really, I started cause you had to go like every couple months or so to go talk to them [counselors], and they would just advise me to go look at different ones [colleges] to see which ones fit me best.

Additionally, high school guidance counselors and teachers have the advantage of seeing the students on nearly a daily basis, which can be a great benefit when assisting the students with their college search. Diana and Davis both discussed an elective, college preparation course that their high school offered. Davis explained,

I don't know how I would have done my college search if I wouldn't have had my CORE class and my CORE teacher. In this class, we looked at colleges online on their websites and we did applications and a lot of other stuff that helped me with college.

Some students were not satisfied with their relationship with their high school guidance counselor in relationship to the college choice process. Amanda described the lack of relationship with her guidance counselor, "I didn't even know my counselors name."

Timothy commented on how he was discouraged to work closely with his guidance counselor because she pushed students to go to a couple of specific colleges. Timothy attended a conservative Christian high school, and the counselor only promoted ultra-conservative colleges for her students. He described,

Well, she wouldn't help me very much cause I wanted to go to a different college that she didn't approve of. She was always pushing us to go to those strict colleges that I wasn't interested in. I wanted to go to a Christian college but not one that has a curfew and strict rules. She told us she was afraid we would get into trouble if we didn't go to one of those colleges.

From the participants' responses pertaining to the influence of high school guidance counselors and teachers, it is evident that these individuals can play a vital role in the college search process for these students. While some students have positive experiences that were monumental in assisting the students through the college search, some students had either negative or indifferent experiences. Ultimately, it is apparent these guidance counselors and teachers have an immense opportunity for mentoring and guidance through a student's college search.

**The utility of websites.** Almost all of the student participants said they navigated institution websites when searching for colleges to attend. According to the participants, browsing institutions' websites was one of the most important factors in the search stage. In fact,

browsing college and university websites was the first step in the college search process for the majority of the students. When asked how he conducted his college search, Drew commented,

I guess I did a lot of my searching online at the schools' websites. Besides hearing different stuff from my older friends about colleges, I looked up everything on their websites. I knew I could find everything I would need there.

To obtain a more in-depth glimpse into college search via websites, participants were asked what they were searching for on the institutions' websites. Participants responded, "I looked to see if the school had math" and "I went online to see how much it would cost." Lane explained what he was searching for on websites.

Just going on [websites] and looking at your basic stuff and your careers, to see what is offered and the teachers, and uh, about campus life, you know, like your- all your clubs and organizations. So just trying to get a feel for where I might fit in best.

Some students were fortunate to have their parents assist them with their college search.

Amanda described how her mother helped her with her research different institutions.

My parents are divorced so I live with my mom. She helped me with a lot pretty much everything from scheduling visits to looking up colleges to starting to apply. She was really my go to if I needed you know any know assistance in that kinda thing. She would look up colleges to see if they had my major and to find information about things going on campus.

In addition to specific institution websites, there are also a variety of college search websites that allow students to search for multiple institutions and compare those institutions.

Some students, including Anna, used college search websites to initiate and narrow their college search.

I looked at the College Board website a lot. They have this thing where you can put in major, GPA, test scores and they give you a list to try to match colleges; I looked at Princeton review and those sorts of websites and then on the actual college websites. Well, I looked a lot at the kind of programs they offered, because I am pre-nursing so I wanted to find schools that had that, but most schools do.

**Visiting the campus.** For many college-going students, visiting multiple college campuses is a typical part of a college search. The majority of the participants did conduct campus visits to one or more campuses. Stacey discussed how her mother went with her on several campus visits.

My mom took me to those [3] schools to visit and look around the campus to see what it is all about. She was helping me remember what I liked and didn't like about the schools we went to. I really don't remember much about most of them. I remember I liked the people at Shorter and I remember how the people at one particular school were not very nice.

Harley described how her only campus visit was to Shorter University and her feelings once she visited the campus.

Shorter was the only place I visited. I don't know, I fell in love with the fountain outside. I was like oh my gosh, that is so beautiful so I was like Shorter is the only school for me. Yeah, I told my mom about it and she was like yeah it's a Christian school, it's small, it's peaceful, it's so pretty. Ya know, this hill, you know in Africa the hills it's so, you know, it's similar to home yeah, so I was like yeah, Shorter.

A couple of students described how they did not take individual campus tours, but they participated in campus visits as part of a high school class. Bonnie talked about how her senior class visited a local four-year public university and a technical college.

My teacher organized class trips to visit some schools. He took us to two different types of schools so we could see what they were like. I mean, it was good to go to the schools in case I wanted to go to one of them, but I wanted to go somewhere different.

Drew visited three college campuses through official athletic visits. He describes how these visits influenced his college choice.

When I went on my official visits, my uncles went with me. They helped me know what the right questions were to ask and what to think about the colleges. They had both been to college so they helped me a lot. Also, my mother works three jobs so she didn't have time to go with me.

While the majority of students participated in a campus visit and campus tour, nine of the first generation college students in this study did not visit a college campus prior to making a

college decision. One student said she did not tour the campus because she was going to be a commuter student, “I figured I would just see the campus when I came for orientation during the summer.” Another student is an international student so a campus tour was not an option for her. Amy discussed how she never contemplated the idea of visiting a college campus.

I didn’t have a car and I didn’t have anyone that could take me, so I just didn’t even think about visiting a college. I figured I would find out everything by asking people or looking up information online.

**Financial aid and scholarship information.** Ada was a typical first generation college student that was overwhelmed by the cost of higher education and the fear of how she was going to pay for it. During her college search she was primarily looking for colleges that she thought she “could afford.” She had narrowed her search to a few schools then began contacting the financial aid offices at those schools to see how many scholarships she could get. Fortunately, for Ada, she was a high-achieving student who was eligible for many different merit-based scholarships. Ada was eligible for a competitive scholarship and was ultimately awarded one of the highest scholarships on campus, which resulted in her decision to enroll at Shorter University.

I looked a lot at the cost because cost is a big thing and what kind of financial aid that I could get. When I found out that I could apply for the big scholarships, I knew I might have a chance. I had looked at what kind of scholarships I could get at a few different schools. I had also looked for different scholarships that I found online or some my counselor told me about.

Amy had a special circumstance as she is an undocumented student who resides in Georgia. She was very intentional in searching for a private college or university because of the lack of financial aid that she would receive at a public institution. Amy explained,

I knew that if I attended a public school I would have to pay out of state or international tuition. Private schools don’t look at that. My best friend had told me that private schools would help me get scholarships so I could afford to go to college.

When Tina was searching for colleges to attend, her primary focus was on financial aid and scholarships.

I dug deep into finding if the colleges I was looking at had scholarships that I could get. There was no point in me looking at a college if I wasn't able to get scholarships. I looked on their websites and I called the school to ask about scholarships.

Throughout the interviews, students were questioned about what type of institution they were searching for. None of the students answered that they were searching for a Christian institution. They primarily explained that they were searching for a small institution, but no one was specifically looking to attend a religious affiliated institution.

### **Choice Stage**

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) described the choice stage as the time when the student makes the final determination of which college to enroll; this stage usually occurs during the eleventh or twelfth grade year. In the final stage of the college choice process, the participants in the study seemed to rely less on the influence of others and instead focus on making this decision themselves. Students often responded that by this time in their college choice process, they were confident in making the final decision on which college to attend without the influence of other individuals. The most influential factors impacting the choice stage are listed below as provided by the participants in the study.

**Size of the campus.** Twenty-seven of the participants responded that the size of the institution was one of the factors that led them to choose Shorter University for their college career. Anna explained how her thoughts on the size of the institution changed throughout her search.

Well, I said for a long time I really wanted to go to a big school. Um, I felt like that is where all my friends went; I felt like that was kind of like my only option. I didn't really think about going to small schools but of course it was an option but I was kind of narrow minded like that. When I started touring bigger schools and seeing what their campus life

was like, I wasn't really into that. I felt like I would have a harder time trying to make friends and get involved because I really wanted to get involved on campus. So then I realized that I wanted to go to a smaller school.

Students expressed how they felt like the size of the institution was a primary factor in influencing their college choice decision. Lane described how he based his college decision on the size of the institution after he had been considering larger public institutions all of his life.

I realized that I did want to go to a smaller school. Just the fact that it is small makes it easier to make friends and it is easier get involved well I mean for me it was. I just like getting to know people and just little things like walking in the caf and seeing friendly faces. Just things like that. And class size...class size was important to me when considering the ratio of students to teachers; I couldn't imagine sitting in a big lecture hall and not getting to know my teacher; it is really nice knowing that if I have a question I can just talk to my professor after class. I really like how accessible professors are here and I don't think I would get that anywhere else.

Some students were specifically looking for an institution where they will be able to develop a relationship with their faculty. Bonnie explained why she was only interested in attending a small institution.

I wanted something small cause I have really bad anxiety. I didn't want to just be a number in a classroom; I wanted to be able to know my teacher and get a relationship with my teacher, and if I needed help I wanted to be able to go to them and ask for help. I have to be able to know my teacher, and be like, okay, I am completely lost, please help. Instead of emailing and hoping to get a response back from a class of 200.

Harley also explained why she selected Shorter University because it was a small, Christian university. He said,

I wanted a small Christian college because I have anxiety so I get really nervous, like right now, I'm still nervous. I talk to a lot of people and I'm really open but it scares me. So I had to choose a small Christian college because I just wanted something small.

**Athletic participation.** Nine of the students revealed that athletic participation on their respective team lead them to choose Shorter University. Carley, the international student, had "never heard of Shorter" nor visited Shorter, but specifically enrolled at the institution because of an athletic recruiter.

Drew articulated his desire to play collegiate soccer. He had been recruited by the coaches at several NCAA Division II institutions, but ultimately decided to attend Shorter University. He said, “I got along with the coach really well and it was the best place for me to play soccer. I had looked at others schools but I figured I would get along well with the team and coach here.”

Timothy was specifically interested in playing college football. He had only considered a college in Kansas and Shorter University because he had offers to play football at those two institutions. He described the support from his father to play collegiate football.

My dad, I feel like, um he pushed me to go to college or play a sport in college. But, I'd say sports influenced me to go to Shorter because I was looking for somewhere to play football and Kansas was too far from home.

Student described how his only desire to attend college derived from his lacrosse coach encouraging him to pursue collegiate athletics.

At first I wasn't supposed to come here. I didn't even know Shorter existed until the coach called me really deep in the summer around June he talked to me about a scholarship and all that and I was like hmm it would be nice to come down to Georgia for school, so I just decided to come down and the athletic scholarship helped too.

**Location of the institution.** The geographic location of the institution played a role in the college choice for many students. In this study of first generation college students at Shorter University, the majority of the participants reside in Georgia. Jessica said the location of the institution was the top consideration when determining which college she would attend. She explained, “Well I was looking for a college that was close to my hometown that was the number one.” Additionally, Bonnie added, “I was looking for a school that was close to my family so that I can go eat food and do laundry at home.”

Marla was adamant about attending a college that was within a one-hour drive from her hometown. She explained how the distance between her chosen university and her home was a top priority when making her college decision.

Well one it's [Shorter University] only about an hour away from my hometown, so that was a big thing. I knew that I was only going to attend a college that was in Rome because it was the closest city to my hometown that had a college. I wanted to be close to home so I can go home on the weekends to be able to go to church with my family.

When discussing the factors that influenced her decision to attend Shorter University Mary expressed her desire to remain close to her family.

I liked that it wasn't like too far away from home. I'm about an hour and um I liked the fact that I had family here nearby cause my cousin's dad which is my dad's brother lives in Cartersville so they're not too far away.

While the majority of the students reside in Georgia and predominately within a 100 miles radius. Some of the students that traveled out of state selected Shorter University because of its location compared to the location of other institutions. Timothy described his choice to attend Shorter rather than an institution in Kansas.

My parents didn't really want me going 18 hours away. And I wanted to stay closer so my family and siblings would be somewhat closer to me to be able to come see me play. Georgia is much closer to Florida than Kansas.

Chris is from Maryland so he was looking for a college to attend in the southeast so he would have a warmer climate for playing lacrosse. He explained, "I knew I wanted to come down here, somewhere where it is warmer and doesn't snow."

**Student and institution fit.** To feel comfortable with a final college decision, the student must feel comfortable with the student-institution fit. Participants often referred to "looking for a school where I fit in." Many students alluded to the fact that "when I visited Shorter, I felt like I fit in." Some participants were concerned with adjusting to college life

because of how different it would be from what they were accustomed to in high school. Lane described his feelings when considering attending Shorter University.

Then I realized how much going to a Christian school mattered to me. I felt like it was God's plan that I ended up here because all of the things I love about Shorter. I didn't really know what I wanted in a college for a long time. It is kind of weird how it all worked out...how I feel like this is where I fit in.

Anna explained how she toured many different institutions and her feelings at each institution type.

Well, I toured seven different schools. I first started going to big schools because I thought that is where I wanted to go then I realized I didn't fit in there. I went to some smaller schools and felt better there. But when I visited Shorter, I felt like it was the perfect fit. I liked the Christian aspect, I like the academic aspect, I liked the size of it, I think I just liked everything...it just felt right.

Diane described her thoughts as she began to consider Shorter University as an option for her college enrollment.

I visited the school and just personally fell in love with the campus, there was no special person that said I should go there and I met some students and got to talk to them and I felt like I actually fit in here; I actually felt like I belong here. Like this is where I was being pushed to go here when I visited campus I felt a weight on my heart that said this is where you belong and so I sort of when on that gut instinct.

**Cost.** The cost of a college education is a deterrent for many families especially families of low socioeconomic status. For the first generation college students who participated in this study, the cost of college enrollment was a major factor in the student's college choice.

Fortunately, many students were awarded scholarships and other forms of financial aid that deemed it possible to choose Shorter University for their college choice.

Stacy described how she was only able to attend Shorter because of the scholarships and grants she received.

I had visited Shorter with my mom and knew that I really liked it, but on our way home she told me there was no way we could afford it. I was so excited when I got the letter

saying I got a scholarship and a grant. I showed it to my mom, and she finally decided that I could accept Shorter.

Diane also pointed out how her scholarship offer was one of the reasons why she choose to attend Shorter University.

They offered me a pretty decent scholarship so that helped with finances. I knew I wouldn't be able to go here if it weren't for that scholarship. It really helped me know I could afford it.

Four of the students interviewed chose to attend Shorter University because it was "where I got the most scholarships." One of these four students said they were trying to choose between two schools at the end of her senior year then ultimately decided on Shorter University "because it would cost less than the other school." One of the other students, Bonnie, explained how she was concerned about the cost.

I knew I wanted to go to a school like Shorter but I didn't think I could cause it cost so much. I really never thought about how I could go to a private school cause I didn't have much money growing up. Then my admissions person told me about two scholarships I would get cause of my grades. I had a glimpse of hope after that.

**Friendliness of institution faculty, staff and students.** Of all of the student participants in this study, 21 students explained that the friendliness and helpfulness of the Shorter University faculty, staff and/or students were one of the reasons they chose to attend Shorter University. Many of the students that commented that the faculty, staff or students served as an influential factor in their decision to enroll at Shorter University, were able to specifically name an individual(s) that influenced their college choice. Mary was one of several students that suggested that their admissions counselor was one of the primary individuals that influenced their decision to attend Shorter University.

I think a major person that influenced me to go to Shorter was Audra, the admissions counselor. She was amazing and I talked to her all the time. I text her back and forth with things I had questions about and she was helpful. She sent me notes asking how I was

doing and hope you are doing well. She told me things I needed to do; there were not surprises which took the stress off. She was very helpful.

Jessica also expressed how her admissions counselor was an influential factor in selecting to attend Shorter University.

Gaby was a big help. I talked to her a lot over the summer but she was my cousin's admissions counselor. I knew I could go to her for advice or if I need help with anything. She always helps me and taught me a lot about this school. She has had the most influence on my experience at Shorter.

There were many participants that listed specific staff or faculty members including admissions counselors, financial aid representatives, even the president of the university made an impact on the student's final college choice. Chase explained,

Everybody at Shorter was nice and happy. I couldn't believe the president even came out of his office and talked to me and my mom and dad. He even asked questions about what I do in high school.

Some students vaguely referred to the overall helpfulness of the individuals they encounter on their campus visit or worked with through the admission and enrollment process. Jacey explained, "Everyone here was so helpful like trying to help me understand how to apply to college properly and ways to get financial aid."

In addition to faculty and staff that made a difference in the students' college enrollment decision, three students specifically stated that they decided to attend Shorter University because of how friendly the students were that they met while on their campus tour. Danny explained how the students influenced his final college choice while he was visiting the campus.

Um when I really got over here [for the campus visit] and I got to talking to some of the students on campus I realized that I could fit in well here and that I would really enjoy my time here. The students here kinda helped to persuade me to come here because they were so nice.

Anna also commented on how friendly the students were at Shorter when she was on-campus for her tour.

When I was on the tour, my tour guide was an upper-class student. She was really nice and made me want to come to Shorter. It was kind of strange because all the students we saw on the tour were so nice to me and my mom. They all smiled and said hey. I was like, these people are really nice here.

There were several students interested in attending Shorter University specifically to play on an athletic team. Many of these students were being recruited by multiple institutions. Two of the students that were solely looking to play their sport were influenced to attend Shorter University as opposed to other colleges or universities because of their future teammates. Drew stated, “the teammates I met at Shorter were friendlier than the ones [teammates] I met at other schools.” Davis explained how the teammates affected his decision to attend Shorter University.

When I came for my official visit I met with the coach then I met with the team for a practice on the field. The guys were kinda cool and I thought I would fit in with them. When I hung out with them, I knew Shorter is where I wanted to play soccer.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the findings were discussed within Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-stage college choice model. In the predisposition stage, most participants identified a specific time in their life when they left a desire to attend college. This desire was influenced by parents, siblings, other family members, teachers, coaches, guidance counselors and even church members. In the search stage, participants discussed how they conducted their college search. Participants were influenced by their parents, teacher and guidance counselors during this stage. Additionally, the participants discussed searching college websites and conducting campus visits to learn more about the various institutions. Searching for information about financial aid and scholarships was also an important factor during this stage. In the final stage of the college choice process, the choice stage, the participants discussed factors that influenced their choice to attend Shorter University. The influential factors in the choice stage are size of the institution, location of the institution, the athletic teams at the university, and the idea of fitting in on

campus. Other factors that affected their choice are cost and accessibility of financial aid and scholarships. Finally, many participants were influenced to choose to enroll at Shorter University because of the friendliness of the university's faculty, staff and students.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In order to provide college access all subpopulations of underserved and underprepared students must be considered in the conversation of accessibility to post-secondary education. While there are many different groups of underprivileged students, the specific subpopulation of students researched in this study are first generation college students. We know first generation college students are often disadvantaged when compared to their continuing generation peers (Aspelmeier et al., 2012; Bryant & Nichols, 2011; Engle, 2007, Shaw et al., 2009). In a higher education environment with an increasing number of first generation college students, it is imperative for high school guidance counselors and teachers, higher education administrators, and admissions professionals to be familiar with the challenges these students face in order to provide a seamless college enrollment process.

In regards to the first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University, an investigation into their college choice process allows us to better understand the factors that influenced their enrollment at Shorter University. Through this qualitative research study, we were able to attain a brief glimpse into their college choice process from the time when they first desired to attend college, through their time of searching for the institution they would attend, and, finally, the time when they determine the university where they choose to enroll. This chapter focuses on the final conclusions and reflections from the study as well as recommendations based on the findings.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to determine the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students at a small, private, religious affiliated institution. The research was guided by five primary research questions based on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. The research questions aimed to reveal the factors that influenced each stage of the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice including predisposition, search, and choice as well as the factors that specifically influenced the students' decisions to enroll at Shorter University. In this chapter, I provide brief summaries to answer the research questions with the data provided by participants through the interviews of first generation college students. Figure 2 provides a visual summation of the findings from the study.

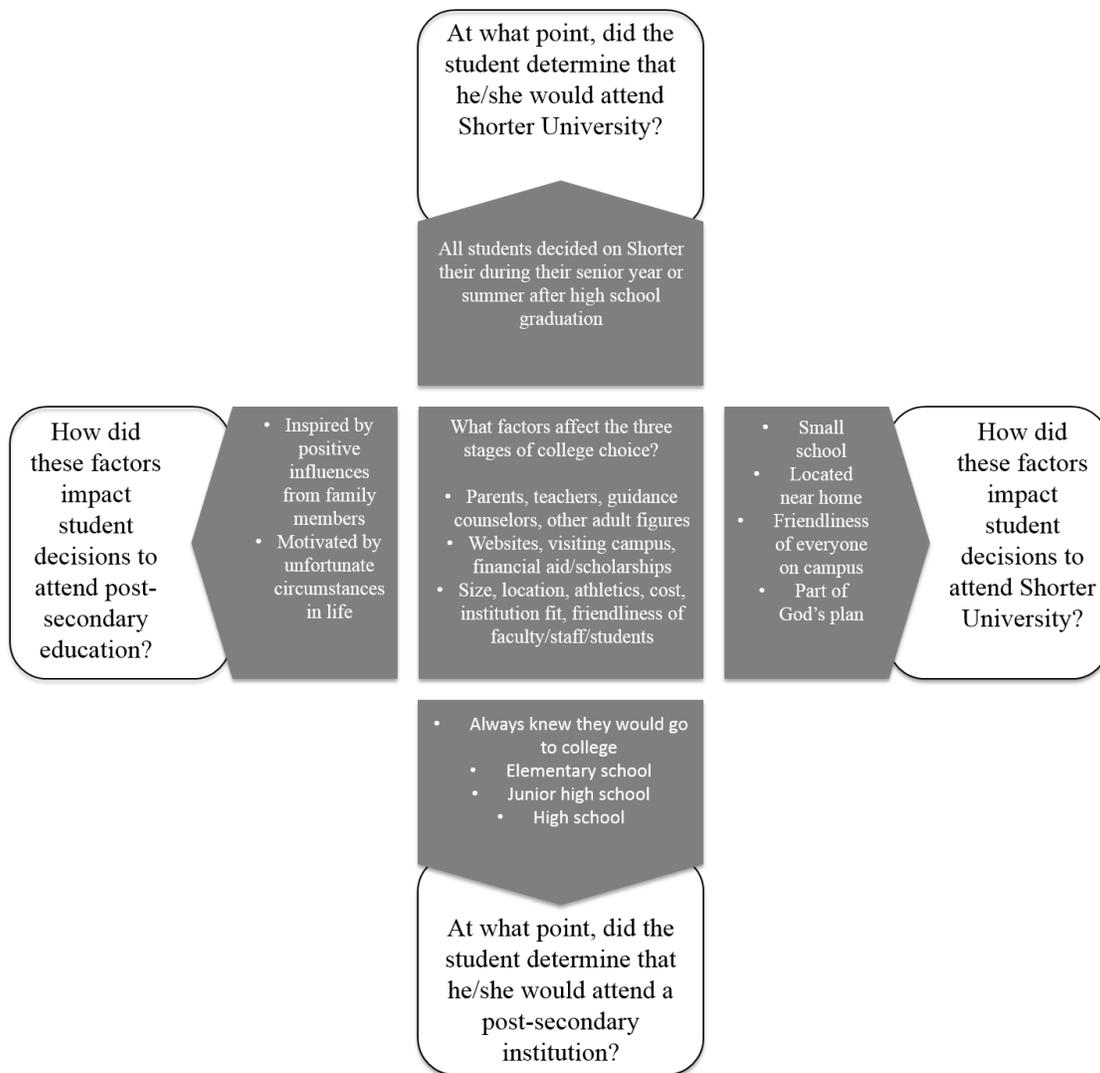


Figure 2. Summation of the findings from the study

### Research Question 1

*What factors impact the three stages of college choice: predisposition stage, search stage, or choice stage?* While a myriad of factors were presented in the data, there were several factors that were prevalent in the findings from each of the stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. The findings from some stages produced factors that are unique to that individual stage while other factors are applicable across multiple stages.

**Predisposition stage.** There were many different factors that influenced the predisposition stage of the students' college choice. The aspiration to attend college was a driving factor for many students from a young age. The first generation college students in the freshman class at Shorter University developed an intrinsic motivation from the socioeconomic status of their family. This innate motivation developed because students did not want to live in the same socioeconomic status in which they grew up, which created a desire to "strive for a better life." Parental influence was a factor that impacted the predisposition stage for many students. Some students' parents were positive influences on the student's desire to enroll in college. While some students' parents were not influential in this stage, they had siblings or other family members that affected their predisposition. Other students did not have any family members that influenced their lives as it pertains to college enrollment; however, they had other adult figures in their lives that greatly influenced the predisposition stage of their college choice.

**Search stage.** Several factors influenced the search stage of the college choice process for Shorter students participating in this study. Many parents played a role in the search stage for their students, as well as high school guidance counselors and teachers. In addition to individuals that impacted the search stage, there were several other factors that assisted the students with their search. The majority of student participants listed websites as the primary source for conducting their student search. Many students visited several college campuses during their college search, which rendered their desire to truly search for different colleges to attend by physically visiting the campuses. For these students, they often had support from other individuals whom either accompanied them to the campus visits or assisted them in arranging their visit. Some students expressed that they only visited Shorter University and others explained they did not conduct any campus visits, which may have resulted from their lack of

resources or support from other individuals. From the findings, I found that students appreciated assistance from others during the search stage. While their aspirations to attend college were primarily based on their own discernment or from encouragement from others, students' desired tangible support during the search stage. Searching for financial aid and scholarship information was another important factor in the students' college search. Some students articulated that they "thought I couldn't afford college," but when informed about scholarships and other forms of financial aid, they learned that affording college could be a possibility.

**Choice stage.** In the final stage of the college choice process there were many factors that impacted the students' final college decision. For the first generation college students who chose to attend Shorter University, there were six major factors pertaining to the choice stage that were revealed throughout the interviews. The size of the institution was an important factor for the students as well as the location of the institution. For some students, participation in an athletic team was a determining factor in their college decision. Other factors related to the choice stage are the final cost of college attendance and the concept of institutional fit for the student. The friendliness of the faculty, staff, and students also was a contributing factor in the final college decision. Overall, it was a combination of several factors that influenced their decision to enroll at Shorter University.

## **Research Question 2**

*How did these factors impact student decisions to attend post-secondary education?* The factors previously listed impacted student decisions to continue their education at a university for a variety of reasons. Many students were inspired to enroll in college due to positive influences in their lives from family members or a desire to achieve a college degree. Because these students would be the first in their family to obtain a college degree, their families "pushed me to go to

college” because “they wanted me to do better than they did.” Other students were intrinsically motivated by the unfortunate circumstances they encountered through life. These students had an attitude of “I just wanted to prove them wrong” that was directed at the negative people in their life.

### **Research Question 3**

*How did these factors impact student decisions to attend Shorter University, a small, private, religious affiliated institution?* The factors that were discussed previously during the choice stage directly impacted student decisions to attend Shorter University. The most prevalent factor frequently explained was the size of the institution. The majority of the students were looking for a “small school” where “I could have a relationship with my professors and not just be a number.” Many students alluded to the fact that they “felt like I would be lost at a big school.” With a 12:1 student/faculty ratio, Shorter University was a good fit for students who desired to have a close working relationship with the faculty due to the small class size (Shorter University, 2016).

Other important factors included the location because the majority of the students were from Georgia and “want to stay close to home” and the friendliness of the faculty, staff and students on campus. Several students commented on “how friendly everyone was when I visited the campus” and one student added, “it made me feel at home.” Some students added that they were not specifically looking for a Christian university, but they “felt like God was leading me to Shorter.”

### **Research Question 4**

*At what point, did the student determine that he/she would attend a post-secondary institution?* Many students expressed they “have always” desired to obtain a college degree.

Students acknowledged they “would be the first person in my family to go to college so I wanted to make my family proud.” Other students discussed they experienced a desire to attend college due to a specific person or event that occurred during their elementary or middle school years that influenced this decision. For example, one student broke her arm in the fourth grade and after that incident, she started making straight A’s in school; it was this point in her life she began to have confidence that she could have a future career as in the medical field. Some students determined their desire to attend college due to future career aspirations that required a college degree such a doctor, veterinarian, and nurse. A small number of students did not decide they would attend college until later in high school when “I realized I was going to have to do something with my life once I finished high school.”

#### **Research Question 5**

*At what point, did the student complete the college choice process by choosing to attend Shorter University, a small, private religious affiliated institution?* The overwhelming majority of students made the decision to attend Shorter University between March 2015 and June 2015 prior to enrolling at Shorter University in August 2015. Researchers explain that the choice stage of the college choice process is when the student makes the final decision on where they will enroll and usually takes place during the eleventh and twelfth grades years of high school (Bergerson, 2009c; Griffin et al., 2012; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Through collecting data during the interviews, none of the students acknowledged making their final college enrollment decision during their eleventh grade year of high school; in fact, only one student explained that she made her final college choice in October during the fall semester of her senior year. All of the other students stated their college decision was determined either spring semester of their senior year or the summer after they graduated from

high school. Furthermore, one student expressed that he did not decide to attend Shorter University until the week before classes began in August.

### **Discussion**

The research conducted throughout this study assisted in a further understanding of the college choice process for first generation college students. The findings enabled the researcher to comprehend the major factors that influence the college choice process based on Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. The thematic structure was divided by the three-stage college choice model. When reflecting on the literature and empirical research regarding the college choice process and first generation college students, it was concluded that many of the thematic concepts from previous research and literature were also applicable to the college choice process for first generation college students at Shorter University.

Based on the findings from the research, three overarching themes were concluded. First, the aspiration to attend college was prominent at an early age for the majority of the students interviewed. The students revealed they "have always wanted to go to college." Research shows that for first generation college students it is often later in their life when they aspire to attend college as opposed to their continuing generation peers (Paulsen, 1990; Saenz et al., 2007). The findings from this study partially contradict what the previous research shows in respect to the predisposition stage of the college choice process. For the purpose of this study, the researcher was not comparing the findings from the first generation college students to continuing generation college students so it cannot be determined whether they aspired to attend college later in life. However, I can conclude from my findings that the majority of students in this study explained that they had a desire to attend college from a young age.

Family background, parents' education level and parents' occupation and income level can directly affect college choice (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999). I believe the students have the perception that a college degree is the avenue to a successful career and stable income, which triggers an aspiration to enroll in college. Many of the students expressed how they aspired to live a better life than what their parents had lived. One way to improve one's social status is to obtain a college education (Engle, 2007; McDonough, 1997). Engel (2007) also portrayed how a college education is vital in earning one's social class in American society. Bui's (2002) study of first generation college students who enroll in college have the tendency to have a higher salary job once they graduate. The research along with the findings from this study validate the students' aspirations to obtain a college education.

The first major theme concluded from this research relates to the aspirations of college enrollment for the first generation college students in the intention of living a better life. For the majority of the students their aspirations to attend college began at an early age. The first generation college students at Shorter University believed that obtaining a college degree would enable them to have more opportunities to "better myself." The students trust that a college education is the avenue for providing a better life for themselves and their family.

Second, the first generation college students frequently described the importance of support throughout the qualitative research study. The level of support ranged from each stage in the college choice process. In the predisposition stage, the students reflected on the moral support they received from family, friends, and acquaintances that influenced their desire to attend college. According to Bryant and Nichols (2011), first generation college students are less likely initially to consider college. From my research, I gathered that these students may not have initially considered attending college, but with encouragement from their parents or other

individuals, they gained confidence in their ability to enroll in college. Throughout the predisposition stage, parental influence plays a crucial role (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Creswell-Yeager, 2012; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999). While during the search stage, the students relied on support from family to provide assistance with searching and visiting different institutions. Bergerson (2009b) explained how student use information and confer with family members and peers to determine their choice set, limit it to practical options, and make decisions where to apply and enroll during the search and choice stage of the college choice process. Many of the students commented that they made the final decision to attend Shorter University; however, their parents and family members supported their decision.

Parental influence was the most prevalent factor in influencing the college choice process for the first generation college students at Shorter University. One of the greatest influences on a student's college choice process is their parents (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). The participants realized their parents were emphasizing the concept of "doing better than I did" or better themselves. According to studies, parental support is one of the most important factors in college choice (Hossler et al., 1999; Ceja, 2006). The research conducted in this study mirrors previous studies that reveal the importance of parental support in the college choice process. Many of the students believe that they are a college student today because of the support from their parents. Parents recognize the challenges they have been faced with in life due to not possessing a college degree; therefore, they do not want to children to experience that lifestyle. Parents encourage a college education for their children because of the struggles they have been faced with and because of their desire for their children to achieve more than they did (King, 2009). Many participants revealed that they wanted to attend a college in close proximity to their home to be able to stay close to their family because of the support they

provide for the student. This reinforces the influential factor of the location of the institution playing a primary role in the choice stage.

Tierney (2002) recommended redefining the phrase “parental involvement” to include extended family members and other supportive adult figures that assist with the college choice process especially for first generation college students, minority students or students of color. For some students, family members were not factors in their college choice process, but instead high school officials such as guidance counselors and teachers were primary encouragers and supporters for their college enrollment. According to researchers, teachers and other adult figures can create an encouraging atmosphere that leads to positive behaviors (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009; Horn & Nunez, 2000). The first generation college students in this study relied heavily on support from the influential people in their lives in order to advance through the college choice process. The research from this study explains that the students would not be enrolled at Shorter University if they did not have support from their family or other adult figures.

The majority of the students supplied commentary on the fact that their parents had not attended college and were not able to provide support and assistance with many of the forms and documentation needed for admission and financial aid. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) suggested that high school officials, such as counselors and teachers, play an important role during the college search for first generation students from low socioeconomic status families. For parents who may not be as knowledgeable about the college admission process, the guidance counselor may play an active role in the college search process for these first generation college students (Hossler et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990). Several students referred to their admissions counselors or

financial aid representatives as being the primary resource for support with these matters; while other students mentioned their high school teachers who provided assistance as well.

The first generation college students at Shorter University relied heavily on the support from their parents, family members and other adult figures. Family members, teachers, guidance counselors and others can provide insight and direction through all three stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. With the college choice process being a new process for the student and their parents, students must utilize the support from others in order to navigate the college choice process. While none of the participants were specifically searching for a Christian institution, several of the students acknowledged they felt additional support and encouragement from Shorter University because it was a Christian university.

Third, the obstacles the students face both directly and indirectly can greatly impact the college choice process for first generation college students. The simple concept of being a first generation college student is an obstacle in for these students. Because aspirations to attend college are closely related to the education level of the parent, first generation college students have an increased likelihood of not going to college (Choy, 2001). The research from this study indicates how the students were fully aware of the challenges of having parents whom do not possess a college degree. In comparison with continuing generation college students, first generation students are less likely to attend college, and those who decide to attend are less likely to successfully complete their degree (Choy, 2001; Rood, 2009).

The socioeconomic status of a family is an obstacle that is often considered during the college choice process. A student's college enrollment is positively associated with their family's socio-economic status (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Toutkoushian & Curtis, 2005; Tucker, 2010). As described when referring to the students' aspirations, the students have to overcome

the obstacle of descending from a lower socioeconomic status family. For the first generation college students at Shorter University, the cost of a college education was an apparent concern for the students who come from low socioeconomic status families. Generally first generation college students have been linked with families of lower socioeconomic status (Rood, 2009). Acquiring information about financial aid and scholarships was a significant concern for the students during their college search. Additionally, the net cost of tuition at Shorter University was a crucial factor when making their college choice.

The students' habitus and cultural capital can be another obstacle that limits their knowledge of the college choice process. Habitus is defined as the disposition, perception, and attitude personified in an individual from their experiences in their childhood (Creswell-Yeager, 2012; Smith, 2007). The participants come from backgrounds where attending college was not a common practice. While habitus is often seen as a barrier, students in this study had a desire to move beyond what their family life was like in order to excel in their future. Lehhman's (2014) study explored the habitus of students from working-class families who enrolled in college with the intention of creating upward social mobility. Similarly, the students in this study were trying to overcome the obstacle of their habitus by enrolling in college in order to achieve a better life. Without knowing the specific terminology of "cultural capital," the students knew their families' cultural capital was not a middle or upper class which was what they desired to attain. Rather than acting as a barrier, the working-class students in the study utilized their college enrollment as an opportunity for increasing their cultural capital (Lehhman, 2014). The first generation college students at Shorter University recognized their habitus and cultural capital as an obstacle; however, they were focused on persevering through this barrier in order to look ahead to an optimistic future.

The first generation college students in this study experienced obstacles throughout their college choice process. In the case of these students, they have overcome many of these obstacles by taking the step of enrolling in college. Research proves that first generation college students are at a disadvantage in comparison with their continuing generation peers (Choy, 2002); however, these students have taken the necessary steps in order to defeat the barriers to college enrollment. Johnson's (2010) study found that students that are traditionally classified as the least likely to attend college due to their demographic and academic backgrounds received the largest increase in income from a college degree. As described by many of the participants, the ability to pay college tuition costs was another obstacle for the first generation college students in this study.

While college enrollment may appear to be an obstacle for the first generation college students at Shorter University, their aspirations and support from others enable them to overcome any barriers they may be presented with throughout the college choice process. Through the research, I learned the students aspired to enroll in college from an early age due to the influences of their family and other adult figures and had a desire due to their intrinsic motivation to have a "better life." With support throughout their college choice process, they were able to complete the necessary steps during their college search and admissions process. While the first generation college students faced obstacles during their college choice process, they overcame challenges to eventually enroll at Shorter University.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for High Schools**

Although it may not be a priority, high schools have a great opportunity with a captive audience to encourage enrollment in post-secondary education. High school students should be

presented with the opportunity to attend college if desired especially those from typically underrepresented backgrounds including first generation college students. My recommendation is for schools to begin educating students at an early age, possibly 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade, about their opportunities following high school graduation. According to Smith (2008), the predisposition stage of college choice refers to the time from birth to approximately the ninth grade where students acquire a palate for or disposition about college. My research proves that some students did not even consider college attendance until their junior year. I believe an intentional effort made by the high school counselor and teachers in early high school could assist first generation college students in a better understanding about their possibility to enroll in college.

Several of the student participants contributed their college enrollment to high school teachers and counselors to assist them with their admission paperwork, financial aid document, and more. However, some students commented they did not have any assistance from their high school counselor or teachers. In a study conducted by Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei (1996), these researchers acknowledged that many students do not feel they receive sufficient assistance from high school counselors. With mandated testing and funding concerns, high school personnel may be overwhelmed with the day-to-day operations; however, they have the livelihood of hundreds of students at their fingertips, and any slight increase in college awareness would be beneficial to first generation college students.

Another recommendation for high schools is to encourage parent involvement in the college choice process for their students. For first generation college students, their parents are typically the least informed about college admissions processes and financial aid opportunities and required documents. I believe high schools have the opportunity to make great strides in not only educating the students, but also the parents. My suggestion is to host college nights for both

students and parents with training and tutorials on how to complete college admissions applications, how to complete the FAFSA and other opportunities for scholarships, grants, loans, etc. Additionally, many college admissions offices are willing to co-host these types of events in their local areas.

### **Recommendations for Higher Education Administration and Admissions Professionals**

While many college and universities are working diligently to assist students with their college choice process, I believe enhancements can be employed to specifically assist first generation college students through this multifaceted process. Many of the students interviewed for this study commented on how they and their parents “had no idea how to do the paperwork” and complete required documents for the admission and financial aid process. Parental support involves many different components during the college choice process including assistance completing admissions documents (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999); however, for first generation college students, they may not have parental assistance with documents and paperwork. I believe institutions should strategically simplify complex processes and streamline application and financial aid documentation to alleviate first generation college students from getting overwhelmed and discouraged. Specifically, I recommend that Shorter University evaluate current processes for admission and financial aid in order to assist this subpopulation of students.

Institutional policymakers should be aware of the reoccurring responses presented by the student participants in the interviews. During the search stage, all participants revealed they researched institution websites when searching for colleges to attend. Institutions should be cognizant of this primary form of searching for colleges by providing prospective students with helpful information on their websites including financial aid information, admissions timelines,

and campus life and student involvement. Information on academic programs and majors offered should also be easily accessible on the institution's website. Policymakers should also be aware of the primary factors that affected the students' decisions during the choice stage. There should be an institutional focus on these factors as they motivated the students' decisions to attend Shorter University. An emphasis on the Christian environment should be included in conversation with prospective students as a unique quality of the institution.

Additionally, admissions counselors should be notified of their students who are classified as first generation college students in order to provide special attention and assistance to those students who may need it most. Many colleges and universities question if the student is a first generation college student on the application for admission, but the institution must utilize the responses by classifying these students in order to provide extra guidance and assistance. I believe Shorter University would benefit from being intentional in assisting first generation college students through the admissions process. Because of the small institution size of Shorter University, this often occurs unintentionally; however, with a concerted effort, our first generation college students would greatly benefit from extra attention through the admissions and financial aid process.

Another recommendation for higher education administration is to develop a scholarship fund for first generation college students. The cost of a college education can be daunting to many first generation families, but with the help from donors or grants, institutions could provide financial assistance that might enable a student to achieve a college degree. Admission counselors could promote the first generation college student scholarship to their students as they assist them through the admissions process. These scholarship funds could also serve as a recruiting tool for institutions to promote to prospective first generation college students.

Institutional policymakers at Shorter University should be aware of the factors that influenced student decisions during the choice stage. According to this study, there were six primary factors that affected the first generation college students' choice stage. Shorter University should emphasize these influential factors in their admissions process. The size of the institution is a component that needs to be focused on in admissions publications and the websites. Students commonly discussed their desire to attend a "small school". It is important for students to be aware of the small class sizes and the student-faculty ratio which should be stated during campus tours and the admissions process. Overall, the institution, including faculty, staff, and administration, should highlight the benefits of the small size of the institution when working with prospective students. When drawing attention to the size of the institution, admissions professionals as well as administration can promote the personalization for each student because of the small size of the university.

As mentioned previously as a recommendation for higher education institutions, institutional websites must be up-to-date with easily accessible information regarding financial aid, academic programs, etc. Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, and Gray (2013) reveal that students frequently utilize websites and social media as a resource when searching for colleges to attend. I believe Shorter University can improve their website by including information on their admissions website specifically for first generation college students. This webpage can include detailed information on the admissions process along with contact information in the case of further assistance with financial aid or admissions concerns. Additionally, this webpage can include links to external websites for first generation college students including scholarship information for first generation students.

While these first generation college students choose to enroll at Shorter University in Fall 2016, it is imperative that they continue to receive support in order to successfully complete their college degree. As presented in the results of this study, support and encouragement from others is a necessity for this subpopulation of students to enroll in college along with continuing their collegiate career. According to the enrollment numbers of first generation college students in the fall semester compared to the spring semester, it is evident that attrition is an issue with these students. For a small, private institution, it is vitally important that institutional policymakers recognize the importance of successfully retaining all students in order to serve the students as well as meet enrollment goals. My suggestion to Shorter University administration is to assign mentors, comprised of faculty and staff or possibly upper-class students, to each of the first generation college students in order to provide continued support and encouragement. Rhodes (2008) explains that college mentoring programs can positively have an effect on student success. The mentors could assist the students with any additional obstacles or challenges they are presented with during their time as a student at Shorter University.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The data collected from this study of first generation college students at a small, private, religious affiliated institution provided a brief glimpse at the college choice process for this particular subpopulation of students at a single institution. While the data gathered provide insight on this subject area, this research opens up more opportunity for research to be conducted at other institutions and specifically at other institution types including two-year institutions and four-year public institutions. Ceja (2001) acknowledges that first generation students have a tendency to predominantly enroll in two-year institutions. According to this statement, a similar study at a two-year institution might warrant a greater pool of first generation students.

Additionally, it would be enlightening to do a comparison study of the continuing generation students in the freshman class at Shorter University in order to determine any differences in the college choice process for continuing generation versus first generation students.

While every study has its challenges, this study had a couple of challenges that could be addressed in the future. Due to the unfortunate timing, this study was conducted in the spring semester of the students' freshman year. Interviewing students regarding their college choice process would have ideally been better to investigate during their first semester of college. Additionally, at the beginning of the fall semester there were 64 first generation college students in the freshman class. By the time, the research began for this study, there only 46 students enrolled which is a 28% decrease. It would also be recommended to draw conclusions based on ethnicity connections of the responses of the student participants in future studies of the college choice process for first generation college students.

Another substantial challenge for this study was the acquisition of interview participants. The small pool of first generation college students required a sizable return of volunteers. Communication through student email and, most importantly, hand delivered invitations provided the number of participants needed to conduct the research. Continuing this study by conducting research in the fall semester would allow for an increased number of participants and decrease the time gap from their college choice experience.

When reflecting on the data provided by the first generation students at Shorter University, none of the students mentioned searching specifically for a Christian institution. A future study could investigate continuing generation students at Shorter University compared to first generation students in regards to the importance of a Christian higher education when searching for an institution type. It would be enlightening to conclude if either student type are

specifically searching for a Christian institution and what role the religious affiliation plays in the college choice process.

### **Summary**

This study contributes to scholarly literature on the college choice process for first generation college students who chose to attend a small, private, religious affiliated institution. The results from this qualitative research study provide a glimpse into that factors influenced the college choice process in relation to the three stages of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice. Not only were the factors that influenced the college choice revealed, but also the timing of when each stage of the process occurred for the first generation college students.

In summary, the first generation college students provided three key themes of their college choice process that appeared through the data collection. First, the aspiration to attend college was prominent in an early age for most of the students interviewed. While there were a few students that did not realize their college aspirations until high school, the majority revealed they "have always wanted to go to college." Second, the theme of support from others was prominent in the research. In many situations, the parents were the primary source of support for their child to attend college. Other students did not mention their parents, but instead referred to support from other family members. For a couple students, high school staff such as guidance counselors and teachers were primary encouragers and supporters for their college enrollment. Finally, the obstacles that these first generation college students had to overcome was a prevalent theme in the data. Throughout the study, the participants frequently commented on the fact that their parents had not attended college, which was an apparent obstacle the first generation college students had to overcome. Because of this, the parents were not able to provide assistance with many of the processes, paperwork, and documentation required to apply for

admission and financial aid. However, with their struggles to complete these required documents, the students relied on different individuals in their life for assistance with these matters.

The study also includes recommendations for high schools, recommendations for higher education administration and admission professionals, as well as recommendations for future research. A thorough understanding of the college choice process for first generation college students can provide high schools guidance counselors and teachers with an ability to assist these students with the beginning stages of their college choice process particularly their aspirations of attending college and by providing assistance in overcoming barriers they may be exposed to such as paperwork, processes, and more. Additionally, this study offers insight into the college choice process for this subpopulation of students that higher education administration and admissions professionals should be cognizant of in order to seamlessly support the students with their college enrollment. High schools and higher education institutions should be encouraged to collaborate to make college attendance a stress-free possibility for first generation college students.

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APPENDIX A:  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project: An investigation of the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students.

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Place: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview procedure: You are begin asked to participate as an interviewee in a research study investigating the college choice process for first generation college students. The purpose of the study is to investigate the factors that influence the college choice process for first generation college students. During the interview, you will be asked to respond to several open-ended questions. You may choose not to answer any or all of the questions. The procedure will involve audiotaping the interview and the recording will be transcribed verbatim. Your results will be confidential and you will not be identified individually.

Informed consent: Please sign the informed consent form signaling your willingness to participate.

Questions:

1. When did you realize that you had a desire to attend college?
2. What or who influenced your desire to attend college?
3. How did you conduct your college search?
4. Who assisted you with your college search?
5. When did you begin searching for different colleges to attend?
6. What institutions were you interested in?
7. What or who influenced you to consider those colleges?
8. How did you conduct your college search (campus visits, websites, preview days, etc.)?

9. What factors affected your decision to attend Shorter University?
10. Who assisted you with your decision to attend Shorter University?
11. When did you determine that Shorter University is where you would attend?
12. When reflecting on your entire college choice process, who or what influenced you the most?

Closing: Thank you for participating in the study. I appreciate you taking the time to participate in the interview. Once again, your confidentiality will be honored. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me.

APPENDIX B:

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research project the factors that influence the college choice process of first generation college students. Your participation in this project involves a face-to-face interview that will take approximately one hour of your time. You will be asked 10 interview questions regarding your college choice experience.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you refuse to participate there will no penalty. There are no foreseeable known risks or discomforts involved with participating in this research study. Your responses will remain confidential.

By agreeing to participate in the interview, you are consenting to be a research participant. If you have any questions about this study, you may contact Emily Messer at 706-331-5048 or via e-mail at emesser@shorter.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Emily Messer  
University of Alabama  
Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies

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I agree to allow the researcher, Emily Messer, to audio record the interview conducted today for research in a case study. I understand that the research will be published as a component of a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies at The University of Alabama.

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C:

PERMISSION FROM SHORTER UNIVERSITY



*Office of the President*  
315 Shorter Avenue - Rome, Georgia 30165  
706-233-7201 - Fax: 706-233-7374  
[www.shorter.edu](http://www.shorter.edu)

March 4, 2016

The University of Alabama  
Institutional Review Board  
700 University Blvd.  
Tuscaloosa, AL 35401

Dear Institutional Review Board:

Please accept this letter as documentation that Mrs. Emily Messer has permission to conduct research at Shorter University for her dissertation. Shorter University understands this research involves student interviews.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dr. Don Dowless  
President

APPENDIX D:  
IRB APPROVAL



March 22, 2016

Emily Messer  
ELPTS  
College of Education  
Box 870302

Re: IRB#: 16-OR-120 "College Choice Process for First Generation College Students at Shorter University, a Small, Private, Religious Affiliated Institution"

Dear Ms. Messer:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on March 21, 2017. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP  
Director & Research Compliance Officer

305.749.8881 | Fax 305.948.7180 | 305.948.7180 | 305.948.7180