

THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS: A QUALITATIVE REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF
PARENTS IN FRESHMAN, FIRST GENERATION SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS' ACCESS
TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the role of parents in freshman, first generation scholarship recipients' access to higher education. Three overarching goals guide the research: To gain knowledge and a better understanding of the college choice process of freshman, first generation scholarship recipients; to better understand the role of parents in the college choice process of these students; to utilize that knowledge to inform the practice of college and university admissions offices in improving access to higher education for other first generation college students. This dissertation does this by addressing three research questions: What perceptions do first year, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making process to pursue post-secondary attendance; What perceptions do first year, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making on what institutions to consider attending; What perceptions do first year, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their ultimate decision to matriculate at a post-secondary institution. Grounded in the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the study evaluates the college choice process utilizing the three distinct phases of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice.

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through many of the roadblocks I had constructed in my head on how to best tell the stories of my participants.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The American system of higher education has become the envy of the world (Khator, 2011). This accomplishment is not one that was achieved quickly, but by many measures American colleges and universities have been described collectively as one of the most sophisticated and evolved systems of higher education the world has ever seen (Khator, 2011; Thelin, 2011). The complexity and sophistication of the system can be measured by the variety of institutional types, ability of colleges and universities to evolve to meet the needs of industry, and the implementation of various technologies to continue the mission of expanding access to increasingly more citizens. Although this system is one to be proud of, it is not without its areas of improvement.

The Spellings' Report entitled *A Test of Leadership: Changing the Future of U.S. Higher Education* (United States Department of Education, 2006) was commissioned by former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to evaluate the American higher education system to celebrate its accomplishments, but also to identify opportunities for improvement. Former Secretary of Education Spellings identified several areas of the current higher education system for the committee to evaluate. Two areas of inquiry included access and affordability of higher education.

Throughout history access to affordable higher education has been a hallmark of the American system (Khator, 2011; Thelin, 2011). In recent years the cost of tuition and fees, room and board, etc. at colleges and universities around the country has risen dramatically (Campos,

2015; College Board, 2016; Trombley, 2003). These increased costs have discouraged some students from pursuing post-secondary attendance or added an additional stressor of tens of thousands of dollars in student loan debt (United States Department of Education, 2006).

The report also found an “expectations gap” in how many high schools were preparing students with skills that did not align with the content knowledge necessary to pursue post-secondary attendance (United States Department of Education, 2006). A large number of these “expectation gaps” existed in schools that served large populations of low-income students, as well as schools with large minority populations (United States Department of Education, 2006). As a result of the Spellings’ Report (2006), the authors concluded that large disparities existed in both college attendance and degree attainment by contrasting income levels and by race. The report stated “About one-third of Whites have obtained bachelor’s degrees by age 25–29, for example, just 18 percent of Blacks and ten percent of Latinos in the same age cohort have earned degrees by that time” (United States Department of Education, 2006, p.1).

The initiative to further support and improve access to higher education for low-income students was reinforced several years later by former President Obama. In a policy paper released by the administration in 2014 entitled *Increasing College Opportunity for Low-Income Students: Promising Models and a Call to Action*, the Obama administration made the national case for improving college access as both an economic and cultural investment in the future of our nation (Executive Office of the President, 2014). According to the findings of the report, the number of jobs requiring a post-secondary credential has doubled in the past 40 years, while the United States’ ranking in four-year degree attainment has dropped from first in 1990 to twelfth in 2014 (Executive Office of the President, 2014). This call to action by the Obama administration introduced a number of initiatives aimed at improving the matriculation rates of these students

ranging from new and innovative communication plans to keep students on track to encouraging high schools to invest in more mentoring opportunities for students interested in pursuing post-secondary attendance (Executive Office of the President, 2014).

In addition to the income and racial disparities that exist in college attendance there is a group of students that oftentimes identifies as low-income and minority, but faces an additional obstacle to the pursuit of higher education. First generation college students are defined in a variety of ways by different entities. As a result of the establishment of several support programs outlined in the Higher Education Act of 1965, the federal government identifies first generation students as college students whose parents have not earned a baccalaureate degree. For those first generation students that also identify as low-income and minority they face the same struggles as their fellow low-income and minority peers while also encountering a lack of knowledge and understanding of how college attendance works as a result of not having parents that experienced the college admission process (Petty, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

First generation college students comprised approximately 19.5% of the entering freshman class of 2012 according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education's 2013-2014 Almanac*. Additionally, The National Center for Education Statistic's 2012 publication of *The Condition of Education* found that first generation students made up more than one-third of the population aged 5-17 in the United States. Given the changing demographics of the United States and anticipated growth of the Hispanic/Latino population and other immigrant populations in the United States it can be expected that this population of students will continue to grow (Smith, 2015). This trajectory of immigrant growth is confirmed in a Pew Research article published by Brown (2015) that posits that immigrant growth will continue to grow in other ethnic groups as

well. Brown (2015) projected that the United States population of foreign born citizens could reach 18.8% by 2060 and meet or exceed the current record high of 14.8% set in 1890 by the year 2025. As this trend continues, administrators at colleges and universities across the nation will be called upon to adapt to the unique needs of the students making their way through the education pipeline.

Throughout the last several decades researchers have studied and developed theories related to college choice in order to inform the recruitment practices of college and university admissions offices to maximize the yield of their efforts. However, little to no in-depth analysis has been done on the way this large and growing market segment of first generation students navigate the college choice process.

To better understand the unique needs of these students in their college choice process, this study explored the experiences of individuals who identify as freshman, first generation college students that are scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama, and provided them an opportunity to reflect on their own personal college choice process. The decision to study freshman, first generation scholarship recipients is of particular importance as these students are the aberration from what literature says is the typical first generation prospective student experience (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Hertel, 2002; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Ward et al., 2012; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). These students were somehow made aware of the availability of these awards, supported in a way that allowed them to compete for selection, granted the award, and ultimately matriculated at a large, four-year, flagship university; all of which defy the typical experience of those students that share their generation status (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Hertel,

2002; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Stephens et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2012; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

The classification of first generation students is based solely on the educational attainment of a student's parents and the corresponding capital transferred to them as a result. Given the importance placed on parental influence in identifying a student as first generation, this study will more specifically focus on the role of a student's parents in their college choice process. The findings will provide researchers and practitioners a better understanding of how first generation students traverse the college choice process. By further understanding the unique experiences of first generation students, practitioners will be better equipped to support these students in the future as they navigate their own college choice process.

Statement of Problem

Enrollment at American colleges and universities has continued on a downward spiral over the past several years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). Decreased enrollments coupled with continued reductions in state appropriations and rising tuition costs have caused institutional leaders to constantly work to diversify their resource dependency by expanding the market segments from which they recruit their students (Rivard, 2013). Further inquiry into how these students navigate their own unique college choice process will advance the recruitment strategies of admissions offices aimed at diversifying their applicant pool.

The results of this study will allow these professionals to strategically breach a large and growing market segment of prospective students that may have been inadvertently excluded from the college choice process as a result of their individual circumstances. The results will also provide an opportunity for higher education administrators to continue to expand their work in addressing one of the pillars of American higher education, as outlined in the Spellings' report,

of expanding access to higher education to students that are currently not pursuing higher education at the same rates as their non-first generation peers (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Jung, 2013; Klasik, 2012; Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, & Schmidt, 2009; Wohn et al., 2013).

Increasing access to higher education is an argument not only rooted in a moral obligation of a government to educate its citizens as outlined by Thomas Jefferson, but in the improvement of our society as a whole. In a letter to James Madison (1787), Jefferson said, “Above all things I hope the education of the common people will be attended to, convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty.” More recently, studies have shown that as educational attainment increases so does participation in the political process and engagement in community service and volunteerism (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011; Volunteering in the United States, 2015). As demonstrated in Figure 1, as one’s educational attainment increases so does one’s median weekly earnings and the likelihood of being employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). As a result of these data, increasing access to higher education should not only be an institutional priority, but a national priority as well. The results of this study can serve as a valuable addition to the body of scholarship used to address this pressing national issue.

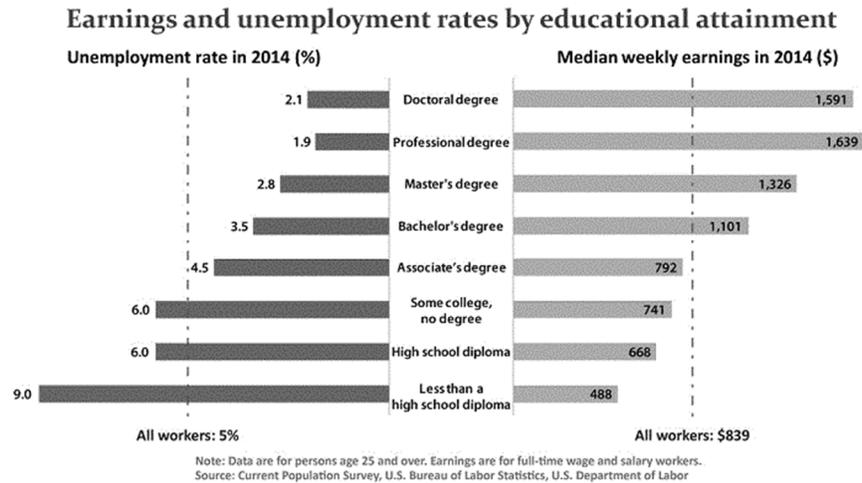


Figure 1. Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment. Adapted from United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016). Employment projections. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the inquiry into better understanding how first generation college students experience the college choice process:

1. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making to pursue post-secondary attendance?
2. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making on what institutions to consider attending?
3. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their ultimate decision to matriculate at a post-secondary institution?

Benefits of Improving Access to Higher Education

As recorded in a U.S. News & World Report article by Peralta (2014), a recent study conducted by the United States federal government found that while the cost of attending college is still increasing, the benefits of earning a baccalaureate degree still outweigh the costs. This return on investment has been true for decades as can be seen in Figure 2. As citizens increase their earning potential through increased education, their future increase in tax contributions creates a case for the overall good that results from improving access to higher education for all (Able & Deitz, 2014; Peralta, 2014).

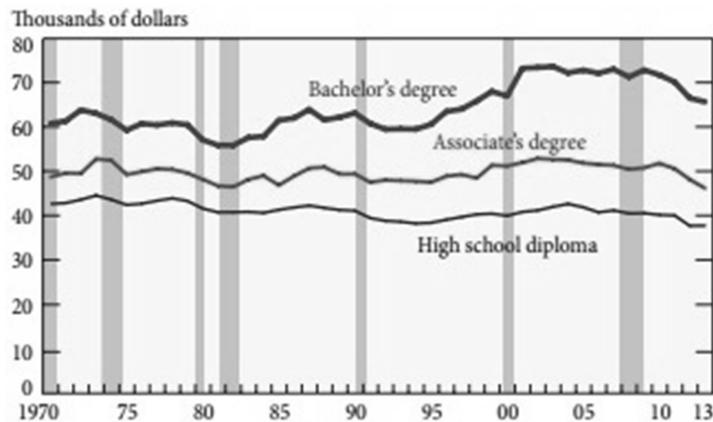


Figure 2. Average annual wages by education 1970-2013. Adapted from Abel, J. R., & Deitz, R. (2014). Do the benefits of college still outweigh the costs? *Federal Reserve Bank of New York Current Issues in Economics and Finance*, 20(3), 1-11.

The argument for improving access to higher education for all is rooted not only in economic principle, as stated by Thomas and Quinn (2007) and Peralta (2014), but also in a cultural and civic context.

There are correlations between educational attainment level and several social and cultural involvement indicators. The state of Ohio conducted a Civil Health Index survey in 2010 and found that as educational attainment levels increased so did participation in elections, participation in volunteer opportunities, and the likelihood that someone would assist a neighbor

in fixing something at or in their home (National Conference on Citizenship, 2010). Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) further argued that increased educational attainment not only increased voter participation, but allowed citizens to obtain the necessary civic education to effectively articulate their concerns to politicians. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) also found that education...

[i]mparts the knowledge and skills most essential to a citizen's task...Because of their schooling, the well educated have the skills people need to understand the abstract subject of politics, to follow the political campaign, and to research and evaluate the issues and candidates. (p. 136)

The National Bureau of Labor Statistics found similar results related to civic engagement and volunteerism nationwide (United States Department of Labor, 2016). Among people 25 and over 38.8% with a bachelor's degree or higher volunteered in the record keeping year from September 2014 to September 2015 as compared to 26.5% of those with some college or an associate's degree, 15.6% of those with a high school diploma, and 8.1% of those with less than a high school diploma (United States Department of Labor, 2016). There are also data that show a correlation between educational attainment and levels of incarceration (Harlow, 2003).

In 2009, The Center for Labor Market Studies reported that the incidence of institutionalization was more than 63 times higher for those that are pushed out or drop out of high school than those that earn a baccalaureate degree (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009). In a report published in 2003 by the Department of Justice, the authors concluded that while almost half of the general population of the United States at that time possessed a baccalaureate degree only 12.7% of those incarcerated had attended an institution of higher learning (Harlow, 2003). While incarcerated, these individuals are not only failing to contribute to the tax base, but

are placing a financial burden on state and national budgets. There are also social and cultural costs to society and families of these individuals as a result of their absence.

Parental Influence on the College Choice Process

The non-traditional education of children by their parents about their culture, family dynamics, and social norms all play an instrumental role in developing the personality, morals, and standard of acceptable behaviors in children (Angerame, 2015; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977). This early education and lived experience influenced by the lives of one's parents provides children and eventually prospective college students with a social and cultural identity that will come to influence the ways in which they navigate the world and societal structures that they will encounter throughout their lives (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977). This knowledge and identity is theorized to be associated with a level of capital, identified as cultural capital, that can be invested or applied in most settings and can yield a return in the form of accumulating assets that bear on social position (Angerame, 2015; Barone, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Silva, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

This cultural capital will play an even more critical role in a student's college choice process as he or she begins to invest the knowledge and information obtained throughout his or her life to gain an understanding of what it takes to make college attendance possible. Many high school students rely on friends, parents, and guidance counselors for insight on navigating the college choice process (Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982, Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Those with decreased levels of cultural capital find themselves with less access to knowledgeable and reputable information sources from which to make informed decisions regarding their continued education (Angerame, 2015; Barone, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Silva, 2006, Yosso, 2005).

Throughout the years researchers have found that one of the most important information sources for students regarding their college choice process is their parents (Bers, 2005; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Chapman, 1981; Choy, 2001; Conklin & Dailey, 1980; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Gilmour, Spiro, & Dolich, 1978; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; John, 2006; Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1982; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005; Petty, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973; Trent & Medsker, 1969; Ward et al., 2012; Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). For first generation students this provides a unique obstacle for their pursuit of post-secondary attendance as they gain little to no information or sometimes even support from their parents for their educational endeavors as a result of their lack of understanding and experience with the process themselves (Petty, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Ward et al., 2012).

Significance of Study

College Board and Art & Science Group developed a collaborative project entitled StudentPOLL, as a way to “present the results from a series of national surveys that measure the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of college-bound high school students and their parents” (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007). In an issue entitled *Parent Involvement in College Planning* the authors found that the parents of college bound, rising high school seniors were heavily involved in much of their out of school life (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007). More than 50% of survey respondents denoted that their parents were “very involved” in their college plans with only 5% responding that their parents were “not at all involved” in their college choice process (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007). Almost one-third of respondents also shared that their parents were “very involved” in their future career planning (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007). Roughly one-quarter of participants

indicated that their parents were “very involved” in helping them secure after school and summer employment and helping them with course selection in high school (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007).

Finally, the survey aimed to assess participant satisfaction with the level of their parents’ involvement in their lives. Three out of five students indicated that they were “satisfied” with the level in which their parents were involved in their lives. Twenty-eight percent of the remaining participants actually wanted their parents to be more involved. Only 6% of the students surveyed who reported having some parental involvement in their college search indicated that they wanted their parents to be “less involved” (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007).

The results of this survey indicate that not only are parents heavily involved in the lives of their students, but that students want their parents to be involved at even higher levels (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007). National consulting firms such as Noel-Levitz have also conducted research reports assessing the influence of parents on their students’ college choice decisions in order to inform the strategy of institutional recruitment efforts (Noel-Levitz, 2009).

Although it is known that the involvement of parents is important, little qualitative research has been done to analyze how that involvement impacts a student’s progress through the phases of their college choice process. Furthermore, even less scholarship has been dedicated to better understanding the influence of parental involvement on the college choice process of first generation students whose parents have never experienced the process firsthand. The results of this study can serve as a valuable addition to the body of scholarship on the topic of college choice. The results may even be used to further inform institutional recruitment efforts to engage the parents of perspective students that identify as first generation.

Summary and Organization of Study

The gap in enrollment rates between first generation students and their non-first generation peers suggests these students have unique needs that are somehow not being met as it relates to their continued education. If colleges and universities are going to continue to strive to grow enrollments and improve access to higher education for all, it is imperative that researchers and practitioners dedicate time and energy to understanding the experiences of these students and the important role that their parents play throughout their college choice process.

This study aims to contribute to the scholarship in this area and is organized into five chapters. Chapter one served as a contextual introduction to the problem, presented the research questions that will drive this inquiry, and offered significant support for further understanding the college choice process of first generation college students. Chapter two will serve as a review of the existing literature on first generation college students, the influence of cultural capital on the lived experiences of students, and the college choice process. Chapter three will present the methodology for this study and further explain the research design. Chapters four and five will present the findings and discussion of the study, as well as recommendations for practice as informed by the results, the limitations of the study, and the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with an overview of the experiences of first generation college students followed by a review of historical literature on the college choice process. It also introduces a review of scholarship related to the role of parents in establishing levels of cultural capital for their children in the context of their college choice process. Lastly, this chapter will synthesize more recent literature on college choice through a cultural capital lens to best prepare the reader to comprehend the experiences of first generation students' college choice process. This literature review provides a historical and theoretical framework for the current study which seeks to better understand how freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama experience the college choice process and the role that their parents played throughout the process. The following research questions seek to examine the experiences of these students and will guide this dissertation:

1. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making to pursue post-secondary attendance?

2. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making on what institutions to consider attending?

3. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their ultimate decision to matriculate at a post-secondary institution?

First Generation College Students

All post-secondary students arrive on the campuses of our country's colleges and universities with their own unique set of skills, knowledge, and capital with a common goal of navigating their respective campus in a way that will facilitate their eventual degree attainment. First generation college students begin their journey through college with a unique set of circumstances and pressure as they embark on a quest to become the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree. This unique situation has the potential to influence the way students navigate the college choice process, transition to college life, and perform academically (Ward et al., 2012). Throughout this chapter the distinctive phases of a first generation college student's experience from college choice to persistence towards degree will be examined in an attempt to critically explore how these students come to experience college.

Who Are First Generation College Students?

In 2013, the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac reported that 19.5% of students in the freshman cohort at colleges and universities in the United States were first generation students. Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistic's 2012 publication of *The Condition of Education* indicated that first generation students made up more than one-third of the population aged 5-17 in the United States. These numbers paint a vivid picture of just how many of these students are enrolled in post-secondary education as well as the growing number entering the college pipeline in coming years.

It is important to note that there are varying criteria for how first generation college students are defined. The federal government via the Higher Education Act of 1965 and the establishment of the first of what became known as the TRIO programs, as well as numerous scholars on the subject identify this population as students whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree (Petty, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Ward et al., 2012). Oftentimes, these students also identify as being low-income, minority students who are academically under-prepared when compared to their non-first generation peers (Petty, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Each factor associated with a student's first generation status has the potential to impact his or her predisposition to consider attending post-secondary education, as well as the type of institutions that will make up his or her choice set (Petty, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Ward et al., 2012).

College choice process. It would be inappropriate to assume that all first generation college students undergo the same college choice process; however, researchers have discovered commonalities in the process for those students identified as first generation (Hertel, 2002; Stephens et al., 2012; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). When discussing the college choice process the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice serves as a seminal framework for how students navigate such a process.

The first phase of the model, predisposition, is characterized by a student's decision of whether or not to pursue post-secondary education. For first generation students, this phase is oftentimes delayed as a result of their limited access to the knowledge and information related to the college choice process (Ward et al., 2012). Researchers have attributed this decreased level of knowledge and access to information to the lack of experience with the college choice process by students' parents as well as the limited resources of the high schools that these students are

more likely to attend as a result of their lower socioeconomic status (Hertel, 2002; Stephens et al., 2012; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

The second phase of Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) model is titled search. During this phase students begin to prepare a list of institutions that will come to make up their choice set. They will actively gather information about these institutions including entry requirements, academic program availability, and cost information. As previously discussed first generation students generally perform at lower levels academically than their non-first generation peers limiting the pool of institutions that will grant them admission; thereby, limiting the number of schools that make up their choice set. As a result, first generation students are more likely to consider and ultimately attend two-year schools when compared to their non-first generation peers (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

The final phase of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model is the choice phase. During this phase students will consider all institutions where they have been granted admission and begin cross-examining availability of academic programs, the implications of attending each institution on their current familial obligations, as well as a return on investment associated with attendance (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). During this phase the cost of attending an institution becomes increasingly important for any student, but more so for this population as they tend to come from lower income families (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Ward et al., 2012). Additionally, their limited access to information related to the college choice process frequently limits the amount of financial resources that these students are able to access due to missed deadlines and a lack of knowledge of the existence of different types of financial assistance (Dumais & Ward, 2010). A lack of available financial resources as well as familial influence often results in first

generation students ultimately attending schools closer to home (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Transition to college. According to Ward et al. (2012), first generation students have the same concerns about entering college as non-first generation students; however, there are several concerns that are more strongly associated with the first generation population. Some of these concerns include: feeling underprepared academically, worries of available financial aid, fears of failing, and being less comfortable in the social environment of college. These students are also susceptible to feelings of resentment by their parents who do not have any experience with higher education (Ward et al., 2012).

Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) observed that first generation students had more difficulty with the socialization process at their institutions than their non-first generation peers. Students struggled with coming to terms with what the institutional expectations are for them as well as how they fit into the institutional culture. Ward et al. (2012) further discussed the importance of the first year of college for first generation students as an integral period of adjustment and socialization into the institutional culture. While this period is important for all students to adjust and transition to their new environment, first generation students are facing this period with a decreased level of expectation for their experience and cultural capital. According to Engle and Tinto (2008), low-income first generation college students across all institutional types are four times more likely to not return after their first year.

One factor that provides the opportunity to positively impact campus socialization and transition is a residential life experience. Data, however, show that first generation students are less likely to reside on campus than their non-first generation peers (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pacarella, & Nora, 1996). Consequently,

Pike and Kuh (2005) found that the intellectual development of first generation students is directly and negatively impacted by not residing on campus. First generation students often elect to live at home while attending school as a means of cost savings, but also as a way to continue to be involved in their home culture (Ward et al., 2012). Ward et al. (2012) described a type of competition that exists for first generation students between their institution and home environments. First generation students are relentlessly facing a struggle between the institutional pull, which aims to engage them in educationally meaningful activities, and the environmental pull of other aspects of their lives, which results in distracting them from the institutional culture, possibly leading to a decrease in engagement with the campus community (Ward et al., 2012).

Retention/Persistence. First generation students not only enter higher education at lower rates than their non-first generation peers, but they are also retained and graduate at lower rates as well (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001; Ward et al., 2012). Sixty percent of first generation students that begin college do not attain a degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). There are a multitude of factors that can attribute to college student attrition. Pascarella et al. (2004) identified a lack of connection or engagement with the academic community as especially difficult for first generation students. Other researchers have also concluded that first generation students are more likely to underestimate the academic expectations placed on them by their faculty, less confident in their academic work, and less likely to seek academic assistance from their faculty (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009).

The influence of a student's parents' past experience with higher education is critical to their future success in college (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Bourdieu (1986)

found that parents pass on cultural capital to their children as a mechanism for preparing them to navigate many of the world's challenges. Students whose parents did not earn a baccalaureate degree have lower levels of cultural capital as it relates to being a college student which; therefore, decreases their knowledge of both the college choice process as well as their ability to navigate the college experience (Gofen, 2009). As a result, first generation students are less likely to engage in co-curricular activities as they are typically not aware of the importance of these experiences (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). This decreased level of involvement and social engagement is an additional factor contributing to the increased level of attrition associated with first generation students (Ward et al., 2012). Next, the foundational research regarding the college choice process will be presented.

College Choice Theory

Much of the research in the past several decades on college choice is rooted in the findings and conceptual models of three publications. Chapman (1981) sought to develop a model of college choice entrenched in the factors that prior researchers (Nolfi, 1979; Trent & Medsker, 1969; Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973) had deemed most influential in a student's decision to both consider the possibility of post-secondary attendance and then ultimately which institution to attend if any was chosen at all. The Litten Model (1982) was built upon the work of Chapman (1981) but aimed to expand the theory to consider additional biographical and demographic factors of students and how these factors come to influence a student's choice process. Finally, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a three-phase, developmental model of college choice built upon the work of Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and others (Astin, 1985; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Hauser & Featherman, 1976; Hearn, 1984; Ihlanfeldt, 1980; Peters, 1977; Manski & Wise, 1983; Mare, 1980; Pace, 1984; Rumberger, 1982; Tillery, 1973; Zemsky

& Oedel, 1983). The Hossler and Gallagher model has become one of the most widely cited and referenced theories of college choice today and will serve as an important framework for the development of this study. Each of these models will be discussed in depth as they serve as an important foundation of scholarship in the study of college choice.

Chapman Model of College Choice

The Chapman Model of College Choice (1981) was developed in response to fears that the number of college applicants and succeeding graduates was headed for a sharp decline. At the time, many institutions were beginning to dedicate large amounts of resources to redevelop the strategies they employed to market their institutions to prospective students. Not unlike the current climate, a number of administrators expressed the belief that they could develop a more competitive edge with the market of incoming college students by refashioning the ways in which they described their institution or targeted their efforts at new segments of students within that market (Chapman, 1981). As a result of the educational landscape at the time, Chapman (1981) sought to isolate the most meaningful factors that administrators should consider when redeveloping their recruitment strategies. More specifically, Chapman aimed to review and chronicle the current literature related to the influence of printed recruitment materials on a student's college choice.

First, Chapman (1981) acknowledged the lack of research on the topic asserting that the influx of student enrollments at the time did not warrant a need for scholarship in the area. Additionally, the author found that much of the work related to enrollment was more focused on selection and rooted in predictive analytics used to anticipate enrollments at specific institutions and predict enrollment behaviors due to recent changes in the administration of federal financial aid (Chapman, 1981). Much of this work used biographical and demographic data sets to predict

such behaviors with very limited presence of theory related to college choice behaviors of students (Chapman, 1981; Tierney, Houang, & Henson, 1979).

Next, Chapman (1981) introduced a basic conceptual model of college student choice, as shown in Figure 3, that identified critical factors that influenced the ways in which students experience their own personal college choice process. Chapman suggested that to best comprehend a student's choice it was necessary to "take into account both background and current characteristics of the student, the student's family, and the characteristics of the college" (Chapman, 1981, p. 492).

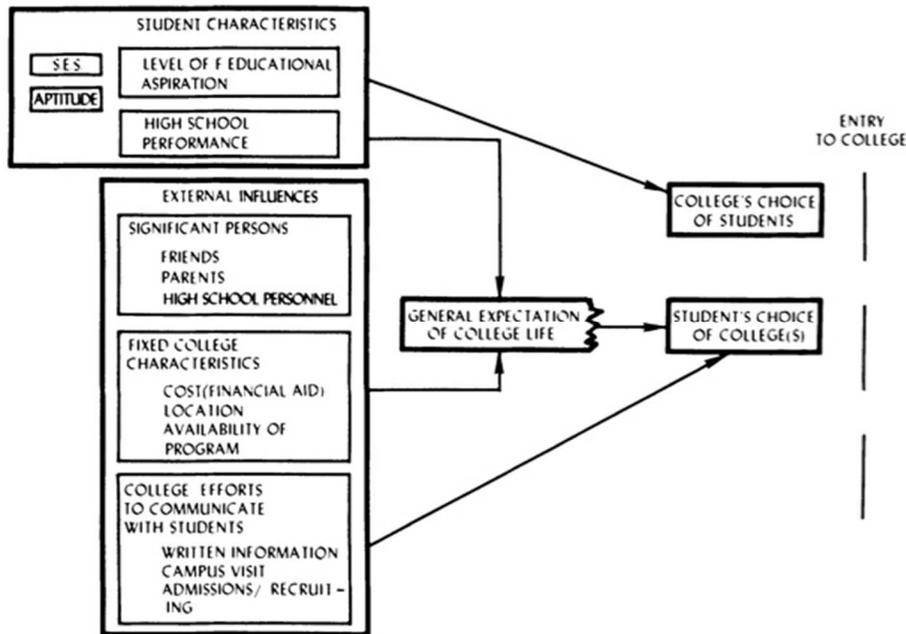


Figure 3. Chapman's conceptual model of student college choice. Adapted from Chapman, D. W. (1981). A model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 52, 490-505.

The model asserts that there are certain student characteristics as well as external factors that influence a student's college choice which can be grouped into three categories: (a) influence of significant people, (b) unchanging characteristics of the institution, and (c) the institution's effort to make contact with prospective students (Chapman, 1981). All of these

factors are then internally compared with the student's assumed expectations for a college experience and assigned determinant value based on the comparison (Chapman, 1981).

Student characteristics. Students approach the college choice process with a set of characteristics that make up their own unique circumstance, which then shapes the ways in which they experience the college choice process. Some of the more determinant characteristics as outlined by Chapman (1981) include: socioeconomic status, aptitude, educational expectations/aspirations, and relationships with significant people. Each of these characteristics will now be discussed in more depth as they relate to the college choice process.

Socioeconomic status impacts the college choice process of students in a variety of ways. Students from differing socioeconomic statuses not only attend post-secondary education at varying rates, but they also distribute themselves at different institutional types (Chapman, 1981; Cross, 1971; Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973; Trent & Medsker, 1969). Additionally, students from higher socioeconomic groups are more likely to attend four-year institutions as compared to their peers in middle and lower socioeconomic groups (Tillery, 1973). Family income, which is a critical factor in determining socioeconomic status, also plays a role in limiting the types of schools that those with lower levels of family income will consider as viable options due to the institutional cost associated with enrollment (Chapman, 1981). Finally, socioeconomic status has an influence on certain attitudes and behaviors related to college choice. Students in higher socioeconomic groups have higher educational aspirations, expectations, and grade point averages, all of which play an integral role in the college choice process of students (Brookover, Erickson, & Joiner, 1967; Chapman, 1981; Rehberg, 1967).

Student aptitude is tightly coupled with the institutions that they consider as part of their choice set as performance on aptitude tests or college admissions exams serve as a foundation for

most institutional admission decisions. In fact, many institutions publish the range in scores and class rank of their entering class in order to set a standard of what it takes to be admitted to their institution (Chapman, 1981). Nolfi (1979) found that students would choose institutions that had an academic profile closest in line with their own aptitude. The author concluded that the majority of students are disinterested with being around peers whose abilities are dramatically different than their own (Nolfi, 1979). Student aptitude may also generate additional responses that can elicit more encouragement to further pursue their education from teachers, family, and friends. Higher achieving students are oftentimes more likely to receive college advising from guidance counselors, which can then lead to increased educational aspirations or exposure to additional scholarship opportunities (Chapman & Gill, 1980).

Although both aspirations and expectations impact student desire to pursue higher education, they do so in distinct ways. Expectations are associated with what a student assumes he or she will have achieved in the future, while aspirations are based on desires students hold for their future (Chapman, 1981). Several researchers found that a moderate correlation exists between educational expectations and aspirations and a student's academic performance as indicated by grade point average (Brookover et al., 1967; Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973). As previously mentioned, grade point average will eventually serve as an indicator of aptitude and may come to limit the schools that make up a student's choice set (Chapman, 1981).

Students' decisions are influenced by their friends and family in meaningful ways and the college choice process is no different. The influence of these individuals impacts the college choice process in a number of ways. Conversations with these individuals have the ability to shape students' expectations of what a specific institution is like. Some individuals may also offer candid suggestions, whether solicited or not, on where the student should attend college. In

some cases, an older friend's decision on where to attend college may influence students to consider an institution that they may not have otherwise considered (Chapman, 1981). While the relationships with and influence of peers, high school teachers, and guidance counselors are important in shaping a student's experience with the college choice process, Tillery and Kildegaard (1973) as well as Trent and Medsker (1969) concluded that a student's parents seem to exert the greatest influence on his or her future enrollment decision (Chapman, 1981).

Fixed college characteristics. Colleges and universities have characteristics about their institutions that cannot be altered. These characteristics play a role in influencing students' college choice process as students consider different institutions with varying offerings and opportunities. The fixed characteristics of college choice discussed by Chapman (1981) include: cost/availability of financial aid, location, and availability of desired program of study. Each of these characteristics will now be discussed as they relate to a student's college choice process.

Cost and the availability of financial aid are crucial factors of whether or not a student decides to attend a college or university (Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973). These factors also span the boundary into students' personal characteristics as their aptitude has potential to influence the amount of financial aid that is made available to them. Additionally, where students fall in regards to socioeconomic status and family income could limit their ability to pay the costs associated with attending certain institutions (Chapman, 1981). Decisions and policies made at the federal and institutional levels regarding financial aid are also critically important to the college choice process for all students and have lasting implications not only for the student but for the institution, state, and nation as well (Chapman, 1981).

According to Ihlanfeldt (1980), "over 50 percent of entering freshmen attend colleges within 50 miles of their home; 92 percent attend college within 500 miles of their home"

(Chapman, 1981, p. 497). Again, this fixed institutional factor can be influenced in the college choice process by the personal attributes of the student. The ability of a student to move geographically is often influenced by academic aptitude and socioeconomic status (Chapman, 1981; Ihlanfeldt, 1980).

While colleges and universities possess the ability to make adjustments to their academic offerings, the length of time often associated with such a process makes this factor relatively fixed for the search process of any given student (Chapman, 1981). Students consider institutions as part of their choice set that they believe can assist them in achieving their educational aspirations and adequately prepare them to either enter the workforce or pursue graduate study. The availability and reputation of such courses and programs becomes increasingly important for those students interested in pursuing careers or programs that require specialized training. Conversely, availability and reputation become less important for those students interested in pursuing courses of study that require less specialized training (Chapman, 1981).

While the Chapman (1981) model was one of the first attempts to comprehensively understand how students experienced the college choice process, the model was fairly reliant on existing data sets that then informed enrollment trends. Chapman's (1981) model has proven to be a noteworthy contribution to the study, but serves as a fairly elementary understanding of students' choice behaviors. The Litten Model of College Choice (1982) sought to expand upon the work of Chapman (1982) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different students experience the college choice process.

Litten Model of College Choice

The Litten Model of College Choice (1982) incorporated the work of many previous scholars in the area of college choice behavior. Litten spent a considerable amount of time

discussing the work of Chapman (1981) and concluded that Chapman's review of the literature and model of college choice "focuses primarily on structural and attribute variables and their relationships to the outcomes of the college-selection process" (Litten, 1982, p. 384). Although Chapman's model (1981) was critical to the study of college choice, Litten argued that there were some noteworthy limitations to Chapman's (1981) work.

Litten (1982) suggested that Chapman's (1981) model was highly generalized and presented a rather basic level of the factors that come to influence a student's college choice behavior (Litten, 1982). Litten (1982) also noted that the Chapman model (1981) left a gap in understanding more of the process that students undergo during the college choice process. The actual process and the unique inputs provided by the individual circumstances of students served as the focus for the development of Litten's model (1982), which Litten considered equally important for administrators when making decisions about their recruitment strategies as understanding the outcome behavior of students (1982). Litten's model (1982) employed principles derived from general marketing theory that informed the practice of segmenting students based on biographical and demographic traits to most effectively reach these students during the recruitment process.

Drawing on the work of Kotler (1976) and Chapman (1982) as well as others (Chapman & Van Horn, 1974; Ihlanfeldt, 1980; Turner, 1978), Litten (1982) developed six aspects of the college selection process as the focus of research:

- timing of the process;
- number of institutional options considered;
- type of information sought;
- attributes of the institutions that are considered;

- type of information media used or preferred; and
- influential people (p. 387).

These areas would be evaluated for different groups to distinguish when segmentation may be appropriate during the marketing and recruitment processes. Segmentation variables included: (a) race; (b) sex; (c) ability level; (d) parents' educational level; and (e) geographic location (Litten, 1982, p.388). The results of Litten's study (1982) and review of literature will now be discussed in the context of each segmented group.

Race. Differences among varying racial groups exist in a number of aspects of how students experience the college choice process. Black students seem to begin their college choice process later than White students and spread the process over a longer period of time (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1982). Black students also appear to consider more schools and report more requests for information about institutions of interest than White students (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1982). Campus visits and college representative visits ranked higher as important sources of information for Black students than White students, while requesting information from the institutions and advice from guidance counselors and parents ranked higher for White students (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1982). Additionally, the variance in the use of parents as sources of information between Black and White students was highly correlated to the parental education level (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1982).

Black students also seemed to consult a larger variety of information sources than White students (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1982). Furthermore, Black students were more interested in the social backgrounds of the students in attendance at the institutions they were considering and were more likely to rate the availability of financial aid as "very important" to their college choice process (Litten, 1982). Finally, Litten's Six-Market Study found that Asian

students relied more heavily on the “general reputation” of an institution than any other racial group (Litten, 1982).

Sex. Lewis and Morrison (1975) found that the differences between men and women were less dramatic than the difference between Black and White students. Both men and women begin the information-gathering phase of their college selection process around the same time; however, women complete their information gathering and begin the application process sooner than men. Nevertheless, both men and women complete their college applications at approximately the same time (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1982).

Hanson and Litten (1982) concluded that students discuss their college selection process with parents of the same sex at higher rates than with parents of the opposite sex. They also found that women were more likely to consider the opinions of their peers, friends, and significant others on the college selection process than men (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Litten, 1982). Based on Litten’s study (1982), the only other dramatic difference by sex was that women were more likely than men to rate residential life as “very important” (Litten, 1982).

Academic ability. In the studies that reviewed the role of academic ability in the college selection process three ability groups were identified based on students’ performance on the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) (Gilmour et al., 1978; Litten, 1982). Students with higher academic ability seemed to begin the application process earlier than their lower ability peers (Gilmour et al., 1978). The group identified as having the highest ability considers and applies to more schools than other ability groups (Gilmour et al., 1978). High school counselors serve as a primary information source at greater rates for higher ability students than their lower ability peers (Gilmour et al., 1978).

There were also a number of attitudinal differences between ability levels related to the price of college, availability of academic programs, campus appearance, and the possibility of career outcomes after graduation (Gilmour et al., 1978; Litten, 1982). Gilmour et al (1978) noted that as students' ability increased so did their concern of academic program. Additionally, Litten (1982) found that as a students' academic ability increased the presence of strong concern over possible career outcomes and campus appearance decreased. Finally, there was a dramatic difference in concern over the overall price of college attendance by academic ability group with the level of least concern exhibited among the highest ability group (Litten, 1982).

Educational attainment of parents. This segmentation area showed dramatic differences between findings of previous studies. Both Litten's Six-Market Factor study (1982) and Gilmour et al. (1978) reviewed the educational level of students' parents as it related to their college choice process. Gilmour et al. (1978) observed that students with parents that had some sort of college education started their college selection process earlier than those students whose parents had no college education. However, there did not seem to be a difference in these groups related to the application process or final enrollment decisions (Gilmour, 1978). Litten's Six-Market Factor study (1982), however, found conflicting results.

Litten (1982) noted that as parental education increased so did the timing of a student's application submission (Litten, 1982). Differences between the number of applications were also detected. Gilmour et al. (1978) found that students with more educated parents applied to more schools than their peers with less educated parents. Forty-four percent of students with college educated parents applied to three or more schools as compared to 19% of their peers with parents that did not attend college (Gilmour et al., 1978).

Both Litten (1982) and Gilmour et al. (1978) found similarities related to the role of parental education on students' college choice process. Students with college-educated parents were more likely to report their parents as their primary source of information related to college choice as compared to their peers with parents that did not have a college education. Similarly, students with college-educated parents were less likely to identify guidance counselors as their primary source of information related to their college choice as compared to their peers with parents that did not have a college education (Gilmour et al., 1978; Litten, 1982).

Litten (1982) found that higher levels of parental education resulted in greater usage by students of "commercial guidebooks" and campus visits. Similarly, these same students reported higher levels of engagement with college admissions officers and unrelated alumni as sources of information (Litten, 1982). Students with less educated parents received information from unrequested print materials and high school counselors at higher rates than their peers (Litten, 1982). Finally, regarding cost both Litten (1982) and Gilmour et al. (1978) found that students with more educated parents considered cost as a less important factor when deciding which school to attend than their peers with less educated parents.

While similarities in the findings of these two studies do exist, there was a difference based on the importance of academic programs on a student's overall decision of which institution to attend. Gilmour et al. (1978) observed that students with college educated parents found academic programs to be of primary importance at greater rates than those students whose parents did not attend college. Litten (1982), however, did not find any difference in importance on this factor between parental education level groups in the Six-Market study.

Geographic location. All geographic location data reported in Litten's model (1982) was reported from the Six-Market study and was bound by the geographic locations of its

administration. The questionnaire was administered to 3,000 high school seniors evenly distributed across the metropolitan areas of: Washington D.C./Baltimore/North Virginia; Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver/Boulder; and San Francisco/Oakland to students with a combined score on the PSAT of 100 or greater. Geographic location was found to be of little importance in better understanding college selection behavior. There were; however, some geographic specific nuances worth noting.

The admissions deadlines at major local institutions dramatically affected the timeline in which students conducted their college choice process. Litten (1982) stated:

Fifty percent of the students in the San Francisco Bay area report filing an application for their first choice school by the end of November...it was not until January that the same percentage had submitted their first choice applications in Minnesota and Texas. (p. 396)

Additionally, Midwestern students exhibited a higher level of interest in financial aid, and students in Chicago displayed low levels of interest in recreational and co-curricular activities (Litten, 1982). Washington area students were the group most likely to seek information from printed materials and least likely to utilize unrelated alumni as a source of information (Litten, 1982).

Litten's (1982) work in refining the model of college choice presented in Chapman's (1981) model provided additional insights regarding the experiences of students as they navigate the commonly accepted stages and processes associated with the college choice process. Litten's work provides the context of additional student experiences and attributes that require the attention of those working to develop new and more inclusive strategies for recruiting students and improving access to higher education. While previous researchers have provided a framework for the stages of college choice and the influence of personal characteristics that

influence how a student progresses through the process, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Model of College Choice continues to build upon the work of these authors, and as a result has become one of the seminal works of scholarship related to the college choice process of students.

Hossler and Gallagher Three-Phase Model of College Choice

The Hossler and Gallagher Three-Phase Model of College Choice is perhaps one of the most widely referenced and used process models for understanding the college choice behaviors of students (Bergerson, 2009). This model was developed as a result of a comprehensive synthesis of pre-existing literature on college choice which was then applied to a developmental framework in which each stage was associated with specific “cognitive and affective outcomes” (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001, p. 5). Each phase will now be presented followed by a discussion of how this model will serve as a framework for the development of this dissertation.

Predisposition. The first phase of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice is the predisposition phase. In this phase, the developmental outcome is a student’s decision whether or not to pursue post-secondary education. There are several factors that influence a student’s decision-making during this phase. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) first noted a student’s socioeconomic status (SES) as an influential factor in his or her decision to pursue post-secondary education. Peters (1977) found that “high SES students are four times more likely to go on to college than are low SES students” (p. 9).

The academic ability or past academic achievement of students is also an influential factor in determining whether or not to continue their education past high school graduation (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983; Mare, 1980; Peters, 1977; Rumberger, 1982). Litten’s (1982) work found that as a student’s academic ability increases the earlier his or her college choice process becomes formalized. Although personal characteristics

do play a meaningful role in students' decision-making process of whether or not to continue their education, there are other factors that exert a noteworthy amount of influence on their decision-making (Chapman, 1981; Conklin & Dailey, 1980; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982).

Conklin and Dailey (1980) found that the attitudes and influence of peers, parents, and other influential people in students' lives play an important role in their decision-making process during the predisposition phase of their college choice process. The authors discovered that as parental encouragement to pursue post-secondary education increased so did the likelihood that the student would enroll in a college or university following their high school graduation (Conklin & Dailey, 1980).

In addition to the influence of parents, students with friends planning to pursue higher education were more likely to also pursue post-secondary attendance (Hauser & Featherman, 1976; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Tillery, 1973). Finally, there were several structural and organizational factors that influenced a student's progress through the predisposition phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Based on other studies related to co-curricular involvement during the high school years (Hearn, 1984; Willingham, 1970) and the research on co-curricular involvement during the college years (Astin, 1985; Pace, 1984), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) speculated that this type of involvement played a meaningful role in a student's predisposition phase. Additionally, Willingham (1970) and Anderson, Bowman, and Tinto (1972) ascertained that living within close proximity to a college or university campus positively influenced a student's predisposition to attend college and not necessarily the institution closest to home. This finding of proximity

more positively impacts the predisposition phase of students living in urban or suburban areas when compared to their peers living in rural areas (Anderson et al., 1972).

It should be noted that the events of a student's predisposition phase could take place at any point in his or her pre-college life (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Murphy (1981) noted that some students begin exhibiting behaviors associated with the predisposition phase of college choice during grade school while others do not display these thoughts and considerations until the early years of high school. According to Jackson (1978), students reach the end of their predisposition phase at some point during high school when they identify with one of three categories:

- *whiches*—those students who never seriously consider not going to college
- *whethers*—those students who apply to 1-2 local colleges, but may not attend at all
- *nots*—those students who never really consider going to college (p. 571).

In accordance with Jackson's (1978) categories, students in the "whiches" and "whethers" categories proceed to the next phase of their college choice process, while the "nots" begin considering life options that do not include additional education.

Search. The search phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model begins when students begin to seek information about different colleges and universities. It is important to note that institutions are also searching for students during this phase making it a mutual search phase (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This mutual search phase creates more interaction between students and institutions, which is also a hallmark of the search phase as described in the model (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

During the search process students determine which institutions to gather more information on by developing what researchers have called the choice set of institutions (Hossler

& Gallagher, 1987). While the development of a choice set is a fairly consistent part of the search process for most students, the ways in which students gather information and make application decisions varies by students with some similarities within different cultural and social groups (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Ihlanfeldt, 1980; Litten, 1982; Litten et al., 1983; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983).

Ihlanfeldt (1980) and Litten et al. (1983) both recognized that students with higher academic ability were more likely to conduct more complex searches. Zemsky and Oedel (1983) also concluded that as students' SAT scores and income levels decreased the more narrow the geographic range and quality of the institutions they considered became. Additionally, Litten (1982) noted that Black students as well as students from low-income households and households with low parental education levels conducted longer and less efficient searches and relied more heavily on high school counselors for information and guidance.

Finally, the role of finances and overall cost associated with post-secondary attendance becomes a more influential factor during this stage, which informs application decisions later in the search process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The authors found that many students lacked an understanding of the actual cost of their attendance due to a lack of comprehension regarding financial aid and scholarship processes. Packer (1980) stated that in 1979 "49 percent of all students coming from families with incomes less than \$6,000 did not even apply for financial aid because they did not think that they were eligible for aid" (p. 80).

As students conclude their search phase some will decide not to progress to the choice phase for a multitude of reasons (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Manski and Wise (1983) found that oftentimes low-income students do not particularly enjoy educational experiences and were possibly less likely to matriculate at the end of their choice process regardless of their

experience. Furthermore, not all students who begin a search phase should be considered potential enrollees (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Choice. The final phase of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice is the choice phase, which the authors described as the student's final review of information gathered during the search phase, receipt of acceptance from institutions that were applied to, and a final matriculation decision to attend a specific institution or to not pursue higher education at all (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The personal preferences of the student, institutional attributes, and relationship developed between the applicant and institution are all key factors in a student's choice decision (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Jackson and Chapman (1984) determined that the perception of quality was important in a student's decision between a first and second choice institution. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) concluded that available financial aid and overall net cost associated with attendance had a dramatic impact on a student's matriculation decision during this phase, but the impact may vary based on institutional type and student characteristics.

There are additional factors that students have identified as important in determining their matriculation decision. Freeman (1984) concluded that the courtship process between institutions and students plays an important role in a student's choice decision. The author suggested that personal letters, on campus receptions, and special awards were in some cases just as important as aid based activities and awards in a student's decision to attend a given institution (Freeman, 1984). Freeman noted that students enjoyed receiving handwritten and personalized communications and outreach from faculty members who taught within the student's chosen discipline.

Throughout each phase of the college choice process students and their families increasingly interact with colleges and universities in a variety of ways (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). They build relationships with recruiters, gather a range of information about different institutions and post-secondary attendance in general, and begin to synthesize information in a way that will ultimately lead to an enrollment decision during their senior year of high school (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice provides a comprehensive and inclusive model for better understanding the historical context of how students experience the college choice process; it will serve as a framework for this study.

Role of Parents in Developing Cultural Capital

When people consider the concept of learning they frequently relive the more formal educational settings of their youth where a teacher stands at the front of the room and imparts knowledge to the rows of pupils sitting in their desks. Though this type of learning and instruction is critical, there is a type of learning that begins well before a child reaches school age and continues at home while they are attending school. The lessons taught to children by their parents at home are the lessons by which children learn and come to understand the social and cultural practices of their families, which dramatically impacts the ways in which they interact with and view the world (Angerame, 2015). These familial lessons come to shape the development of a child's personality, morals, customs, and understanding of what is acceptable behavior (Angerame, 2015). The compilation of this knowledge and lived experience develops a cultural and social identity that several theorists posit provides people with a level of capital that can be invested or applied in most settings and can yield a return in the form of accumulating assets that come to bear on social position (Angerame, 2015; Barone, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986;

Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Silva, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu (1986) coined the term cultural capital to identify this phenomenon in a book chapter entitled “The Forms of Capital”.

Although different cultural groups assign value to different activities, belongings, skills, and lifestyles, Bourdieu (1986) argued that the richest individuals within a society determine which of these have legitimate value within the larger society. Those chosen activities, belongings, skills, lifestyles, and experiences are cultivated by the wealthy and are then mimicked by the “petite bourgeoisie” or middle class and later filtered down to the lower working class (Bourdieu, 1986; Silva, 2006, p. 1174). In fact, Bourdieu (1986) further contended that the poorest group within a society lacks the privilege to even distinguish between the necessities of life and cultural desires.

One’s cultural capital exerts influence over decision-making in most situations and opinions of structures in modern society. Barone (2006) argued that most modern societies consist of social groups and social class structures that retain certain cultural identity traits. Cultural groups and the identities associated with them oftentimes influence the way people within the group view certain structural systems within society as a whole (Barone, 2006). Structural systems may include the labor market, educational system, leisure activities, political affiliations or ideologies, etc. (Barone, 2006). While the individual circumstance of every family and cultural group impacts the specific details and discrete lived experiences associated with an individual’s cultural capital, there are some commonly accepted groupings in which cultural capital is studied. Some of these groups include: socioeconomic/class groups, sex/gender, racial/ethnic groups, geographic location of origin, religious identity, and level of parental education, among others (Angerame, 2015; Barone, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Silva, 2006; Yosso, 2005). For the purpose of this dissertation all of the

previously mentioned cultural groups, except religious identity, will be reviewed further in the context of influencing the college choice process of students later in Chapter two.

Cultural Capital and Education

Along with the rich and powerful of a society shaping the cultural norms in terms of assigning cultural value to certain activities, experiences, etc., Bourdieu (1986) asserted that this group, predominantly composed of White people, continues to oppress communities of color by also controlling what knowledge holds value in society (Yosso, 2005). Since the vast majority of history books were written by members of the rich and powerful White elites within the society the cultural capital, lived experience, and historical knowledge of communities of color or those of the lower echelons of the socioeconomic latter is often discounted and left to be forgotten (Yosso, 2005). This oppression often translates into the classrooms of children who are not from the wealthy or predominant culture.

Yosso (2005) asserted that minority children are often expected to regard mainstream, White culture as more valuable than the culture with which they more closely identify. Some children of color who are less familiar with mainstream culture may even be regarded as culturally deficient in comparison to their White peers who are not viewed similarly for being less familiar with the cultural norms of different minority groups (Yosso, 2005). These students may be looked down upon as uneducated and expected to conform to mainstream cultural norms if they wish to be successful in their educational pursuits (Yosso, 2005).

The effects of cultural capital can be felt on the educational experiences of low-income, minority children as early as elementary school (Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006). Many of these students' parents tend to be less educated than their more affluent, White peers (Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006). As a result of the lack of educational attainment by these students' parents they

do not have the socially accepted cultural capital to inform them to be more involved with their children's schoolwork (Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006). These parents tend to "focus less on their children's homework, extracurricular activities, parent-teacher conferences, and other activities because they do not recognize their importance" (Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006, p. 194).

These parents often communicate that since they did not take their education seriously that they are not permitted to have higher educational expectations of their children (Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006). In contrast, the cultural capital associated with being more educated and of higher socioeconomic status informs parents to have more control over the ways in which their children spend their time (Jung-Sook & Bowen, 2006). Similar circumstances and situations continue to exist and new ones emerge as students make their way through the educational system that exists based on the cultural norms defined by the most affluent members of the dominant community (Barone, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; Jung-Sook, 2006; Silva, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

Upon nearing the completion of high school, all students are faced with the decision of whether or not to continue their education through post-secondary attendance. The cultural capital possessed by students will greatly influence their decision-making process regarding whether to consider college or university attendance, as well as every step of the process along their college choice journey, should they decide to pursue it (Barone, 2006; Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977; John, 2006; Jung-Sook, 2006; Silva, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

Although the federal government of the United States has made strides in improving access to higher education for low-income and underrepresented populations over the past several decades, students that identify with these groups still face a multitude of obstacles to earning a college education. John (2006) found that each year hundreds of thousands of college

prepared students from low-income families find themselves unable to attend college because they cannot afford it. These students are generally the children of parents who lack a college education (John, 2006).

Decreased parental education is associated with lower levels of cultural capital and a lack of available resources to seek information about available scholarship, grants, loans, and other financial aid opportunities that could aid in their pursuit of higher education (John, 2006).

Without access to these resources and quality information these students commonly discontinue their pursuit of post-secondary attendance (John, 2006).

Bourdieu (1986) described the concept of cultural capital in an educational context as the differences in educational pursuit and degree attainment as it relates to varying socioeconomic statuses (Ward et al., 2012). Cultural capital will continue to be discussed via socioeconomic status; the level of education attained by a student's parents; parental involvement in their student's college choice process; and the influence of family members, peers, and teachers in supporting a student's journey through his or her educational experience throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Role of Capital in a Student's College Choice Process

The relationship between varying factors that constitute a student's level of cultural capital and his or her college choice process has been introduced in some of the seminal pieces of college choice and capital theory research. Next, more recent scholarship on the topic of college choice will be synthesized through the lens of varying aspects of a student's cultural capital as influenced by the role of his or her parents.

Socioeconomic Status

Numerous authors have concluded that there are significant differences in the rates of higher education pursuit and degree attainment by students of varying levels of socioeconomic status (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Chapman, 1981; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Jung, 2013; Klasik, 2012; Klugman, 2012; Shaw et al., 2009). Socioeconomic class influences decisions, such as where families live and the schools their students will attend. All of these factors influence the amount and type of cultural capital that students will come to possess (Klugman, 2012).

Klugman (2012) stated that the system of education in the United States facilitates this type of segmentation by socioeconomic group.

Family income not only influences the quality of school a student attends but also his or her peer group. Klugman (2012) found that high school student bodies comprised of students from a high socioeconomic status performed better than their peers on marks of distinction defined as grade point average, entrance exam scores (ACT & SAT), enrollment in advanced placement courses, among others. The author also discovered that students who attended private high schools were more likely to attend college and were significantly more likely to attend more selective institutions (Klugman, 2012).

These more affluent students also showed greater rates of enrollment in post-secondary institutions (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Klugman, 2012). One of the factors that could influence their increased levels of post-secondary pursuit could be the amount of cultural capital exchanged among peers in day-to-day interactions as well as in interactions through social media (Wohn et al., 2013). Wohn et al. (2013) found that first generation college students, a student population which typically possesses lower levels of cultural capital in regards to the college choice process, displayed higher application completion when they utilized forms of social

media to gain access to application related resources. These results demonstrate that even though these students may not have access to abundant amounts of cultural capital at home, their motivation to matriculate may drive them to seek out the knowledge that they desire in other places (Wohn et al., 2013).

Parental Education and Involvement

The transfer of information as a result of experience with navigating the college choice process is an integral part of developing students' cultural capital in regards to their own choice process (Bers, 2005; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Jez, 2014; Kim, DesJardins, & McCall, 2009; Klasik, 2012; Klugman, 2012; Nienhuser, 2013; Perna, 2000; Pitre, 2006; Shaw et al., 2009; Wohn et al., 2013). One of the greatest sources of this type of information is a student's parents (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Engberg & Allen, 2011). This factor is so meaningful, in fact, that students' confidence in applying to college as well as their likelihood to matriculate, increases as the level of their parents' education increases (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Engberg & Allen, 2011; Jung, 2013; Klasik, 2012; Shaw et al., 2009; Wohn et al., 2013).

While there is much research to support the role of parental education attainment as cited above, there are several other articles published that discuss the emphasis on merely the involvement of parents in the process as a noteworthy indicator of their student's future matriculation and success at a college or university (Bers, 2005; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005; Wohn et al., 2013). Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) found parental involvement in the college choice process to be two-fold. First, it is motivational in the form of academic expectations that parents set for their children. Second, it is proactive as parents take

on a more active roles in the education of their student, begin discussions of college attendance, and, in some instances, begin saving for the cost of college attendance.

Perna and Titus (2005) analyzed the number and frequency of conversations and involvement behaviors performed by parents to determine their influence on students' decisions in the college choice process. The authors determined that the likelihood of a student enrolling at either a two-year or four-year institution increased significantly as the number of education-related conversations and actions between students and parents increased. However, Perna and Titus (2005) also noted that this type of parental influence varied by racial and ethnic groups.

According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* for 2013-2014, students attending two-year institutions made up approximately one-third of post-secondary attendance. Given the large number of two-year students, the work of Bers (2005), which reviewed the role of parental involvement in two-year students' college choice, is of particular importance. Bers observed that parents were significantly involved in their students' choice to attend a two-year school citing that four of five parents indicated some sort of involvement in their student's decision to attend.

Parent responses also indicated that they were involved in a number of college choice activities, most of which included some sort of personal contact with the institutions. The most common choice activities that parents participated in were: reading college brochures and catalogs, talking with high school teachers and counselors, visiting college websites, and attending open house sessions hosted by the institutions (Bers, 2005). As indicated in these findings, part of parental involvement in a student's college choice process includes speaking with students' teachers and counselors, as parents recognized them as influential sources of information related to their students' future success (Bers, 2005).

While there is a great deal of scholarship surrounding the involvement of parents in a student's college choice process, there is little discussion regarding how a "parent" is defined. In most publications on the subject there is delineation between the role and influence of parents and the role and influence of other family members and others who play a prominent role in the student's life. There may be value in better understanding the familial structure of today's prospective college student and how the term "parent" is defined in evaluating the influence of prominent adult figures on major life achievements and decisions like the college choice process.

Influence of Family Members, Peers, and Teachers

The knowledge and confidence that make up a student's cultural capital as it pertains to the college choice process do not come solely from their parents. Siblings and other family members can play a crucial role in facilitating the transfer of knowledge and experience to the college choice process (Bers, 2005; Jun & Colyar, 2002; Tierney, 2002). In addition to the family unit, talking with teachers and coaches plays a significant role in a student's decision to apply and ultimately attend college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Klasik, 2012). The findings of these researchers further confirm Bers' (2005) findings about how parents view these individuals as valuable sources of information regarding their student's college choice process.

An excellent example of how teachers and high school administrators can influence a student's college choice process is evidenced in Nienhusser's (2013) qualitative study, which reviewed the ways in which seven high schools helped undocumented students navigate the college choice process. Nienhusser (2013) found that these schools employed a number of methods in an attempt to increase the cultural capital of their graduating students in order to aid in their pursuit of higher education. Methods included: one-on-one counseling, presentations by college and university representatives, outreach by high school faculty and staff to learn about

other existing programs that could assist their students, scholarship opportunities, and a required course for all students on the college choice process with a specific section geared towards those student who were classified as undocumented (Nienhusser, 2013). These programs benefitted not only those students who were undocumented but also those void of the cultural capital necessary to successfully navigate the college choice process on their own.

The role of peer relationships also plays a significant role in developing cultural capital (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Holland, 2010; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Klugman, 2012; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Wohn et al., 2013). Student peer groups influence the ways in which they are motivated, socially engage, transfer information, establish mentors, and define cultural norms (Ryan, 2000; Wohn, 2013). As students have changed over time so have the methods through which they interact.

Wohn et al. (2013) conducted a study to investigate how students' use of social media has shaped them in terms of their college choice process. The researchers classified participants by first generation student and non-first generation student to conduct a comparative analysis on several factors related to their college choice process. The authors found that there were several statistically significant differences between the groups in regards to expectations of college success, perceived levels of emotional and instrumental support from parents pertaining to their college attendance, and peer norms which were defined as interest in performing well and attending school regularly.

The first generation student group experienced dramatically lower levels of expected success, perceived levels of emotional and instrumental support from parents, and adherence to peer norms (Wohn et al., 2013). However, there were no statistically significant differences regarding perceived instrumental and emotional support from both close friends and Facebook

friends. Additionally, the researchers demonstrated that social media played a more instrumental role in predicting first generation student college success. The authors concluded that even having Facebook friends who were currently in or recently graduated from college increased participants' expectations of their own future success (Wohn et al., 2013). The network of peers who recently completed the college choice process served as an additional contact point for students to increase their cultural capital related to their own personal college choice process (Wohn et al., 2013).

A student's belonging to social groups associated with race, ethnicity, and sex has the ability to greatly influence his or her experience through the college choice process (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Kim et al., 2009; Klasik, 2012; Martinez, 2012; Nienhusser, 2013; Perna, 2000; Pitre, 2006; Shaw et al., 2009).

Differences in Choice Behavior by Sex

Differences between males and females regarding their college choice process have rarely been the direct focus of this topic of inquiry. However, statistical differences have been found as a result of analyses of descriptive statistics of participant demographic data. The few studies that were conducted with a focus on the influence of sex on the college choice process were quantitative in nature and at times resulted in equivocal results.

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Stage Model of College Choice presents differences among the sexes as they navigate the predisposition, search, and choice phases. Engberg and Allen's (2011) study of low-income students found that a significantly higher percentage of male students did not attend post-secondary education when compared to those who chose to attend a two-year or four-year school. Cabrera and LaNasa (2011); however, noted that there was no difference between the sexes in their likelihood to apply to a college or

university. This discrepancy in findings demonstrates how consumers of research cannot assume generalizability to the general public based on the findings of an individual study.

There are differences by sex in enrollment at colleges and universities around the country. While women had a greater presence in higher education in 2005 based on the National Center for Education Statistics, men and women were disproportionately enrolled between two-year and four-year institutions. Shaw et al. (2009) found that there was a greater proportion of females enrolled at two-year schools and a greater proportion of males enrolled at four-year schools. This finding was based on analysis of educational statistical data, but it does not attempt to establish reasons behind the differences in institutional decisions.

There are probability differences in admission at colleges and universities based on sex as well. Kim et al. (2009) found that females have a higher probability of being admitted to institutions of higher learning. Kim (2004) also discovered that female students chose less selective institutions and revealed greater sensitivity to the size and location of the institution as well as the perceived comfort on campus regardless of academic ability or achievement when conducting their college choice process. Cho, Lee, Hudley, Barry, and Kelly (2008) concluded that female students found the idea of “fit” critically important to their college choice process, especially in the later stages of decision-making in comparison to their male counterparts.

While each individual student experience is unique to his or her specific circumstance, gender studies have provided insight into how the two sexes place varying levels of emphasis on different factors related to their college choice process (Cho et al., 2008). Male students were less likely than female students to stress the psychosocial characteristics of an institution when considering them as part of their choice set. Female students found these factors to be significantly more important to their choice process (Cho et al., 2008). Factors of importance for

females included: perceived safety, positive social climate, and having friends on campus (Cho et al., 2008). Cho et al. (2008) also found that female students were more influenced by cost and financial aid opportunities than their male counterparts.

Differences in Choice Behavior by Race/Ethnicity

The influence of each form of capital that a student possesses at the time of initiating the college choice process cannot be completely segmented as they are all interconnected. Race and ethnicity, for example, are associated with factors that influence every form of capital. Race and ethnicity relate to students' development of cultural capital regarding knowledge and experience of navigating college choice transferred to them by those of the same social group. The enrollment patterns of different racial and ethnic groups will also be discussed as these patterns influence the type of capital made accessible to students beginning their choice process.

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that students enrolled at both two-year and four-year institutions are overwhelmingly White. The only minority group to rival White students is Asian Americans (Shaw et al., 2009). Engberg and Wolniak (2009) found that race did not generally influence college enrollment; however, matriculation decisions could vary by different racial group. In this study, Black students demonstrated an increased likelihood of attending four-year institutions only; however, they participated at lower rates at four-year institutions when compared to their White peers, which suggests that a deficiency in some other form of capital prevents them from matriculating (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009).

Similarly, Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) found that African American students were 13% more likely to apply to college than their White peers. This study is consistent with other findings by Pitre (2006) and Klasik (2012) that show similar levels of college aspiration by Black students and their White peers, but they begin to differ at the choice phase of the process.

Multiple researchers have outlined the choice process as occurring in phases defined by several benchmarks ranging from aspiration to attend and achieving the appropriate academic targets required for matriculation to acquiring the necessary financial resources to make college attendance a reality (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Klasik, 2012). Progress through these phases varies by racial and ethnic groups (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; Klasik, 2012).

Klasik (2012) conducted a longitudinal study of students of different races in which the author monitored them through these varying phases of the college choice process. Klasik determined that there were minimal racial differences in college aspirations at the 10th grade level with participating students. At the entrance exam stage White, Asian, and Black students were still at relatively similar levels with Hispanic students falling roughly 16 percentage points below the others. The next phase was benchmarked by the achievement of minimal academic preparation for collegiate attendance. White and Asian students remained relatively consistent; however, Black students dropped 19 percentage points below White students in the accomplishment of this benchmark.

At the application stage black and White students returned to similar levels with Asian students slightly higher and Hispanic students still drastically lower. Students were admitted at rates proportional to their application rates. White and Asian students enrolled at relational rates to their admission frequencies; however, only about half as many Hispanic students enrolled as were admitted. Additionally, Black students were admitted at similar rates as White students, but were three-quarters as likely to matriculate (Klasik, 2012). These differences may be attributed to deficiencies in other forms of capital necessary to successfully navigate the college choice process to ultimately matriculate.

There are additional components associated with the cultural capital of race and ethnicity that are specific to some groups that may not apply to others. In attempting to understand the college choice process of immigrant students, there are issues of immigration status (Nienhusser, 2013), language barriers (Shaw et al., 2009), as well as the pressures associated with the expectation of students to represent their race or ethnicity in a positive way (Martinez, 2012).

Students native to the United States are typically unaware of the increased cultural capital associated with their documented citizenship. Nienhusser (2013) indicated that there are approximately 2 million undocumented students enrolled in the American K-12 school system. Notably, fewer undocumented student immigrants enroll in college (25%) as compared to their documented immigrant peers (53%) and peers born in the United States (62%) (Nienhusser, 2013; Passel & Cohn, 2009). The undocumented status of these students leaves them without a network of individuals to impart knowledge needed to successfully traverse the college choice process, but they are also not eligible for federal financial aid opportunities; therefore, negatively affecting their ability to acquire the necessary financial resources needed to make college attendance a reality.

There is a language component to cultural capital acquisition pertaining to the college choice process. Shaw et al. (2009) discussed the growth of residents in regions of the country where English may not be their first or best language. This difference in language proficiency can create a barrier for these students as it relates to the gathering of information and clarification of the frequently mystifying college choice and application processes.

Finally, the qualitative work of Martinez (2012) on the college choice process of Mexican American students provides an additional layer of cultural capital associated with the college aspirations of this population. Martinez (2012) quoted one participant saying “I think people in

general think Hispanics don't really get their education and that's like a big part of why I want to go" (p. 77). In this situation, the student's race/ethnicity contributed directly to her aspirations to both disprove the stereotype of her people and take active steps to socially elevate herself and her family (Martinez, 2012).

Differences in Choice Behavior by Academic Ability

Shaw et al. (2009) described a student's academic ability as "the most apparent influence on college choice" (p. 666). Other researchers have made similar assertions regarding academic achievement. Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) found that high school grade point average and score on the SAT were the best predictors of whether or not a student applied to a college or university. These findings are consistent with one of Klasik's (2012) indicative steps that predict matriculation behavior. Klasik (2012) learned that earning the necessary academic marks of distinction required to be considered an applicant is a requisite benchmark for navigating the college choice process. If a student does not earn the necessary grade point average or score on a college entrance exam he or she is de facto removed from the college choice process.

Engberg and Allen (2011) measured academic ability regarding students' college matriculation decisions. The authors found that students enrolled in both two-year and four-year institutions had higher academic profiles than non-attenders. They also determined that four-year enrollees demonstrated an even higher academic profile than two-year enrollees and non-attenders; thereby, demonstrating a noteworthy relationship between academic profile and enrollment behaviors (Engberg & Allen, 2011). Academic preparation was also considered a highly meaningful factor in increasing the likelihood of a low-income student matriculating at a post-secondary institution (Engberg & Allen, 2011).

Engberg and Wolniak's (2010) study expanded the academic profile of a student from grade point average and entrance exam score. When evaluating a student's academic achievements and profile the researchers added the factors of highest level of math completed as well as the number of advanced placement courses that a student had successfully completed as significant factors in determining the likelihood of a student completing the college application process (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). While researchers have established that academic performance has a direct influence on the cultural capital possessed by a student (Engberg & Allen, 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hossler et al., 1989; Klasik, 2012; Shaw et al., 2009), Hossler et al. (1999) found that academic achievement also plays a significant role in further developing the cultural capital needed by students to successfully navigate the college choice process.

The researchers in this study found that parents, teachers, and guidance counselors were more likely to support the aspirations of students who displayed high levels of academic achievement (Hossler et al., 1999). Additionally, Litten (1982), an often-cited researcher of college choice, indicated that the characteristics of a student's high school, the curriculum at that school, and the student's academic performance influenced students' aspirations to attend certain types of institutions. This once again affirms the relationship between cultural capital and the eventual outcomes of a student's college choice process.

Differences in Choice Behavior by Levels of Self-Efficacy

Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) drew on the work of Bandura (1995) to define the construct of self-efficacy to investigate the role of a student's expectations of his or her ability to be successful in college. Bandura (1986) noted that people have a propensity to avoid activities they perceive to exceed their proficiencies and only pursue those they consider to be more consistent

with their capabilities of being successful. Deil-Amen and Tevis (2010) used Bandura's concept to evaluate the role of self-efficacy on the outcome of students' performance on standardized college entrance examinations such as the ACT and SAT.

The authors further discussed the role of students' performance on such exams as an influencing factor on their decision to begin and navigate the college choice process. Scoring within a certain range on these exams was a necessary benchmark to the prescribed progress through the choice process as described by Klasik (2012). Throughout their qualitative work Deil-Amen and Tevis found that the ACT and SAT played a meaningful role in a student's expectations for success at the collegiate level. The authors also observed that student scores occasionally caused them to question whether or not they perceived themselves as being academically prepared for the level of academic rigor required at the college/university level; thereby, decreasing the likelihood that they would begin or progress through the college choice process.

While a student's quantifiable academic performance and profile has been proven to be influential in the college choice process, Pitre (2006) found that the perception of being prepared by their high school to handle collegiate level coursework also played a significant role in developing student aspirations to pursue higher education. Students who believed that their high schools were preparing them somewhat well were 33% more likely to aspire to post-secondary attendance than their peers who indicated that their high schools were not preparing them well for college (Pitre, 2006). Additionally, students who indicated that they were unsure about whether their high schools were preparing them well were 29.2% less likely to aspire to college attendance than their peers who indicated that their high schools were preparing them well (Pitre, 2006). These findings confirm the role of a student's high school network, a form of cultural

capital, as being influential to the development of his or her aspirations to pursue a college education.

Difference in Choice Behavior by Aspirations to Attend College

The earning of a bachelor's degree carries with it an expectation of social elevation through career placement and earning potential (Perna, 2006). Perna (2006) used the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model as a theoretical framework of evaluating college choice in three distinct phases. Perna (2006) concluded that a student's aspirations to attend college for reasons related to social elevation and financial gains in terms of gainful employment most notably affected the predisposition phase.

In a study designed to better understand the college choice process, Klasik (2012) established nine benchmarks of college-going behavior. The first two steps included aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree in the 10th grade and aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree in the 12th grade. While this study did not find that achieving these benchmarks specifically increased the likelihood of a student attending college, Klasik concluded that the more stages in the nine-step model that a student completed increased his or her likelihood of attending a college or university (Klasik, 2011).

Citing the work of Flint (1992), Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) identified an additional link between the cultural capital associated with parental involvement in a student's secondary education experience to the development of his or her capital in the form of post-secondary aspirations. These types of examples continue to reinforce the interconnectedness of varying forms of capital as they relate to the college choice process.

Summary

The college choice process is unique to every student and the individual circumstances of their lives. Capital acquisition in the forms of gaining information, financial resources, and understanding/achieving the necessary academic prerequisites for post-secondary attendance all play an integral role in how a student comes to navigate the established phases of the college choice process. Further understanding the stories of students that identify as first generation will provide additional insights for researchers and practitioners to advocate for the removal of barriers that prevent access to higher education for these students. The next chapter will outline the methodology that will be employed in this dissertation to better understand the college choice process of first generation students and the role their parents play throughout the three phases as established by the Hossler and Gallagher Three-Phase Model of College Choice (1987).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although the method of defining a first generation college student may vary, practitioners in the field of higher education must continue to develop strategies and programs to assist these students in their pursuit of post-secondary education to further address the issues of access exposed as a result of the Spellings' report (U.S. Department of Higher Education, 2006). As policymakers and politicians continue to focus on how to increase the income and wealth of all Americans, providing an informed strategy to improve access to higher education, which has been shown to increase earning potential, could prove to be a valuable tool in working to achieve that goal (Abel & Dietz, 2014; Peralta, 2014).

The United States enjoys one of the largest participation rates of its citizens in higher education, but first generation, low-income, and minority students still participate at rates dramatically lower than their White, more affluent, legacy peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Yosso (2005) noted that students from different backgrounds provide value to the overall educational experience. The value added by assisting underrepresented students in accessing post-secondary education is not limited to their own social and economic potential, but to the learning experience of all involved (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Yosso, 2005). In order for practitioners at colleges and universities across the country to improve their work of increasing access to higher education for underrepresented student populations it is necessary to understand how they are currently experiencing the college choice process.

Research Questions

The following research questions have guided this inquiry into better understanding how freshman, first generation scholarship recipients experience the college choice process:

1. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making to pursue post-secondary attendance?
2. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making on what institutions to consider attending?
3. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their ultimate decision to matriculate at a post-secondary institution?

Research Design

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the college choice process of freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama, a four-year, public research university. A qualitative methodology was chosen to best capture the rich, descriptive nature of the college choice process of the participants. A quantitative approach would not have allowed for the level of depth necessary to accurately portray how these students experienced their college choice process.

Patton (2002) described qualitative inquiry as “an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there...the analysis strives for depth of understanding” (p. 1). This study was designed in such a way to capture the uniqueness of the college choice process for these students in the context of The University of Alabama. By

utilizing a qualitative methodology the researcher was able to capture the depth of understanding of these students' experiences and accurately tell their stories.

After a thorough review of the existing literature on college choice there are a limited number of studies that focus on the experiences of students from a qualitative method of inquiry. Many existing studies utilize large data sets and aim to discuss who is attending college in greater numbers based on biographical and demographic characteristics of students. While these factors are important and relevant to the study of college choice, the ways in which students from a largely underrepresented population, like those who identify as first generation, negotiate the influence of others, particularly their parents, on their own personal aspirations for post-secondary attendance. These considerations are worthy of further investigation. Additionally, it is important to explore how the existing structural and procedural processes related to the college search and ultimately college choice influence the matriculation decisions of these students.

Merriam (2009) described a qualitative approach, referred to as basic qualitative research, which served as the method of inquiry for this dissertation. Basic qualitative research is an interpretive approach to understanding the meaning of an experience and how that experience gains meaning from its interaction with participants' social worlds (Merriam, 2009). Data were collected through semi-structured, 60 minute, individual interviews with freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama.

Setting and Site Selection

Although there are several national initiatives aimed at improving access to college for first generation students, barriers to their enrollment continue to exist. First generation students are more likely to attend two-year institutions that are closer to home rather than attend four-year institutions that may take them away from the comfort of home (Chapman, 1981; Chen &

Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). They are also less likely to take college preparatory courses needed for four-year attendance as part of their high school curriculum (NCES, 2000).

Additionally, Choy (2001) discovered that first generation students enroll in post-secondary attendance at lower rates for a variety of reasons including lack of academic preparedness, lack of support from parents and high schools in preparing for the college choice process, and lower levels of family income. Despite these setbacks, some first generation students do find their way to a variety of four-year institutions across the country. These students and their experiences of navigating the college choice process are worthy of further inquiry as they have beaten the odds that are oftentimes aggressively against them as a result of their particular backgrounds. For these reasons, the Tuscaloosa campus of The University of Alabama was selected as the research site for this dissertation.

The University of Alabama is the state's oldest public university and flagship institution, founded in 1831, and is a senior, comprehensive, doctoral-level university in the western region of the state of Alabama (UA Factbook, 2015). As of the fall semester of 2015, The University of Alabama has been ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* among the top 50 public universities in the nation for over a decade, is a trailblazer among public universities in the number of National Merit Scholars with more than 600 currently enrolled. It has seen unprecedented enrollment growth, as evidenced by Figure 4, welcoming its largest and most academically talented freshman class of 7,211 students taking overall enrollment to a record 37,100 students (UAViewbook, 2015). The number of first generation students within the freshman class or within the undergraduate student population is captured on the application for admission, as well as on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). These data are self-reported on

these applications. Given that the interpretation of what constitutes a student as first generation varies from one person to another, inconsistencies may exist in terms of how many actual first generation students are enrolled at any given time.

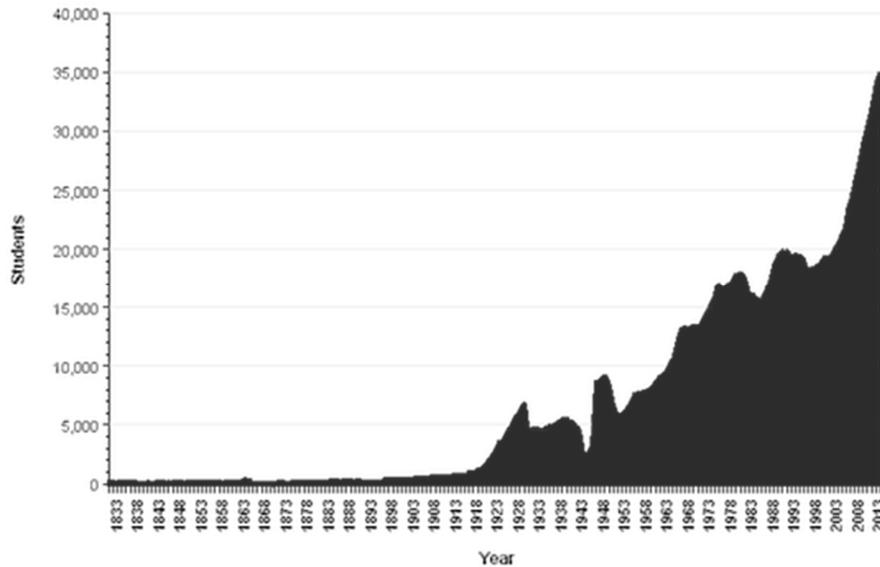


Figure 4. Total student enrollment from 1831 to 2013. Adapted from The University of Alabama Office of Institutional Research & Assessment Featured Data, 2015. <http://oira.ua.edu/d/>

Participant Selection

Researchers have found that finances play a substantial role in the college choice process of prospective first generation college students (Ward et al., 2012). Additional evidence shows that as a result of their decreased level of cultural capital associated with having parents unfamiliar with the choice process these students are oftentimes not as aware of the financial assistance opportunities available to them (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Ward et al., 2012). The decision to study freshman, first generation scholarship recipients is of particular importance as these students are the aberration from what literature says is the typical first generation prospective student experience. These students were somehow made aware of the availability of this award, were supported in a way that allowed them to compete for selection, granted the award, and ultimately matriculated at a large, four-year, flagship

university. All of these steps defy the typical experience of students that share their generation status.

The participants for this study were freshman, first generation students participating in either the Coca-Cola First Generation Scholarship Program or the University of Alabama First Generation Scholarship program. Each fall, 12 freshman students are selected for each program who meet specific criteria as defined by each program and demonstrate financial need as identified by information submitted on the FAFSA. In order to be considered for the Coca-Cola First Generation Scholarship program students must be first generation, as defined as students whose parents and siblings have no education beyond high school (have never attended nor hold a degree from any college). The University of Alabama First Generation Scholarship program defines first generation students as students whose parents have no more than two years of education beyond high school and no post-secondary degree.

Students participating in both programs are required to enroll in a first year seminar course specific to their program. The researcher attended a meeting of this course to solicit student participation in the study. Twenty students between both programs responded and participated in the study.

Data Collection

Patton (2002) discussed the role of the qualitative interview as a primary data source for most qualitative inquiry. The qualitative interview is used to find out information from people that a researcher cannot directly observe (Patton, 2002). Data for this study were collected through a series of 20 semi-structured interviews with freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama.

Participant interviews occurred in the fall 2016 semester on the campus of The University of Alabama in the Ferguson Student Center Sparkman room. Patton (2002) described the importance of a setting to what then takes place in that environment. Creswell (2013) also described the importance of the setting stating that the location for the interview should be a quiet space free of distraction. The Ferguson Student Center was used as it provided quiet, private meeting room space in a neutral and centrally located space on campus.

The researcher was seated at the head of a boardroom table with each participant seated next to him. The researcher disclosed his position as a staff member at the institution at the time of the interview then discussed the purpose of the study and plans for the results. Additionally, each student was provided a consent form in compliance with the Institutional Review Board policies at The University of Alabama. The researcher transitioned to a new position at a different institution following the data collection for this study.

A prepared interview protocol form was used to guide each interview. Deviation from the prepared protocol was allowed to provide each participant the opportunity to share his or her experience free from any limitations. Interview questions were developed as part of the interview protocol and designed to capture individual experiences of each participant. The questions were designed in a way to guide the conversation related to the theoretical framework and guiding research questions of the study. The progression of questioning was intentionally designed through the distinct phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice. Participants were questioned about benchmark accomplishments throughout the phases and the role their parents played in achieving those benchmarks in an attempt to answer the guiding research questions of this study.

The protocol was the same for each interview participant. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant in order to protect him or her from being identified. Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes and audiotaped with the written permission of participants. In addition to audio recordings, the researcher took notes as a method to record any special observations or non-verbal gestures made by participants during the interview. Following the interview the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then stored electronically for analysis in conjunction with the researcher's interview notes. The attached interview protocol with open-ended interview questions was used for data collection during participant interviews (Appendix A).

Data Analysis

Multiple analytical approaches were employed by the researcher to capture the emergent themes and experiences of participants within the constructed phases of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice. Inductive analysis and constant comparison was used in the analysis of personal interviews and researcher's notes. Constant comparison was then employed to provide an opportunity to compare different segments of the data in order to identify similarities and differences between participant experiences (Merriam, 2009). These similarities and differences were used to identify patterns in the data. Inductive analysis of participant interviews afforded the researcher the opportunity to take specific observations and begin to construct more general patterns associated with the common experience of participants (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Inductive analysis also allowed the researcher to concentrate large amounts of raw, interview transcripts into more concise themes that connected to the guiding research questions and theoretical framework of the study. Initial coding, which was previously referred to by

Strauss and Corbin (2008) as open coding, was employed by the researcher “to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). This initial approach allowed the researcher the opportunity to assign telling groupings and themes to the data upon first review (Saldaña, 2013).

Axial coding was used to extend the work of the initial or open coding to intentionally reconstruct data that may have become splintered during the initial coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Saldaña, 2013). The use of axial coding also allowed the researcher to conclude which codes were the more principal, representative ones, and which played a more secondary, descriptive role in synthesizing participant experiences (Boeije, 2010; Saldaña, 2013). The combination of these related codes decreased the number of initial codes allowing them to be arranged and renamed in a more conceptual way (Glaser, 1978; Saldaña, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally, the axial codes developed allowed the researcher to connect the themes that have been developed by participant statements and phrases to the guiding research questions of the study in a more meaningful way.

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice was used in the coding and analysis of data to organize participant responses in a more expressive way. This organization allowed the researcher to better understand how themes spanned the three phases of the model for comparison of experiences between participants and for comparison of experiences discussed in existing literature on the college choice process.

Researcher Positionality

While I am not a first generation student, I greatly relate to the experience of first generation students in the United States during their high school years in regards to post-secondary attendance. My mother’s education ended with a high school diploma while my father

did go on to earn a baccalaureate degree in Marketing from Nicholls State University in Louisiana. My father's college experience was not a traditional undergraduate experience. He attended school part time while working full time in order to pay his own way through college. He attended three different institutions before completing his degree, never lived on campus, and participated in no co-curricular activities throughout the six to seven years that he was enrolled. As a high school student, the only understanding I had about college attendance was that I was going to go and that I would rely on my parents as sources of knowledge related to the subject.

There were times throughout my high school years where I felt lost and confused about the process of applying and completing financial aid paperwork all while attempting to simultaneously focus on my current academic endeavor of earning my high school diploma. While my parents were supportive and encouraging throughout the process, I came to recognize that they were not always as familiar with the processes or how best to support me throughout these times as a result of their lack of experience with post-secondary attendance.

Trustworthiness

Merriam (1998) outlined numerous strategies to ensure that the findings of qualitative inquiry are viewed as trustworthy. Rich, descriptive text was used to describe not only the responses of the participants, but also the setting in which the interviews took place. Additionally, vivid quotations from participant interviews were used to accurately portray the experiences of these students as they navigated their own unique college choice process. The researcher took thorough and detailed notes during the interview process that can be made available for review.

Finally, member checks were utilized to provide participants the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews to ensure that the researcher captured the true essence of their

experience. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking provides one of the most critical techniques for establishing validity and trustworthiness in qualitative studies. Member checks also serve as a critical mechanism to minimize any researcher bias that may exist during the synthesis of participant interviews (Merriam, 2009).

Limitations of the Study

It is important to disclose for the purpose of this dissertation that I was an employee of The University of Alabama throughout the data collection process and acknowledge that my affiliation may have influenced the data collection and analysis processes associated with this study. Additionally, I made my position at the institution known to all participants of the study prior to any data collection. I left my position at the university in October of 2016.

All participants selected for this study were freshman, first generation students receiving a scholarship based on their past academic performance, financial need, and generational status. Their receipt of this award was evidenced to play a role in their college choice process; therefore, limiting experiences to those of first generation students that were also recipients of this type of financial award.

Finally, other limitations may exist as a result of the data collection methods employed by the researcher in this study. Participants may have had trouble recalling specific details about their experience with the college choice process; thereby, presenting some recall bias (Creswell, 2013). Participants may also have exaggerated the details of their experiences to portray themselves in a more positive light; thereby, introducing prestige bias or intentional deception into the results (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

Chapter three provided a detailed explanation of how this study was conducted. Basic qualitative inquiry provided the researcher the best research methodology to answer the research questions that compelled this inquiry. A qualitative approach to this topic was selected to best capture the rich, descriptive nature of the college choice process of participants and to fill a gap in the literature that can only be addressed by qualitative inquiry. As previously noted, the existing literature identifies factors that prevent first generation students from matriculating as opposed to better understanding the experiences of those that do.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to better understand the role of parents in the college choice process of freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama, a four-year, public research university in the Southeast. Although every student experienced his or her own unique college choice process, the following chapter will examine the themes that were discovered throughout this study, guided by the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making to pursue post-secondary attendance?
2. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making on what institutions to consider attending?
3. What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their ultimate decision to matriculate at a post-secondary institution?

Themes

In conjunction with the review of literature that was outlined in Chapter two, data analysis revealed six themes regarding the role of participants' parents in their college choice process. Throughout this chapter the data will be presented in six themes utilizing quotes from

participant interviews to paint a vivid and rich description of their experiences. All participants' names have been replaced with a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. The six themes identified as a result of this study are:

1. College attendance was a natural next step
2. Pressure to succeed
3. Use of technology in the search process
4. Independence, Autonomy, & Motivation
5. Support
6. Money

College Attendance Was a Natural Next Step

This section examines the various people and circumstances in participants' lives that influenced their predisposition to pursue higher education. The stories of each participant are unique; therefore, they reflect a number of influencers to their predispositions to pursue post-secondary education. The interview questions designed as part of the interview protocol relevant to this theme were designed considering the first phase, predisposition, of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice. The following subsections were developed as a way to categorize participant responses within the theme of predisposition. The data reflect a number of influences ranging from cultural experiences of residing in Alabama to people in participants' lives encouraging them to pursue a post-secondary education experience.

Influence of Parents and Family

For a number of participants in this study, college attendance was a natural next step for them. Bethany had known her entire life that she wanted to pursue college, a desire that was instilled in her by her parents from a young age. Bethany stated:

I've always wanted to come. It was never like, I never like, had a phase where I didn't want to come. It was always like something I was going to do like not really my choice but I wanted to.

Bethany was one of a large number of participants who was the oldest of her siblings and expressed a passionate desire to elevate herself socially in a way that her parents were not able to do. Trisha, Frank, Matthew, Jessica, Alex, Rachel, Ronald, Erika, Melinda, Lyndsey, Haley, Marcus, and Patricia shared similar experiences as Bethany noting that throughout their lives their parents and other family members had instilled in them the importance of post-secondary attendance to their futures.

Trisha moved with her family approximately three years ago to central Alabama. She is an only child who grew up with both of her parents. When she was in the first grade her father was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and was receiving disability for a number of years. Several years later her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer placing her on disability and requiring her father to return to work at a local chicken plant in order to provide additional income. For Trisha, being a first generation student at Alabama meant having an opportunity that no one in her family had ever had. Trisha said:

I don't remember a time when I wasn't considering going because it was something my family has always told me, you're going. Like when I was in the first grade or whatever... anytime I went "I'm going to be a policeman" they were like... "no you aren't".

Not only were her parents meaningful influences on her predisposition to pursue post-secondary attendance, but so were other family members. She replied, "My parents, aunt, uncle...

everybody was just like, you're going. Because none of my family completed a normal four-year college degree."

Like Trisha, Frank is an only child but grew up in a single parent household. His mother suffered an eye injury early in her life rendering her unable to work. Similar to Trisha's parents, Frank's mother receives disability. When asked about what it means to be a first generation college student Frank said,

I think it means a lot. Like in general my family is more college-oriented in this generation. Several of my cousins went to college and it was like I'm going to go to college because it's pretty much a big thing now and means a lot not just to me but to my family as well.

While his mother was not noticeably involved in his college choice process, Frank shared that pursuing college was something stressed throughout his childhood. "As a kid, she [mom] was never like you have to go [to college], but she like heavily implied it."

Matthew is one of three children who grew up with his parents and two siblings in south Alabama. He was raised in an extremely religious household where his mother was a Pentecostal traditionalist. Matthew commuted 40 minutes to and from school every day in high school so that he could attend one of the best high schools in his county and enroll in pre-engineering and international baccalaureate (IB) courses. He indicated that his mother always pushed him toward pursuing post-secondary education while his dad did not view it as a necessity.

She's [mom] always wanted me to go to college. She told me once that if she had to drag me to college I was going to go. I mean she doesn't really know much about college but she knows that it's important for us to go. My dad doesn't really care if I go to college or

not, not like in a bad way, but he didn't go so he doesn't really see it as big of a deal as my mom does.

In addition to his mother encouraging him to pursue college, Matthew remembered his aunts playing an integral role in assisting him with his desire to attend college. "Two of my aunts went to college and they were both really supportive. One was more like emotionally supportive and the other was supportive in helping me go about getting into college."

Although all of the participants of this study were Alabama residents during their time in high school, several of them had lived in other states throughout their upbringing. Two participants were children of immigrants, which proved to have a deep influence on the opportunities that higher education could provide for them.

Jessica is the daughter of two refugees that came to the United States at ages 14 and 15. Both of her parents have a high school education and have owned and operated an alteration shop in central Alabama for the last 17 years. Jessica is the oldest of two children and credits both of her parents for stressing the importance of education as a substantial motivating factor in her decision to pursue college.

I don't remember the moment I decided that I was going to college because I've always known that I was going. Both of my parents are refugees, and for the longest time my dad has always told me that you have to go to college to get a good job to get anywhere.

Similarly, Erika is also the child of immigrants. Her parents are both from East Asia, and she is the oldest of two children. Her mother is a sushi chef in south Alabama and her dad has held "many different jobs from managing hotels, cleaning carpets, to cooking in a restaurant. He can learn any trade really quickly." She recalled being in first grade as the point in which she decided she would attend college.

Both of my parents are like the stereotypical Asian parents, you know, education is number one...well, family is number one and then education. My dad always used to talk to me about being a lawyer from like the first grade, so I always knew that I would go to college.

Erika said that the cultural expectation of her Asian family and heritage to work hard and adapt as necessary was instilled in her at a young age; she has used it as a guiding philosophy in all that she has done throughout her life.

Participants of this study came from households with varying levels of formal education. All of the participants discussed thus far were products of parents with at least a high school diploma. For Alex, her familial experience with formalized education was much different.

I was the first in my family to graduate high school. Both of my parents had like dropped out and started working and stuff and then they went back to get their GED, so I'm the only one with a high school diploma.

Alex is from north Alabama and is an only child. Her mom works in a factory and her dad is a construction contractor for AT&T. Like a number of the participants, Alex could not recall a specific point in time when she decided to attend college. Rather, it was something that she always knew was next for her, citing her parents as principal influencers.

I don't know, ever since I was little I never had a doubt that I wouldn't go to college.... Like I just always grew up with my parents telling me they wanted better for me than what they had. I just always had it in my mind that I was going.

Ashley also credited her relationship with her aunt, who is a college graduate, as an important force not only in her upbringing, but also in her pursuit of higher education.

My aunt is the person that I kind of like looked to for advice and I don't know... like... me and my parents have a good relationship but it's not like the best friend thing like mother-daughter like some people have. Like I don't really tell my mom all the stuff about college, but I do tell my aunt and like through this time especially because she went to college and she's done all of this before, so like when I was at Bama Bound making my schedule and stuff out like... I'd text her and ask her questions because I knew my mom wouldn't know what to tell me.

Like Alex, Patricia was the first in her family to receive a high school diploma. Patricia is from central Alabama and is the oldest of the four children in her family. Her parents have never been married, and she spent most of her childhood years with her mom and stepdad. Going to college for Patricia was not a natural next step, but the influence by her parents was different than the experiences of the participants who have been discussed thus far.

I guess it means a lot [being a first generation college student] because I wasn't really ever expected to do this when I was growing up. They [parents] never really cared if I had good grades at all. I guess it just means a lot from that perspective. I don't know... I didn't want to be like a statistic, like 80% of people whose parents don't graduate high school don't go to college. I just didn't want to really fall into that spectrum plus I mean I've seen how like my dad... he doesn't have like a good life and so I didn't want to turn out like that and so I guess it kind of scared me.

For Patricia, her decision to pursue college was almost in spite of the influence of her parents. "My stepdad actually graduated high school but he doesn't think college is good. He kind of believes in people going out and working." It was obvious to Patricia that her parents never

identified education as a priority for her, but she viewed it as an opportunity to provide a better life for herself, which will be further discussed later in this section.

Contrary to the influence of Patricia's parents, Marcus came from a family that he said would have made any and every sacrifice possible to ensure his access to a college education. Marcus is from North Alabama and has been living with his mom since his parents divorced when he was 12. His mom is a receptionist at a hospital and his father is a truck driver. Since his parents' divorce, he had not spent much time with his father, but credited his mother's influence on his desire to attend college. "My mom assured me ever since I was in grade school that I would be going to college."

Marcus reflected on his mother's role throughout his college choice process with a great deal of appreciation and affection for her and the sacrifices she had made for him. He also shared that The University of Alabama was his dream school and throughout the information gathering process about colleges his mom would instruct him not to look at any other schools if Alabama was where he wanted to go. "My mom told me from day one that she wanted me to go wherever I wanted to go and if I wanted to go to Alabama that we would find a way to make it happen."

Haley, also the daughter of immigrants, came to live in west Alabama by way of being born in Central America. She stated:

My dad is from Central America and I was actually born there. My parents met when my mom and her parents were doing missionary work in Central America. They both had plans of going to college and then I came along, so it didn't really work out for them, so they have always talked about me going to college for as long as I can remember... probably because they didn't get a chance to go.

Haley's mother is a medical translator in pediatrics at University Medical Center and her father is a supervisor at a local roofing company. For as long as she can remember her father has told her that she has to be a lawyer or neurosurgeon, which has been the driving force behind her pursuit of higher education. Although she does not plan to pursue either of those career paths, growing up in pursuit of them created a narrative for her pursuit of post-secondary attendance.

Many of the participants of this study were either the oldest of their siblings or the only children in their family. Lyndsey was one of the outliers in that regard. She is from central Alabama and is the youngest child in her family. She has an older brother who is eight years her senior. She spent time in the interview reflecting on the support of her parents throughout her pursuit of higher education despite their lack of understanding and experience with the process.

Ever since I was young my goal has always been to go to college. It's been a goal my whole life. My parents didn't really know how to help me get there so they would always say, "Just tell us what you need in order to help you get there."

Melinda's memory of her parents' involvement brought back a feeling of inspiration for her. She is from East Alabama and like Lyndsey she is the youngest of her siblings. Her father works in construction and her mother works in the activities department of a local nursing home and also picks up seasonal work at Goody's Department Store. At age 5, Melinda decided that she wanted to be a doctor and from that day on her parents have encouraged and supported her to pursue her dream.

My parents, they didn't go to college of course, but they've always like pushed me to it...make yourself become better and you know... do a little bit better than us kind of. So, that's always inspired me to okay I need to do good in school, go to college, do good, and you know... make a good life for myself.

Like other participants, Ronald shared the influence of his parents on his decision to pursue higher education, but also cited the role of a particular family member who was not mentioned by any other participant. Ronald is from central Alabama, is the oldest of two children, and grew up with both of his parents. His mother is an operations analyst for an insurance company and his father is a pressman at a printing company. He shared that his parents really gave him no choice but to pursue college, but he grew noticeably more proud and emotional when he began to speak of the involvement of his grandmother in his pursuit of higher education.

My Nana, my grandma on my mom's side, always told me, you know, that she would do anything it took for me to get there. She, or my grandfather, like nobody in my family went to college and she was determined to get me there. She was really supportive.

The final participant to speak extensively of her parents' involvement in her predisposition to attend college was Rachel. She is from a small community in East Alabama and the oldest of three children. Her mother graduated from high school and her father dropped out and later received his GED. Rachel speaks of her parents' encouragement for her pursuit of post-secondary attendance as a life long journey with her attending college as the ultimate goal. "Grades have always been a big priority in our house. Our parents kind of like wanted us to do what they didn't if that makes sense. They didn't want us to be held back by anything."

Although participants' parents served as obvious influencers on their decision to pursue post-secondary attendance there were two participants who spoke about the involvement of other family members as playing an even more influential role in their college choice process. Hannah is an only child from North Alabama. Her mother is a pharmacy technician at a Walmart

pharmacy and her father is disabled and unable to work. Hannah spoke about her parents' involvement with a tone of disappointment.

There were numerous occasions when she reflected back on the experience and expressed how lonely she felt as a result of her parents' lack of interest and involvement in her pursuits. She did; however, express a great deal of appreciation and affection for her fiancé's role in supporting her. "My fiancé influenced my decision to attend college greatly because I was trying to consider whether to go to community college and he made sure that I knew that I was capable of attending a four-year school."

Unlike Hannah, Emory's mother was actively supportive of her pursuing college, but played a very small role throughout the process. Emory is from a small town in northwest Alabama. She is from a single parent household where her mother is disabled and unable to work. She is the middle child of three. Although Emory's mother did not play an active role in her college choice process, her aunt was a great source of inspiration, experience, and support throughout her pursuit of a higher education.

It was always put in my head that I was supposed to go to college. My aunt, she's a travelling nurse and so she's like the one in our family that has made it, and she was always telling me to keep my grades up. Do good, go to college, keep good grades and stuff and my mom was just always supportive of whatever.

Influence of Teachers, Guidance Counselors, and Other High School Staff

Study participants were asked primarily to reflect on the involvement of their parents in their college choice process, but they were also asked to consider any other people that may have played an influential role in their pursuit of college. Three participants spoke at length regarding

the involvement of teachers, guidance counselors, or other staff members of their high school in their overall decision to pursue college.

Erika discussed her parents' involvement in pushing her to attend college and instilling in her a strong work ethic, but spoke about their lack of activity in assisting her through the process of gathering information about different schools, completing applications, and searching for scholarship opportunities. She credited her guidance counselor at her school with supporting her college choice process in a way that her parents could not. "My counselor was a huge help throughout the entire process because I think she told me that her biggest goal was to get as many people into college as possible."

Similarly, Emory spoke about the instrumental role that her guidance counselor played throughout her college choice process in the absence of an active mother, even citing that without the help of her guidance counselor she did not think she would have been able to make it to college.

Once I opened up to her [guidance counselor] and stuff she was really committed to getting me into college and finding a school, getting me all the funds that I needed because she knew like without her I probably wouldn't be here.

John had a unique family experience that he spent a great deal of time reflecting on and sharing how he felt his family dynamic has shaped his journey to The University of Alabama. John grew up in central Alabama. His father is originally from Thailand and is active in the military. John has lived with his grandmother since he was in the 10th grade. At that time he came out to his family as gay, and his mother did not respond to this news well. He said that he has not seen her since. His father, who John said took the news rather well, was later relocated out-of-state. John did not want to leave his high school so he moved in with his grandmother and

completed high school. In the absence of parental involvement in his college choice process, John credited his high school, an academic magnet school in central Alabama, and his principal for getting him to this point in his academic pursuits.

My high school principal played a big role in me getting to college even though she retired my junior year. My senior year even when she wasn't principal anymore I was telling her that I was scared because I only had one scholarship at that point and I didn't know how I was going to be able to afford college. She basically told me to shut up, that I was going to get there, and she was going to make sure that I got there.

This subsection focused on the role of influential people on participants' predisposition to pursue higher education. The next two subsections will focus on other factors that played a motivating role in participants' decisions to pursue post-secondary attendance and more specifically The University of Alabama.

Cultural Influences to Attend

It is impossible to mention the words "university" and "Alabama" in the same sentence without thinking of University of Alabama football. This scenario is no different for the participants of this study. At varying points throughout the interviews more than half of the participants mentioned Alabama football as either a motivating factor for participants' parents or for the participants themselves to consider attending The University of Alabama. Bethany, Laura, Darren, Patricia, Melinda, and John all shared similar experiences in regards to their parents, mostly fathers, encouraging them to research and/or attend The University of Alabama as a result of being a fan of Alabama football as displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Responses Regarding Their Parents' Affinity towards Alabama Football

Bethany	"My dad always wanted me to come here [University of Alabama] because he's a huge Alabama fan."
Laura	"I remember my parents talking about me going to Alabama, but I think it was mainly for football."
Darren	"My parents didn't really play a role in me wanting to go to college, but they did want me to go to Alabama because they were Alabama fans so that's kind of what pushed me to go here probably."
Patricia	"My parents never really talked to me about going to college other than the occasional "Are you going to Alabama or Auburn?" like from a football perspective."
Melinda	"My parents, my dad mainly, was like "apply to Alabama just because, like you know we're all Alabama fans so see if you can get in."
John	"My dad just didn't want me to go to Auburn." Interviewer: "Why?" John: "Roll Tide! The only reason necessary."

As shown in Table 2, Jessica, Ronald, Mark, Alex, and Marcus discussed Alabama football as an introduction to the institution for them whether by attending a football game or engaging in conversation surrounding the Alabama/Auburn rivalry. This type of cultural experience is unique to those from the state of Alabama or familiar with the team rivalry, but is worthy of mentioning as an element of their college choice process as it was repeatedly stated by a number of participants.

Table 2

Participants’ Responses Regarding Their Experience with Alabama Football as an Introduction to The University of Alabama

Jessica	“I researched those schools because that’s what you do in the south. You’re either an Auburn fan or an Alabama fan. You have to choose one or the other.”
Ronald	[I chose to research Alabama because] “it was just—it’s always, I mean, partly because of football... I know that’s bad”
Alex	“Then I came here [for a campus visit] and like, I’m always, I mean I grew up on Alabama football.”
Marcus	“I’ve always wanted to come to The University of Alabama. I grew up coming down here to go to games and everything.”
Mark	“I grew up on Alabama football. I’ve been going to games for as long as I can remember”

Just as Alabama football culture has been evidenced to play a role in impacting participants’ predisposition to consider attending The University of Alabama, the individual cultures of participants’ high school was also demonstrated to play a role in their predisposition to pursue post-secondary attendance. John and Lyndsey discussed their magnet high school experiences as being transformative and credited these experiences for being in college. John cited not only the level of academic preparation that his high school afforded him but also access to resources that were made available to him in support of his dream to attend college.

I went to a really good academic high school and it is the sole reason I got to college. I wouldn’t have been able to find half of the scholarship opportunities without my high school. It is also a school really focused on getting kids to college. College was a whole new territory for me. I didn’t know anything about it.

Lyndsey described her high school experience as being instrumental in her developing the confidence to see her college attendance as a reality. “I’ve known that I was going to college ever since I started going to a magnet school. The whole school, everything about it, is geared towards getting kids to college.”

Bethany and Haley discussed the opportunities that their high schools afforded them to visit college campuses and enroll in AP and other college preparatory classes as important experiences that allowed them to envision themselves in a college environment. Bethany said, “My high school would take trips to college and universities for us to tour because there were several in the area. It was cool to be on a college campus as a high school student”. Haley reflected back on conversations she had with her AP teachers relating her high school work to the type of work she would do in a college classroom. “I guess some of my teachers played a role in my pursuing college too because I took a lot of AP and Honors classes so they would always talk about those classes getting me ready for college.”

Finally, Alex spoke about the unwritten expectation of her high school that students would attend college following graduation. “It was just something that everyone did, like in school they tell you like that’s your thing. Like after high school you go to college. I guess it’s just kind of like an expectation.”

Career Options Require College Attendance

The motivation for attending college can vary from one individual to another. For some, college is merely the next step in what they feel is their predetermined educational journey established either by an influential person or the educational structures that they happen to be a part of. For others, attending an institution of higher learning is a means to achieving a desired career path. That career path may be one determined by self-discovery or one determined by the influence of the same people that have been guiding them towards post-secondary education throughout the course of their lives. For Hannah and Melinda, their journeys to college were a lifetime in the making. Hannah said,

Ever since I was little I actually wanted to be a doctor so from the time I was five, we had to write prompts in my little journal for school and I would talk about being a doctor.

Then I was in the middle school I went about the process of becoming a doctor. At that point, I decided, I definitely want to go to college no matter what.

Melinda had virtually the same story beginning at a similar point in her life.

I remember exactly when I decided that I was going to college. I was five. I have always wanted to be a doctor and I just kept saying it and saying it and eventually someone told me that I was going to have to go to college for that.

John was faced with a familial dilemma regarding his academic trajectory. Many of the members of his family were either military or blue-collar laborers, neither of which he felt was suitable for his desires or skills. For him, college attendance was an opportunity to break the cycle of his family and pursue a career better suited for his interests and talents.

My family all went into the military right after high school or went straight to work. I'm not military material, and I don't really have any skills to work so I wanted to get my education and do things like that. So, college was really my only option. If it wasn't for college I don't know what I would be doing with my life.

Earlier in this section a high school culture focused on post-secondary attendance was presented from the experiences of a number of participants. For Laura and Darren, the opportunity to engage in career discovery inventories and conversations while in junior high school made them recognize the necessity of post-secondary attendance in order to achieve their career goals. Laura said,

We did this career exploration thing in like the 7th grade and we went to this Powerpoint and like what career we wanted to pursue and at the time I wanted to be a pediatric oncologist so I knew I was going to have to go to college for that.

Darren had a similar experience during his 8th grade year.

When I was in 8th grade we had to do this survey to tell us about our career options, and I got news analyst or something and it said it required a college degree, so that's kind of when I decided that I needed to go to college.

Finally, Haley's experience was one that began at a young age and was motivated and influenced by her father. For many students who attend college, they begin their educational journey with an intended major or desired career that has been dictated to them by a parent.

While Haley's experience began that way and played an integral role in her predisposition to attend college, she has since adjusted her career trajectory to one that better suits her interests.

My dad always told me that I would be a lawyer or neurosurgeon and both of those careers need to go to college...so even though I'm not following through with either of those things it was always what I talked about as a kid as a reason to go to college.

Throughout this section the influences impacting a student's predisposition to attend college as a natural next step were presented as a theme that was discovered throughout the data analysis process. The next section will examine the ways in which participants viewed their identity as a first generation college student and the pressure that exists for them to succeed in their pursuit of a higher education.

Pressure to Succeed

For a large number of first generation college students, entering the uncharted territory of college attendance carries with it an increased pressure to succeed not only for themselves as the

lone member of their family to take on such a pursuit but also to set an example for their siblings. For many of the participants this pressure is self-imposed, but some also reflected on pressure from their parents to be more successful than they were and to socially elevate themselves through post-secondary attendance. The stories of these participants will be presented throughout this section.

Pressure to Do Better Than Parents

First generation college students beginning their college choice process and higher education experience take on an endeavor and opportunity that no one else in their family has ever achieved. In doing so, numerous participants acknowledged this challenge while also speaking humbly about the access to opportunities afforded to them as a college student. Hannah spoke emotionally about her identity as a first generation student.

To be a first generation student is difficult. It means that I am taking on the challenge that no one else in my family has been able to and it's kind of overwhelming, but it's an honor to know that I am going to be the first student in my family to graduate with a college degree

For Bethany, her identity as a first generation college student was rooted in a sense of providing a better lifestyle for herself than her parents were able to provide.

That means a lot considering I'm the first and I'm kind of like going above and beyond what my parents did. Uhhh... I don't know, like I want to succeed and do better things than they did. I just want to have a different lifestyle than they did.

Marcus reflected on his upbringing and recalled the financial struggles that his single mother faced in providing for him. For him, attending college was an opportunity to be able to provide for his family in a way that his mother was not able to do.

When I was growing up if I ever wanted anything my mom would have to budget for it because she was a single mom. I just want to make sure I never have to tell my kids we couldn't afford something so I want to make sure I have that covered whenever I decide to have kids one day.

Uncharted Territory

“It means a lot to me [to be first generation] just because like...I don't know, I never had that person to look to for the next step.” In this quote, Alex captures the essence of how many of the participants explained their experience as a first generation college student. They are entering uncharted territory and expressed a level of accomplishment coupled with pressure to succeed. Alex further described her feeling as a first generation student; she said:

Like growing up it's me just like doing everything on my own because... I mean... my parents don't really know what to tell me because they haven't done it before and it's just like turning my name around. Like I'll be the first in my family to go to college and then like future generations will have that.

Similarly, Erika and Bethany shared their feelings of what it means to them to pioneer a new path and create a legacy for future generations. Erika said, “I'm basically setting the boundary for my future generation because I don't have anyone else to tell me what they did in college or before. I have to start to make my own legacy and follow one.” Bethany shared a comparable experience as she begins to pave a new path forward for her family by attending college. She said,

Going to college is a new thing for me, just getting over that hurdle because I'll be the first one to actually graduate college in my immediate family. It's just a new hurdle for me to overcome and move my family forward.

Setting an Example for Their Younger Siblings

Many of the study participants self-identified as either the oldest of their siblings or as an only child. For those who self-identified as the oldest among their siblings there was a universal pressure and in some cases self-imposed expectation to succeed in order to set an example for their younger siblings. The accounts of Bethany, Matthew, Laura, Rachel, and Darren are outlined in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' Responses Regarding the Pressure to Succeed in College in Order to Set an Example for Their Younger Siblings

Bethany	"I watched them [siblings] like for a good amount of time because my parents were out a lot. So I did a lot for them growing up and umm... they look up to me which is intimidating, yeah. My brother said he wants to like do better than me but I don't think he will (laughs)."
Matthew	"I have a little brother and little sister. They look up to me and that's a big reason why I wanted to go to college. I just want them to know that I can help whenever its time for them to go, because I don't think that they always think that they can."
Laura	"To me it [going to college] was more about setting an example for my sister because we had like grew up seeing our parents be not so great examples and like they hadn't obviously gone to college... my mom didn't even finish high school so I didn't want like and my sister struggles in school anyway so I wanted to like show her that we don't have to be like our parents... that we could do better"
Rachel	"It's awesome because not only am I the first in my immediate family to attend college, I'm the first in my entire family. My aunt and uncle both attempted college but it didn't really work out for them. With my two younger sisters I'm like sort of setting an example for them and getting to be like, "Look it is possible" and I can be there to help them."
Darren	"Well personally it means that I have to fulfill a role of like being the first person in my family to go to college. That means I have to be an example for my siblings so they'll know that college is like an option. It also means that I have to prove to my parents that what I'm doing here in college is worth it, like what I'm doing here matters."

Similar experiences were shared by the majority of the participants regarding their first generation college student identity and the added pressures placed on them either internally or by family members to succeed and to set an example for their younger siblings and future

generations. These pressures not only impacted these participants' pursuit of higher education but will likely persist throughout their tenure as college students.

The first two sections of this chapter focused primarily on participants' reflections on their experience and parental involvement throughout the predisposition phase of the Hossler & Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice. The next section will transition to the search phase and reflect participants' responses to questions designed to better understand their experiences and the role of their parents in the search phase of their college choice process.

Use of Technology in the Search Process

Study participants were high school students from the years 2012-2016, and as a result had been exposed to countless types of technology not only in their educational setting, but at home and likely in their pockets at any given moment as well. The sharing of and searching for information on any topic, including how to access higher education, has never been as easy or accessible as it was for these students. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) defined the search phase as the point in a student's college choice process where he or she has decided to further pursue post-secondary attendance by developing a choice set of institutions to gather additional information. It is also important to remember that colleges and universities are also in search of new students making the search phase a mutual sharing and collecting of information by the students and institutions.

In the past, first generation students were had less access to the types of information necessary to actively pursue post-secondary attendance as a result of their parents' lack of experience with the process and lack of resources available at the schools they typically attend (Hertel, 2002; Stephens et al., 2012; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). Throughout this section, the activities of participants' search processes will be discussed highlighting the ways in which

technology has facilitated the gathering and sharing of information. As evidenced in the stories of these participants, the Internet as well as technological advancements in the areas of strategic and targeted communication by institutions may have aided in closing the information gap experienced by many first generation college students in the past.

Google

“Yeah, Google was my main source of information. There were a couple of schools that came to my high school to speak to us but mainly I found everything myself through research on Google.” Lyndsey’s quote sums up the nearly unanimous experience of participants when asked about the most valuable source of information regarding the colleges and universities that made up their choice set of institutions. Access to the Internet and a basic Google search provided students not only with a basic understanding about the institutions and application processes, but oftentimes led them to additional information critical to their eventual matriculation. Table 4 provides additional quotes and data points as expressed by participants regarding the role of the Internet in their initial search for information about college.

Table 4

Participants’ Responses Regarding the Role of the Internet in Their Initial Search for Information about College

Rachel	“Online and my counselors [were the most important sources of information for me].”
Bethany	“Google [how I got information about what I wanted to major in].”
Trisha	“Google [main source of information about college]. I found this one website call campus X or something and like they’ll move it to spam mail, but it had this really nice layout and everything like cost and that. But honestly, just the Internet.”
Jessica	“The Internet was a big one of them [source of information about college].”
Ronald	“They [parents] would try to help me Google stuff. They didn’t just leave me.”

College Websites

For many participants their initial web searches led them to official college and university websites maintained by the institutions. Participant experiences with institutional websites varied. A number of participants found the information to be useful, but at times this information was not consistent with anecdotes shared with them by their peers who had experiences with the institution. In other cases, participants found the information to be outdated and confusing.

Alex's experience with institutional websites was solely for gathering information. When asked about her main sources of information regarding the institutions she was interested in she said,

Mostly online. I just do like research. Every, like all the schools have like the same thing, just different information like the same way they show it, so like they all have the cost of attendance and like break down everything about the different majors they offer.

Lyndsey shared her experience triangulating information between recruiters and content published on institutional websites. Typically in doing so, one source would inform another and offer some clarity on others.

Conversations with recruiters and also just the websites themselves [were the most valuable sources of information] because I would get little snippets of information from recruiters and then go further and look that information up on websites and the whole plethora of information would just pop up and I'd just be reading through it and just find notes on the different information that I wanted to know.

Melinda and Bethany took a similar approach to their information gathering on college and university websites. Bethany used websites to further investigate information that her high school was sharing with her. She said, "Our school gave us information about scholarships, but

then I also just looked them up on the Alabama website.” Melinda used websites to follow up on conversations she had had with institutional representatives at college fairs. She said,

Honestly, I looked at their websites and looked up information and then we had I think two college fairs at my school, so I would go to those and then search the specific things that I wanted to know like what’s the tuition rate, what is the main focus at the school, and other stuff.

For Erika, she was interested in researching a number of schools, some of them out-of-state. Due to distance and the cost of travel, she was not able to physically visit the out-of-state institutions she was interested in learning more about. For her, the institution’s website was the sole physical and visual representation of the institution and its campus.

I mainly went to their websites, the school websites. That was my main source of information and also I just checked out different websites to see what people felt about these universities because I’m not going to tour there because many of them were far away so I just looked around and stuff like that and saw pictures of campus.

For Hannah, she found websites and information online more valuable than some of her on-campus tour experiences. She recalled an experience where she was seeking clarification on something she found in one of her searches regarding an institution’s graduation rate.

The website offers the most valuable information and how things work. Like whenever I asked students or people who did the tours they weren’t really sure... I remember asking one of the tour guides about their graduation rate compared to other colleges and she just told me to Google it.

Darren and Patricia used their searches of institutional websites to review college or university rankings and to validate the quality of programs and the overall student experience.

When asked about the main sources of information on institutions for her, Patricia said, “Just looking up on the Internet. I was Googling to see if Alabama was good, like if they had a good program in what I wanted to major in and stuff like that.”

Not all of the participants’ experiences with college and university’s websites were positive. Matthew and Jessica shared some frustrations that they experienced while attempting to gather information from institutional websites. In Matthew’s situation he found much of the information he was encountering to be outdated.

Stuff in the mail and websites [main sources of information about college] mainly because everything is on them. There’s links to everything else and you can click on them. Sometimes you need to talk to people that actually go to the schools too because the information on the websites isn’t always completely updated.

The literature on first generation college students’ experience with their college choice process confirmed that a point of confusion and frustration for these students is frequently their inability to acquire clear information regarding cost (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Jessica’s frustration with navigating different websites was consistent with that finding. She shared, “I feel like schools should put just a price tag on the website. Like make a big tab that says it costs this much to go here.”

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Jessica’s frustration with the lack of a clear indication of the overall cost of attendance on many institutional websites is a common frustration by first generation college students. One of the most influential factors in determining whether or not any student will attend post-secondary education is being able to afford it and the availability of and access to financial aid (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Ward et al., 2012). This factor is of even greater importance to first generation

students as they are oftentimes from low-income households without access to the type of financial capital necessary to attend college. The initial step in securing any federal financial aid is to submit the FAFSA. Although this application has been online for a number of years, its completion and submission still presents a barrier that all students must overcome as much of the information necessary to complete the FAFSA involves tax documents and to a certain degree some knowledge of a family's income.

It is worth noting that the experience of the participants in this study took place prior to the implementation of the Prior-Prior FAFSA, which began as of the 2017-2018 aid year. The Prior-Prior FAFSA uses tax information from two years ago allowing those submitting the application to use an Internal Revenue Service retrieval tool that will import much of the tax-related information from submitter's e-filing from that year. The adoption of this new method of submission will allow students to begin the process earlier and should reduce the amount of labor and prior knowledge of a family's taxes making it easier for students to submit.

When asked about their experiences with the FAFSA participant responses were wide ranging. Some relied heavily on the assistance of parents or outside support. Some completed the process alone and with ease, while others faced great difficulty when attempting to submit their application.

For Haley, she began the application on her own but was unable to complete it on her own. She recalled, "I did all that I could [on the FAFSA] and then I had to pass the computer to my parents". For other participants, the FAFSA presented such a challenge that they had to seek out additional assistance in completing it. Depending on participants' geographic location or the high school they attended some services were provided to assist students in submitting their FAFSA. Their experiences are outlined below in Table 5.

Table 5

Participants' Responses Regarding Their Experiences Completing the FAFSA

Hannah	“I really don’t know many people who enjoy the FAFSA. The process is kind of frustrating. There is an agency for the North Alabama Financial something that will actually sit down with you and do the FAFSA with you. So I did that because I was really nervous that I would do it wrong and those women were really helpful.”
Melinda	“Me and my mom sat there and we were like we have no idea what to do [with the FAFSA]. So, I actually went and was like, we had to ask other people like “How do we do this?” and she asked friends at work and they were like really you just have to do this and that and at the end of the day we went to my mom’s tax lady so that she could help.”
Alex	“We had a FAFSA help night at our school where we all came and their parents came and they helped us fill it out. My mom came in but I really did it because she’s not very tech savvy.”
Trisha	“We had this wonderful lady in this office in my town and she did it [FAFSA] all for us. I just went in and answered her questions and she sent us on our way with our little forms and next thing I know I had money and it was all amazing.”
Laura	“There’s a place back home called the North Alabama Center for Academic something... you just go in there like me and because my grandfather adopted me, so he came too. We just went in and took his tax paperwork which there wasn’t much because he’s retired and disabled and they just did it [FAFSA] all for me.”

Three other participants reflected on a level of anxiety that the FAFSA brought to the entire college choice process for them and their family. Identifying as a first generation student meant that likely no one in their family had likely ever completed a FAFSA or even knew what it was. Emory said, “Well it was all so new for me [the FAFSA] because I had no idea what it was...I was completely lost.” Similar to Emory’s experience, Patricia reflected on her family’s challenges with the FAFSA. She shared,

I thought it was really complicated to apply [the FAFSA] because like I said none of us had ever done it before, so I feel like it was really complicated for people that hadn’t done it before or maybe someone that wasn’t like an accountant or something like that.

Although Ronald expressed difficulty with completing his FAFSA application, it turned out to not be as complicated as he anticipated once he was finished. He shared,

It was rough [the FAFSA]. I mean, it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be, but none of us had any experience with it and had no idea what we were doing. Other people I know had siblings and other family that have gone to college so they had some experience.

Bethany, Matthew, and Marcus expressed overall confusion and frustration with the design of the FAFSA identifying it as a challenging and frustrating step in their college choice process. Bethany shared,

It was rough [the FAFSA]. Like the wording and like exactly how to like put everything in the right lines...I've never done taxes before so I didn't really know what was going on...I don't know... they were just numbers on paper to me.

Like Bethany, Matthew's experience was not a positive one. He said,

Oh my gosh... Okay so no one in my family went to college. No one knew what the FAFSA was. I didn't know what the FAFSA was. I procrastinated on it for a while. It wasn't that bad, but they asked me lots of questions that I had no idea what they were. I asked my parents for help, but they didn't know what they were doing, so it took me at least a week of sitting there and going through papers and stuff and finding the little boxes.

While discussing the FAFSA, Marcus provided a quote that aptly summarizes the experiences of many of his fellow participants. He shared, "The FAFSA was a nightmare".

The use of technology may have expanded access and facilitated a degree of ease in submitting the application, but challenges for students submitting the application remained. Next, the experiences of students with other digitized applications will be discussed as the use of

technology has dramatically improved students' access to both applications for admission and for scholarships.

Common Applications

The use of common applications for admission to a large number of institutions, as well as common applications for scholarships with varying criteria, have increased access for first generation students by consolidating processes that may have gone unnoticed by a number of these students. As a result of the common admissions application Darren was able to apply to 10 schools in total. He reflected on his experience noting with great pride that he submitted applications to a number of Ivy League schools.

I applied to MIT, Harvard, Suffolk, RPI, Vanderbilt, Alabama, UAH, Mississippi State...10 in all. They were all on the Common App so you just kind of click some boxes and it sends them out to all of the different schools.

A large number of institutions and even some scholarship clearinghouse websites have implemented dynamic common applications that allow students to submit one application to be considered for any and all awards they offer. By implementing these types of applications students were able to apply for a wide range of scholarships without having to seek and find individual award applications. The experiences of these participants are outlined in Table 6. For many participants, the scholarships that were awarded to them as a result of this common application were the determining factor in their decision to attend.

Table 6

Participants' Responses Regarding Their Experiences with Common Scholarship Applications

Haley	"I just filled out the Alabama scholarship application and it told me what I got"
Ronald	"I found out everything about scholarships on the Alabama scholarship app. The first gen (generation) one was on there and so I checked the box and I got an email saying I was a finalist...I got excited and when I researched it further I found out it was \$5,000 a year and I was shocked!"
Bethany	"I just did the Alabama scholarship app and I just got some even though I feel like I didn't directly apply to them because of that application."
Laura	"I just filled out the Alabama scholarship application online and there were like three or four that I was applicable for so I filled them out and then the Coca-Cola one gave me an interview and I was so excited."
Emory	"The scholarship app at Alabama was awesome. I received like three nursing scholarships from them and then I received a presidential scholarship and then from my high school I received two additional scholarships."
Melinda	"I found information about the Coca-Cola scholarship on the scholarship page on myBama."

Scholarship Searches

Although common scholarship applications have dramatically reduced the amount of time and effort required to identify potential sources of funding for students to attend college, there are a number of privately funded awards through corporations and foundations across the country designed to aid students in their pursuit of acquiring a degree. Scholarship websites and clearinghouses exist for students to search for additional scholarship awards based on their specific circumstances. Four of the participants shared their experiences with these types of websites and digital postings of scholarships.

Lyndsey began her scholarship research early in her high school career. By the time she was in her senior year she had developed a fairly thorough plan to find as many scholarships as possible.

I began my scholarship research probably in my 9th grade year, but I don't think I started going on websites until 10th grade. A lot of my friends laughed at me because I was

always looking up everything. But yeah, late 10th grade year I was going to websites that I don't know what for, like signing up for the newsletters and things about scholarships and information about the schools that I was getting less from.

Similar to Lyndsey, Hannah searched for scholarships on a regular basis as well throughout her senior year of high school.

I Googled available scholarships. I would Google scholarships that were related to the degree I was interested in, but then I went to the Alabama website too to look up scholarships. I was pretty much searching constantly in my senior year trying to apply for scholarships that I could receive.

Although Rachel's experience is similar to Lyndsey's and Hannah's the scholarship search process was also a way for her parents to be involved in her college choice process. She reflected on her scholarship searches saying, "a lot of Googling [how I found out about the availability of scholarships]. I also did the fastweb.com and scholarships.com. My mom would also Google different scholarships and send me screenshots every day."

Alex's scholarship search included a method that provides an ideal transition into the next segment of this section. Her high school utilized an education specific social media platform to communicate and share information to seniors about the college choice process and potential scholarship opportunities. She said,

My high school had an Edmodo page. It's like social media. Like Facebook for school and we turn assignments in and teachers post grades and announcements and stuff. We had several senior groups on Edmodo and they would post scholarships and who was eligible to apply and how to apply.

Alex's reflection on her use of her high school's Edmodo page was consistent with the theme of how technology has not only provided access to information for students via websites, online common applications, etc., but it also shed light on how technology provides ease and access to communication and the sharing of information through direct and targeted messaging on social media, email, and text messaging. Participants' experiences with varying forms of digital communication will now be discussed.

Digital Communication

The days of anxiously awaiting the arrival of an information packet from a college or university are no longer the exclusive method of receiving information about an institution or monitoring the status of one's application. Although mail pieces remain an integral tool in the communication and recruitment efforts of institutions, in the age of technology and the Internet, emails, social media, and even text messaging have become the preferred methods of sharing information and engaging with potential new students. In reflecting on what were the most valuable sources of information about institutions, Darren said, "Email and mail, definitely."

Some colleges and universities also grant access to their student portal to prospective students as a way for them to get real time updates on the status of their application. The experiences of participant engagement with digital communication and online student portals will now be discussed. Melinda utilized email to gain information from institutional representatives regarding the availability of a specific course that she was interested in taking. She shared, "I emailed schools specifically about like did they have an endocrinology class because that's what I want to specialize in." Like Melinda, Ronald used his access to email to gain information directly from an institutional source whenever he had a question. He said, "My

counselors were helpful, but if they ever didn't know something all I had to do was email my recruiter and she always knew the answer.”

When asked about how they found out about the scholarship application Haley and Matthew recalled receiving a notification from either an email or when they signed in to their student portal (myBama). While reflecting on how he was notified about the availability of the scholarship application Matthew recalled receiving emails regarding scholarship applications from a number of schools and used that information to assume that The University of Alabama would also follow suit. He shared,

I found out about the scholarship application I want to say from an email from the school.

I also figured there was one because Auburn and South (Alabama) were both sending me emails about scholarship applications, so I assumed Alabama's would be similar.

Most participants shared that they received the majority of their communication from colleges and universities via email. Two participants reflected on their experience with text messaging from their high schools as a method of communicating with the senior class regarding college attendance. Trisha stated, “My guidance counselor was great about sending out all of these emails and text messages.” Similar to Trisha's experience Lyndsey mentioned receiving text messages regularly from her counselor regarding available scholarships. She also said that her mom was able to sign up for text messages and could engage with her college choice process by discussing the opportunities with her and encouraging her to apply. She recalled:

My counselor was using this program that is available to teachers that basically sends text messages out to all the students and she would send out links to scholarships to us through those texts and a lot of them were local and small scholarships but a lot of benefits, \$1,000 or \$3,000 here and there and I applied for almost everything that she sent

to me so I got my first year paid off...my mom actually signed up too so every time the counselor would send one out my mom would also text me and tell me to apply for it.

The expanded use of technology in the sharing of information and communication processes associated with the college choice process of prospective college students has dramatically improved students' access to information over the years. While information may be more accessible, desire and intrinsic motivation must still exist within the student to seek out that information. Throughout the data collection process associated with this study, a theme of independence and autonomy surrounding the entire choice process was discovered among the vast majority of participants; these reflections will now be discussed further.

Independence, Autonomy, and Motivation

A number of participants reflected on acting alone and receiving little to no assistance during the decision-making points of their college choice process. Their ability to act with the level of autonomy and independence could be a reflection of the way in which they were raised by their parents and guardians indicating a level of latent involvement in the process. There were a number of occasions when participants vividly recalled being raised in a way that fostered independence, autonomy, and determination. Many of them also mentioned being in situations during their childhood where they were called upon to care for siblings, hold jobs to contribute to the family finances, etc. These circumstances are powerful experiences that frequently result in children developing a premature level of responsibility and independence.

“They [parents] never actually had like a sit down conversation like ‘hey you should be going to college’ because it was something I already had in my mindset.” Lyndsey provided a summation of the mindset and motivation of many of the participants' experiences with the college choice process. The process for a number of participants was a personal one that had

little active influence in the actual steps of the process by parents, guardians, or family members and was more about their own determination and motivation to attend college as a way to provide a better life for themselves than they had growing up. Throughout this section, the motivation for pursuing post-secondary attendance and the autonomy and independence experienced throughout the choice process will be discussed.

Determination

As presented in the theme of participants' predisposition to pursue college attendance it was evidenced that some participants were unable to recall when it was that they made the decision to pursue post-secondary attendance. For a number of them, attendance was something that they understood as a next step in their academic career. The determination to persist in their educational pursuit was further evidenced when participants were asked to specifically recall the level to which their parents/guardians were involved in the decision-making processes associated with attending a college or university. Emory reflected on her college choice process by saying,

Well it's [getting to college] kind of not as hard as people make it out to be. It felt like if you put your mind to it, it's very possible and like you can make it happen so like... I don't know it's just like if you're very determined you can do it.

Many participants expressed a similar occurrence when reflecting on their experience navigating their college choice process. Some of them were more proud and satisfied with the level of independence they experienced in the process, while others felt that it was more isolating. Jessica stated, "No one really helped me in deciding to go to college. I just had a mindset. I knew I was going to college." Laura and Alex had similar thoughts. Laura said, "Nobody ever told me like, 'Hey, you should go to college.' I mean, it was more of a self-decision that I made." Ashley also recalled a similar experience, but shared her experience from a place of pride, "I just always had

in my mind that I was going [to college]. I wanted to do it for myself because ultimately I'm the one getting the education so I want to be able to provide for myself."

Participants discussed their determination to attend college regardless of the influence or involvement of their parents or guardians. Lyndsey said, "They [parents] didn't really play a big role because I had made that decision myself to actually go to college." John had a similar reflection, "They weren't really involved [in the final decision to attend Alabama]. It was more personal." The final two participants to discuss their determination to access higher education despite the level of involvement of their parents or guardians had very different opinions of the experience. Trisha recalled,

Honestly, I kind of liked doing it on my own [the college search process] because it was one of those that way I got to look for what I wanted and I didn't have to say oh well according to your experience this is better even though we're completely different people like maybe it was because I was very motivated to do it. I didn't have any trouble with it. I liked it.

For Hannah the experience was more isolating. She reflected on her experience saying,

They [parents] did not play a role at all [in her final decision of where to attend college]. For a while they kind of refused to talk to me about it and I felt that they did it out of fear because they were afraid that I'd get into a lot of debt or be unhappy, so they were just kind of not involved in all of my decisions. I felt kind of alone in choosing a college.

Raised to Be Independent

Many of the participants recalled being content with conducting much of their college choice process on their own because they felt that they were raised by their parents/guardians to be independent and this process was merely another opportunity for them to exert that

independence. For some, independence was exercised out of necessity as a result of their parents struggling with the English language. While reflecting on the topic, one participant came to realize that by her parents taking less of a role in her college choice process she acquired the confidence and independence that would be necessary for her to be successful while in college.

Frank recalled the autonomy he experienced in regards to his college choice process to be fairly typical of his upbringing.

She [mom] didn't really say anything [about college] until late, late. Its like I had already committed to a university. She said, "Why didn't you go to UAB? It's much closer" and I said "yeah... that's the problem." She didn't really have much input over what schools I looked at or anything. It was mostly me. I guess I'm more the type that did not necessarily like to ask for help at first because most of the time there's a lot of stuff I'm used to doing on my own anyway so it wasn't like I was that worried about it.

Similarly, Lyndsey recalled being left to do a number of things for herself throughout her childhood, but came to realize the benefit of such independence in her first few weeks of being at school. She shared,

I guess my parents raised me to be very independent, so a lot of things I did on my own. What they did [during the college choice process] was perfect, especially for me it kind of pushed me out of my comfort zone a little more and made me get out there and explore my options a little more. It kind of made me realize that I'm going to be on my own. Whatever I need to do, I need to figure it out now. I need to start being independent, start being able to figure everything out. I don't want them to hold my hand the rest of my life so now it's the starting point.

Jessica described a similar experience but also recognized the value of being able to navigate the college choice process autonomously. She said,

I wouldn't change anything about how involved my parents were. I think it was just the right amount. Because they gave me the independence I would need to be a good college student like how they allowed me to look things up and decide for myself and see how much it would cost and look through all the tax stuff. I feel like if I didn't have that experience, I wouldn't really know the value of a dollar and I wouldn't be as independent as I am today. The whole process helped me to be more assertive and to be a more independent person, but they were still there any time that I needed them.

John, Alex, and Erika shared additional details regarding their experiences of autonomously navigating their college choice process. While their recollections and reasons for exerting a level of independence on the events of their life were unique, they were meaningful to their overall experience and consistent with the theme of independence.

John recalled being more of an introvert and not really participating in many social events in high school. He said, "I wasn't really involved socially in middle and high school so I just did a lot of things on my own." Alex recalled her experience as an only child. Her parents had busy work schedules among other responsibilities, which led her to become accustomed to being alone. She said, "I think they [parents] were still like worried about me going off on my own, I guess, but I'm an only child so I've always been very independent." Finally, Erika spoke of the active role she played in assisting her parents with a great number of things during her upbringing since English was not their native language. She shared,

I did everything myself because my parents they don't know English very well. Honestly, I was okay with their kind of bystander involvement [in the college choice process]

because I kind of felt it was my responsibility to do this because it will kind of, it was unfair of me but it'll be even more unfair for them to try and learn something that they've never experienced.

Responsibility

A number of participants discussed performing additional responsibilities for their family while in high school. Most of them worked to help provide additional income for their families. Some cared for younger siblings while their parents worked multiple jobs to ensure they had enough money. When discussing these additional responsibilities participants attributed them to an increased level of independence and comfort with autonomy when navigating the events of life.

Emory and Trisha both discussed the lessons of responsibility that having a job provided to them during high school. Emory shared,

From the time I turned 16 to the time I left for move in day I worked so it was like it's kind of all me and it was kind of hard but it was like the life I lived. That has all taught me responsibility like it's just the cards that I've been dealt so I just dealt with it.

Trisha reflected on a similar experience. "I worked 40 hours a week as soon as I could. Because my family, we didn't have much money, so I was like I'm going to help out. I'm going to work."

Other participants spoke about the responsibility of securing the funding necessary to attend college as something that they took exclusive control over. For many of them, it was a point of pride and independence to be able to fully own their higher education experience. Jessica said, "I did the FAFSA entirely on my own. My parents don't know what the FAFSA is and probably still to this day don't know that I applied for it." Lyndsey has a similar autonomous experience with the FAFSA. She said,

I basically almost did the application [FAFSA] myself. My mom provided me with the tax returns and everything that I didn't know. She was there to help, but a lot of things I always did myself, so it wasn't really a problem.

Matthew discussed his parents' attempt to influence what he should study until he realized that repayment of his student loans was going to be solely his responsibility. This realization informed his decision to own his college experience. He said,

At first my parents were trying to tell me what to major in and then I realized that the student loans were going to be in my name and that's when I decided that I was going to study whatever I wanted to study.

Marcus spoke endearingly of his mother's involvement in his college choice process. When he began to consider which schools to research she told him that if he was passionate about attending The University of Alabama as his dream school that he should not consider or research any other institutions. She told him that no matter what she would find a way to make it a reality for him. As a result of his upbringing and the values instilled in him by his mother he took a more responsible approach to his college search. He recalled,

She [mom] didn't want me researching anything else besides Alabama because that's where I wanted to go. But I look at it realistically. I just thought I wasn't going to be able to come here so I ended up researching other schools without her knowing.

Lastly, Bethany spoke about the responsibility that she developed as a result of caring for her younger siblings growing up. She reflected on her past by saying,

I watched them [siblings] like for a good amount of time because my parents were out a lot. So I did a lot for them growing up. It made me a more responsible person and I was used to doing things on my own. I did all of my applications and research on my own.

The independence, autonomy, and motivation expressed by nearly all of the participants came to be a meaningful part of their reflection of their college choice experience. Although participant experiences varied, the spirit of this theme was consistent and oftentimes allowed participants to reflect on how their upbringing, which was heavily influenced by their parents or guardians, had played a role in how they experienced their college choice process and would ultimately influence their experience as a college student.

Support

Although the majority of participants of this study expressed a belief that they were highly independent and had functioned in many aspects of their life autonomously, they almost unanimously expressed a desire to feel supported. Some participants said that they felt greatly supported by their parents through their college choice process; some of them even shared that that was their parents' greatest contribution to the process. For others, they expressed a desire for their parents to have been more supportive throughout the process when reflecting on their overall involvement in the college choice process.

Some participants reported receiving support from outside of their family unit. A number of participants reflected on the role of their church in supporting their academic endeavors. Others expressed a desire to find a community of support among their peers as well as university staff upon their arrival at The University of Alabama. The remainder of this section will discuss the role of support in participants' college choice process and its importance to them during their search process and throughout their time in college.

Support from Parents and Family

All of the study participants expressed somewhat different experiences of how their parents were involved in their college choice process; however, the word support was repeated

by a number of participants in either reflection of how their parents were involved or out of a desire for how they would have liked their parents to be involved. For Emory, she recalled feeling supported in two different ways by two different family members. She said,

My aunt is a traveling nurse and she's just supported me because she always knew like I wanted to go to college and stuff and knew how to make it happen. My mom, like she just supported me on whatever I decided to do because she never really experienced the college experience so she didn't really know how to help me so it's like in that area she wasn't very active but like as far as the support role, she played a very good support role.

Similarly, Jessica recalled the involvement of her father. While he lacked hands-on experience with navigating the college choice process he was still engaged and supportive of his daughter's pursuits. "My dad was that one who talked to me about college because even though my mom was really supportive and she loves me a lot she isn't very knowledgeable on that kind of stuff."

Other reflective quotes from participants regarding the support of their parents and family members of their college choice process can be found below in Table 7.

Table 7

Participants' Responses Regarding Their Parents' and Family Members' Support of Their College Choice Process

Matthew	“One of my aunts went to college and it took her forever to finish. Another one of my aunts went to community college. They were really supportive. One was more of an emotional support and the other was really supportive and helpful with telling me how I was going to get there.”
Bethany	“They [parents] wanted me to be like happy and like if I wanted to be here it would be better for me, you’re better at school and a better transition and all that.”
Marcus	“From day one my mom just encouraged me.”
Lyndsey	“They [parents] just wanted me to follow my dreams and I wanted to do it, so they were willing to support me.”
Melinda	“They [parents] were there as like a support saying, “you can do it and we can help you get through it like money wise, and not be afraid to like go off even if its like farther away.” So they were just my support system in choosing. For me, I feel like they [parents] were involved enough because they didn’t persuade me to go like anywhere. They just were there for support. They were there if I needed help, but I usually just try to do it on my own.”
Ronald	“I wanted to go to college, but it was mainly my family keeping me going. Mom was supportive of whatever I decided.”
Rachel	“They [parents] were very supportive of all of them [the schools] but they had definitely told me to apply to some bigger and some smaller to keep the range open. Dad was more on the money side and mom was more on the do what you want to do.”

Four participants shared disappointment in the support they received from their parents. For Laura, her parents were not in the picture given their pasts. During the interview Laura became visibly upset when reflecting on their absence during this milestone in her life. She expressed a level of resentment towards them as a result. Matthew, Trisha, and Hannah had similar recollections of their parents’ support. Support was somewhat lacking when they made decisions regarding their college choice process, especially decisions their parents did not necessarily approve of. Laura reflected on the absence of her parents:

My parents weren’t really in the picture, but it would have been nice to have more of my parents’ help like a support because they were kind of like, “Okay, you’re on your own.

You figure it out.” So, I felt like I was very much on my own because my grandpa who was my guardian then was like 60 so he didn’t know much.

Matthew discussed a change in his parents’ support of his pursuit of post-secondary attendance when he shared his decision with them to not attend the university in his hometown.

My parents were really only involved with the finances of college, but then also like supporting me emotionally like they were supportive of me going to college but whenever I decided to not go to South Alabama they were not as supportive. They were not happy that I did not choose to stay as close to home as they would have liked. So, I wish they would have been more, “yeah Matthew that’s a great decision” but they weren’t.

At one point in her college choice process Trisha was wavering in her decision to attend The University of Alabama despite receiving her first generation student scholarship. She recalled her parents’ support changing to be more directive during this part of her process. She said,

I mean obviously it’s nice now and I like the money but it’s one of those things that’s like they may have been right in the end, but at that time it was very like, no you’re supposed to support me. So, kind of a little bit less [involvement by her parents].

Hannah reflected on her parents’ support of her college choice process from a place of disappointment. As she discussed her parents’ lack of support of her attending The University of Alabama she became visibly upset and recalled feeling alone in her college choice process. She reflected on her experience saying,

Once they realized that this was a permanent decision they started to think “ok, she’s there” and they started supporting me. I would have really liked having support from my

family in regard to help. I feel like if I was to ask for more support in the beginning I might have been happier at Alabama.

Support from Community

For Laura and Lyndsey their churches served as a reliable source of support both during their college choice processes and into their college experiences. In Laura's experience, her church community and boyfriend's family helped fill a void left by her absent parents. She shared,

Some days are good and some days I get really homesick and cry in my room. My boyfriend's mom has been a really big support for me and she will text me stuff like... "blah blah blah days until you're halfway done with your first year", like being really supportive like "you can do it." "You got this." My church members from home are also really supportive texting me all the time and telling me that they are praying for me.

Lyndsey recalled the support of her church as being a great source of accountability for her in pursuit of her dream of earning a college degree. She said, "My church played a big role. They always had high expectations for me."

Finally, a number of participants spoke about representatives of the University that served as a source of support for them during their college choice process and beyond. Ronald spoke endearingly about his recruiter and the support that she provided him during his college choice process. He recalled, "She [recruiter] was very helpful. I don't feel like I would have been able to be here without additional support." Matthew spoke of the program coordinator of the Coca-Cola Scholarship program as someone that shared with him the amount of support and opportunities that would be afforded to him by participating in the program. He noted that this

support made him feel much more comfortable about attending such a large institution. He stated,

When I was trying to decide where to go and I talked to Ms. Imbody she told me all about the connections that you get from the Coca-Cola program and all of the support that they provide, so I decided to come here.

Similar to Matthew's experience, learning about the additional support available to students who participated in the first generation scholarship programs, John, Hannah, and Rachel spoke about the role that participation in those programs played in feeling supported in their decision-making process as well as their first couple of months as a college freshman. John said, "I'm really happy that I'm here. I'm really happy that I have the 12 Coca-Cola people and that we can be together." Hannah spoke more specifically about having a network of older students to rely on for help whenever she needed it. She shared,

It [the Coca-Cola scholarship] was probably the most important factor [in decision to attend Alabama]. It not only offered me a scholarship, but it offered me a program and a community, a group of students that were [*sic*] in the same situation with me that I can relate to and go to for help and since there are also sophomore, junior, and senior Coke scholars they provided an even larger group of resources for me to go to if I had a question because they had experienced it.

Finally, Rachel shared her experience of interacting with the older scholars and the sense of family she felt between all of the scholars in the program. This support played an important role in affirming her decision to attend The University of Alabama. She shared,

It [first generation scholarship] was really important because one, it was a lot of money and two it was like going into that interview and getting to see everybody and see how

happy they were and see like how close they were. It was really reassuring like you'll kind of have like a little family here.

Money

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) discussed the importance of money throughout all three phases of their college choice model. This was consistent with the findings of this study as the topic of money was discussed from a number of perspectives and crossed several of the other themes. Because of this overlap, money was selected as the sixth and final theme. Money and finances were discussed by participants in the context of their increased future earning potential as a result of college attendance, as influential to their predisposition to pursue post-secondary attendance, and important to their choice of major. Money was also discussed from the perspective of what it would cost for them to attend college. The overall cost and debt burden was of great importance to participants' parents. For many of parents, money was the extent of their involvement in their student's college choice process. The role and influence of money and cost will now be discussed through the diverse experiences of study participants.

As previously discussed, no two participants experienced identical college choice processes. They were all motivated by different factors with varying levels of involvement and influence by their parents and family members. Laura's parents' involvement in her process as it related to money was highly focused on return on investment. She recalled,

My parents didn't really play a role in what I was going to study other than telling me I needed to make a lot of money. It was never like do what makes you happy, it was more you have to make a lot of money.

In contrast, Lyndsey's parents discussed with her the importance of understanding how her decisions of institution and major would impact her return on her investment, but ultimately they

allowed her to make her own decisions and progress in the direction that she thought was best for her. She said,

They kind of let me, I mean, they just told me to think about what do I want to get out of my school and the price point was a big thing with them and what would I benefit from going to this school or that school.

Regardless of the approach taken by different participants' parents, financial assistance, future earning potential, return on investment, and cost of attendance proved to be major factors in all of the participants' college choice process.

Cost of Attendance and Financial Assistance

For most college students, whether first generation or not, the overall cost of attendance and return on investment are influential factors in the decision-making process. Return on investment influences not only what institution to attend but whether it is worth it to attend an institution at all. A number of students found securing the information necessary to make an informed decision related to cost frustrating as it has become somewhat convoluted by mandatory fees, on campus living requirements, and meal plan purchases. Jessica shared her frustration with trying to deduce this type of information during her search process.

I feel like schools should just put a price tag on what it costs to go to school there. Like it costs this much to go here because it took so much math trying to figure out fees and housing and everything.

The ability to determine with some level of ease and accuracy what it was going to take financially for a student to attend an institution played a critical role in participants comparing different institutions from a feasibility-of-attendance perspective. The overall sticker price combined with their financial assistance package was the determining factor for many study

participants to attend The University of Alabama. Emory reflected on the importance of finances and the availability of assistance related to her decision to attend The University of Alabama.

Finances were a very important factor in picking a school. If it hadn't been for the scholarships I applied for and the Pell grants and everything I got there was no way I was going to be here today.

A number of other participants discussed the costs associated with their college choice process in comparison to other institutions. Jessica recalled another in-state institution that she was planning to attend until she received her scholarship package. "At first, I was really planning on going to Auburn, but I would have to pay like \$22,000 with minimal scholarships there."

Matthew was strongly considering attending an out-of-state institution until he came to realize the cost differential between an in-state institution and an out-of-state option.

I really liked the University of Vermont because it was really pretty and liberal, but I just couldn't afford it. It was like fifty something thousand dollars a year for out-of-state students, and I only got like \$7,000 a year in scholarships.

Similarly, John was considering attending both an out-of-state institution and an international institution and was quickly made aware of the additional factors that would need to be considered when deliberating about what institution to attend. He recalled,

I applied to a lot of schools. I thought I would have gotten into more, so it really humbled me, but after that it all came down to financials. Ole Miss was out of the question because I got zero scholarships from them. The University of Toronto was out because of the really high cost of living in Canada. First and foremost I was looking at financials. Once I got my acceptance letters I applied for financial aid for all three schools. I got the FAFSA and everything from everywhere. Once Ole Miss got knocked out because I didn't get

any scholarships from them it was between Alabama and Toronto and again it came down to financials. Was I going to live on or off campus?

Other participants considered attending out-of-state institutions until cost of attendance and financial assistance became parts of the equation. Their quotes can be found in Table 8.

Table 8

Participants' Responses to the Role of Finances in Their Decision to Forgo Further Pursuit of Out-of-State Institutions

Trisha	“Before we moved [to Alabama] I really wanted to go to Notre Dame because my high school had a lot of programs that led there or to Purdue. Then when we moved obviously they were no longer options financially because we can’t really afford out-of-state.”
Patricia	“I really wanted to go to Auburn, like it was the school I wanted to go to, but I couldn’t get enough scholarship money from there.”
Marcus	“It [finances] was pretty important. Alabama is one of the most expensive schools I could’ve applied for in the South and I would have to pay out-of-state fees at Mississippi State. We just had to really look at scholarships that were available and what I would need.”
Erika	“I got accepted to Emory, but it was way too much money.”

Several participants considered attending two-year alternatives as a way of pursuing their dream of attending college had they not gained the funding possible for them to attend the four-year institution of their choice. Emory shared, “Alabama was my main focus of schools to go to, but I had like a community college on my list too just in case I didn’t get the funds that I needed to come here.” Similarly, The University of Alabama was Marcus’ dream school, but he approached his college choice process from a pragmatic approach. He said,

Alabama is my dream school. It always has been, but we just didn’t know if we could afford it so we kind of looked at cheaper alternatives. We were going to look into scholarships with Alabama and Mississippi State and if we couldn’t find a way to pay for it I could always have Northwest Shoals to fall back on.

Haley was fully prepared to attend the local community college had her financial aid and scholarship packages not covered enough for her to attend The University of Alabama. She reflected on her experience saying,

It just kind of broke down into where the finances ended up at like if it was going to be a big sum of money that I was going to be owing then we were going to look further into the community college in town.

Student Loans

As participants reflected on their financial assistance packages a number of them discussed their lack of interest in taking out student loans. Some of them indicated that they would have preferred to attend a two-year institution than to take out student loans. A considerable number of them shared a negative opinion of student loans rooted in a fear of debt passed on to them from their parents. Melinda reflected on her conversations with her parents regarding the availability of financial aid and her lack of interest in taking out student loans.

They [parents] asked mainly like tuition, what kind of financial aid was available.

Finances were really important because like we've struggled financially, so I won't—I had personally wanted to like to go a school that was lower on tuition because I was like.. I don't want to put myself or my parents in debt.

Lyndsey and Erika were also not interested in taking out loans. Lyndsey was advised by her parents to not take out any loans while Erika's decision seemed like more of a personal preference. Nonetheless, participants indicated that they did not factor the availability of student loans into the overall financial assistance package when deciding where to go to college.

Rachel reflected on the conversation of cost with her parents related to her college attendance. While she discussed the potential of debt burden in her conversation she had somewhat of a less debt-averse perspective. She shared,

They [finances] were quite important. My parents told me that they would help as much as they could, but I have two younger sisters so they had to give them the kind of life they gave me, so they told me they would send a little money to me each month, but if you're going into debt...that's yours. So that was a big thing like deciding how much loan money I wanted to take out.

First Generation Scholarship as Deciding Factor

Study participants overwhelmingly identified cost and availability of financial assistance as the ultimate determining factor of whether or not to attend The University of Alabama. A number of them had previously determined that they were going to attend a college or university no matter what, it was just a matter of where. For most participants, the first generation scholarship was a determining factor. When asked how important her first generation student scholarship was to her decision to attend The University of Alabama Alex's quote summed up the general consensus of many of the participants. She said,

It was that first generation scholarship that like I was like if I get that I'm going to go to Alabama if I don't then I'm still not sure where I'm going to school, but once I got that it was like my sign.

Several of her peers had similar responses to that interview item. Their responses can be found in Table 9.

Table 9

Participants' Responses Regarding the Importance of Their First Generation Scholarship to Their Decision to Attend The University of Alabama

Emory	“That [the Coca-Cola scholarship] was tremendous for me. That was like the biggest scholarship like out of all of them and like that’s one that my guidance counselor really, really pushed me on.”
Jessica	“It was really important [the Coca-Cola scholarship] because it is a \$20,000 scholarship over four years and I don’t think Auburn or UAB even has a Coke scholarship.”
Matthew	“[The Coca-Cola scholarship] It was the most important thing in my coming here. Money and distance in general were my two biggest factors.”
Frank	“It was a pretty big role [first generation scholarship] because it helped me get another scholarship so it was like that’s going to be great. So it was like, go to UA and get all this money or go somewhere else and get a little bit of money...I wonder which one I should do.”
Trisha	“Literally, it [money] was the only thing that mattered. That was the tipping point [the first generation scholarship] because otherwise it would have been maybe \$2,000 difference [between Alabama and Auburn] but because of that it was \$5,000 a year difference.”
Hannah	“Finances were very important. In the beginning I didn’t really think I was going to get any scholarships to Alabama, but I ended up getting the Coca-Cola scholarship and Pepsi Buffalo Rock and all, so my tuition was completely covered by the time all of my scholarships were there and other schools in Alabama weren’t willing to offer me that much, so it was a big factor in my decision.”
Bethany	“I mean, I don’t have a college fund or anything and we don’t... I mean... we’re middle class but we don’t have like \$1,000 laying around so I got good scholarships here.”
Darren	“Financially, it [first generation scholarship] was really important”
Erika	“I chose Alabama because mainly scholarship money. It [first gen. scholarship] kind of sealed the deal because I’m not going to pay anything my first year of college. I was pretty stoked.”
Ronald	“It’s [Coca-Cola scholarship] an amazing opportunity. Without it I wouldn’t have been able to be here.”

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to better understand the role of parents in the college choice process of freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama. Six themes were discovered after careful and thorough analysis of the data: (1) College Attendance was a Natural Next Step: Participants discussed the influence of their parents

and family, high school staff, desired career paths, and overall environmental culture on what seemed to be their inevitable pursuit of post-secondary attendance; (2) Pressure to Succeed: Many participants expressed an internal or external pressure to succeed in their pursuit of higher education. They said they felt pressure to provide for themselves a situation that was better than their parents, pressure to pave a successful path through the uncharted territory of the college choice process, and pressure to set a positive example for their siblings; (3) Use of Technology in the Search Process: Advances in technology over the last several decades have made it easier for students and parents without a great deal of experience with the college choice process to collect information, maximize their options in regards to admission and scholarships through online common applications, and share and gain information quickly through digital forms of communication; (4) Independence, Autonomy, and Motivation: Participants reflected on the level of autonomy they felt throughout their college choice process. A number of them credited this to being raised in an environment where responsibility, independence, and determination were required to be successful; (5) Support: Although many of the participants said that they felt a great deal of autonomy throughout their college choice process, most of them reported a desire for being supported through the process by their parents, families, teachers, university staff, peers, churches, and communities. They also expressed a desire to have a system of support in place throughout their time in college; and (6) Money: Finances played an integral role in study participants' decision to attend The University of Alabama. Research conducted throughout their college choice process regarding overall cost of attendance of all institutions being considered coupled with their individual financial assistance package at The University of Alabama ultimately influenced their decision to matriculate at The University of Alabama.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The previous chapter presented the findings of this study through the lens of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice and the six themes that were discovered during data analysis. Throughout this chapter, those data will be synthesized, conclusions will be formulated, limitations of the findings discussed, and recommendations for future practice and research presented. The conclusions and recommendations are a product of the data garnered as a result of this study and previous research presented in Chapter two.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making to pursue post-secondary attendance?

The decision to pursue post-secondary attendance brought about a mix of emotions among the participants of this study. There was a sense of pride in their academic performance having completed high school. This achievement was one that a number of participants' parents were unable to accomplish. There was an even greater sense of pride in that they were not only accepted to the state's flagship institution, but they were also attending thanks to being awarded a significant amount of scholarship money from The University of Alabama and from outside entities.

A number of participants were either the oldest of their siblings or only children. These participants spoke to a level of responsibility associated with their pursuit of post-secondary attendance. They carried with them additional pressures of succeeding in order to set an example for their siblings or to positively represent their family in their pursuits. In addition to this responsibility, they also spoke about a level of privilege that they felt in being able to access an experience that no one else in their family was ever able to access that will most certainly have a positive impact on their future.

When discussing the timeline associated with their decision-making process regarding post-secondary attendance, there was a great deal of variance among participants regarding their decision to attend a college or university. For many participants, college enrollment was something that had been engrained in them from an early age, some early enough in their lives that they did not ever remember a time when they were not going to pursue college. For others, it was not until they reached a time in which they began preparing for the mandated delivery of the ACT as a high school exit exam.

Participants who expressed an early predisposition towards attendance credited numerous sources for their early active pursuit of higher education. For some, it was engrained in them from childhood by their parents that they would attend college as a way to provide themselves with a more comfortable life in the future and expand their job prospects. For others, it was engrained in the academic and curricular culture of their elementary and middle schools. Some participants shared that for as long as they could remember being in school, college was talked about as a next step post high school graduation.

Students with an early predisposition towards attending college also expressed in greater numbers than their peers with a later predisposition to attend that their parents (one or both) were

heavily involved in their K-12 experience. The parents of these students were involved either in the schools, extracurricular activities, or at home assisting with homework and other assignments. One participant also shared that she had an aunt who was an active part of her life early in her childhood. This aunt worked at a university and took her to the campus library in middle school to do school projects. The aunt also had conversations with her about how after she graduated high school she would be attending a school like that the university, providing that student with an experience that she remembered vividly as a time when she could visually and realistically see herself in the college environment.

Some participants expressed having a later experience in which they realistically envisioned themselves pursuing post-secondary attendance. For some, it was not until high school when they heard about application and scholarship deadlines from their high school guidance counselors were encouraged to consider college by one of their teachers, or saw the college representative set up in the cafeteria at lunch. A couple of participants also expressed that they had not considered college attendance until they were made aware that it would be required for their desired career choice.

For many of these participants, college attendance was not spoken of regularly at home. Several participants expressed that while it was not something commonly discussed, their parents were in support of whatever they decided to do. Two participants; however, indicated that when college was presented as a topic of conversation in their home one or both of their parents responded negatively, shared feelings that college was not necessary for them to provide for their family; therefore, it was not necessary for the participant to provide for theirs as long as they were willing to work.

When asked about perceptions of their parents' involvement throughout the predisposition phase of determining whether or not post-secondary attendance was something these students wanted to pursue, a myriad of responses were received. Responses ranged from contentment with the level of involvement to participants wishing their parents had been able to assist in answering more questions to some simply wishing their parents had been more supportive of their interest.

Every participant spoke about role that his or her parents played in the process either positively or negatively. Despite the varying levels of involvement and support by participants' parents throughout the predisposition phase of their college choice process, they all spoke to a level of independence they felt related to their pursuit of college. It was something that they wanted for themselves. Once their decision was made to pursue post-secondary attendance nothing was going to get in their way of making that dream a reality, regardless of when the decision was made.

Research Question 2

What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their decision-making on what institutions to consider attending?

The decision of what institutions to consider was based on a great deal of research as outlined in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice and confirmed by the participants of this study. Participants described the transition from deciding to pursue post-secondary education to deciding which institutions to research and ultimately apply to; they noted that these decisions were based on a great deal of research. Some of this research was conducted independently, but much of it was mandated through college and career discovery

projects throughout their educational experience beginning at varying grade levels for each participant.

Regardless of the motivation for research, participants indicated the importance of technology to their ability to acquire information about the college application and financial aid processes both in general terms, but also the institution-specific information they were seeking in an attempt to identify schools that would ultimately be a part of their choice set of institutions. Participants identified General Google searches as well as college and university websites as the most important sources of information in learning about the institutions they were considering.

Varying forms of electronic communication were also identified as important sources of information. Participants identified emails and text messages from institutions and their guidance counselors; video and virtual tour resources; online scholarship databases; Facebook, and phone conversations with older friends who were currently enrolled at colleges and universities as critical sources of information. Participants used these strategies to determine which schools to consider further and as resources for making their eventual matriculation at one of them a reality.

Most participants indicated that much of the information gathering process was a task they performed independent from their parents. Some indicated that their parents were willing to call institutions to get additional information on specific questions, provide college ranking information by purchasing a Princeton Review publication, and perform Google searches on potential scholarship applications.

Although technology has expanded access for students to this type of information, the number one factor disclosed by all participants in determining whether or not they would attend an institution was cost. This concern was shared among the students as well as with their parents in a number of cases. Cost was initially determined by most participants as sticker price when

considering out-of-state or private institutions. Participants selected for this study were all scholarship recipients with impressive academic credentials in regards to grade point average and ACT score.

Many participants expressed interest in researching or even pursuing some out-of-state or private institutions but were deterred from pursuing them further by the high sticker price discovered during their preliminary research. The availability of information related to the published sticker price as a result of technology may be serving as a deterrent to highly talented students from pursuing some institutions as they are unaware of how the impact of scholarships or institutional discounts can impact the overall cost associated with attending these institution.

When discussing participant perceptions of the role their parents played in determining what schools to consider there was one nearly universal factor that influenced parental involvement—Alabama football. Although there was a range of involvement by participants' parents regarding this part of the process, every participant discussed the role that Alabama football played in their parents' overall perception of The University of Alabama and how it was placed in an elevated position as a result. Some students shared that the only involvement their parents played at this point was to be supportive of whatever they decided, others shared that their parents were vocal supporters of Alabama because of the cultural affinity towards the institution as a result of the performance of the football team. A small number of participants noted that their parents expressed interest in the strength of the academic program that the student was interested in pursuing as an important factor for considering an institution.

Research Question 3

What perceptions do freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama have about the role their parents played in their ultimate decision to matriculate at a post-secondary institution?

In the final stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice participants of this study were unanimously attending a college or university regardless of the circumstances. Participants were accepted to at least one of the institutions that comprised their choice set and for all of them attending somewhere whether it was a first choice institution or not was always the priority. Some participants chose to only apply to The University of Alabama expressing a confidence in their ability to be accepted based on their academic credentials and lack of interest in pursuing other institutions. For others, Alabama was not their first choice. However, considering all factors at the time of their decision, Alabama was the school they chose to attend.

It is worth noting that one of the participants expressed that she would be transferring to a different institution closer to home at the conclusion of her first semester. This participant shared that she would be returning closer to home as a result of feeling homesick, missing a significant other who would be attending the same institution she was planning to transfer to, and a lack of feeling safe in the community of Tuscaloosa.

All participants discussed the overall cost of attending The University of Alabama as the most significant factor in determining their attendance. Concern over cost was also the issue that most participants shared as the most significant to their parents' input into their attendance decision. Nearly all participants indicated that the receipt of their first generation scholarship was a highly significant factor in their decision to attend, with some sharing that it was the sole

determining factor. Of the participants that expressed the significant importance of the first generation scholarship, many cited as important the financial assistance as well as the ability to be a part of a community of scholars undergoing a similar transition. This sense of community was spoken of highly by most participants. Some further shared that being part of such a community made their parents feel more comfortable with their decision to attend The University of Alabama as well.

When participants were asked to reflect on the role of their parents in their final decision of which institution to attend a number of them expressed a similar level of involvement as in previous stages of the college choice process. Some shared that their parents were not involved in the process at all and they (students) made the decision of which institution to attend independently. Others shared that their parents expressed a heightened concern for overall cost, concern for the possibility of carrying a debt load, and concern over the distance from home.

In addition to these interests, some participants noted that their parents expressed an increased attention to their preferred field of study. Some said that their parents were encouraging of whatever field they decided to pursue, while others expressed a desire for their student to pursue a degree and career that had the highest earning potential. Although some participants shared an interest in pursuing a career as a result of the earning potential, others found this involvement by their parents to be stressful and discouraging to what they truly wanted to pursue for themselves.

All participant interviews concluded with a question asking them to reflect back over their college choice process in its entirety and to share their overall perceptions of their parents' involvement throughout the process. The vast majority expressed content with the level of involvement by their parents in their college choice process. Many said that they wished their

parents could have been greater sources of information and knowledge of the process but did not fault them for not serving as such given their lack of personal experience with attending college.

A number of participants expressed the wish that their parents had been more helpful throughout the FAFSA and financial aid processes given the type of paperwork and information that was required. Some also shared that they enjoyed being able to complete the process on their own. These students said that they felt like they were not constrained or limited to the experiences of their parents and therefore could pave their own road, seek out the information that they felt was important, and consider factors related to the decision that were important to them rather than being dictated to them by their parents as a result of their experience.

One common theme was discovered across the experiences of nearly all of the participants related to the involvement of their parents in their college choice process. Several participants who wanted more involvement from their parents said that they would have liked to feel a greater sense of support from their parents. They wanted their parents to ask more questions, show more interest, and express support for the decisions that they were making along the way related to institutional choice as well as major and career choices.

For participants who expressed that their parents were involved at an appropriate level indicated that they most enjoyed how supportive their parents were of them and their decisions along the way. The one participant who will be transferring schools at the conclusion of her first semester shared that she felt that if her parents and family members back home would have been more supportive in her preparation for leaving home and beginning her academic journey that she may have had a more successful transition.

Recommendations for Practice

Results of this study have provided me with a better understanding of how first generation college students, more specifically those eligible for scholarships, undergo the college choice process. Although no two students' experiences were identical, there were a number of commonalities that can inform future practice for both students who will begin the process in the future as well as college/university staff and leadership; high school faculty, staff, and administration; and community organizations. Next, I will outline some of the implications for practice for each group garnered as a result of this study.

Recommendations for Students

As evidenced by the experiences of the participants of this study, students begin considering and researching colleges and universities at various times in their lives. For participants who began the process earlier and those who explored varying types of institutions, the search allowed them to make more informed decisions about the type of institution that would best prepare them to achieve their academic goals. Beginning early also afforded these participants the opportunity to explore different major options and careers that they may not have even known about as viable options.

Participants also conducted various types of searches to collect information about the institutions they were considering. Students who went on campus tours and met with faculty and staff seemed to be more confident in making some of the decisions associated with their college choice process. For most, interactions were used to either confirm or reject information that they found independently. Having information come from an official associated with the institution, however, gave more legitimacy to the information.

Among the majority of participants, there seemed to be a frustration regarding overall cost of attendance. Students oftentimes found conflicting information and were wary of hidden costs associated with room and board as well as course fees. Future students should ask questions regarding published sticker price versus actual cost of attendance when considering financial aid packages and scholarships. Asking these questions early may help students eliminate a school from further consideration or even make a highly desired school seem more attainable depending on the financial assistance opportunities available at the institution.

A number of participants indicated that they had determined they were interested in pursuing post-secondary attendance as a result of a career exploration course they took during their K-12 experience. These types of experiences and other opportunities for major and career exploration can be impactful to students with limited understanding of higher education. The more options students explore or have experience with, the more informed decision they can make when declaring a major and pursuing a future career.

Guidance counselors, teachers, and other K-12 administrators were identified by a number of participants as meaningful influences in their life; many of them disclosed that one or more of these individuals was responsible for their decision to pursue college. Students should be proactive in seeking information from these individuals as early as possible. School personnel are oftentimes privy to information from institutions that others may not access to and have personal experiences to draw on related to the college choice process and college attendance. College and university representatives spend a good deal of time in high schools across the country cultivating relationships with high school administrators, counselors, and teachers. These individuals would be more likely to advocate for a student with whom they have a relationship as compared to students they do not know.

Taking the time to cultivate relationships with different individuals associated with the college choice process can prove to be beneficial for students. One of the most important contacts a student will have during their college choice process is their assigned admissions representative. Establishing an ongoing relationship with these individuals provides students a point of contact when they have questions. These individuals also have access to scholarship information and may be able to advocate for students with whom they have a relationship throughout the process.

Another important relationship throughout this process is a student's relationship with his or her family, primarily parents. It is important to discuss expectations of each other throughout the college choice process so that those involved clearly understand what others need and expect throughout the process. Clearly articulating how students, parents, and family members communicate with each other regarding the college choice process allows for each party to understand and manage their expectations better.

The vast majority of participants shared that a great source of frustration related to their college choice process was completing the FAFSA. With the implementation of the prior-prior FAFSA, which allows students to use tax return information from two years ago, students are able to complete the application much sooner than ever before. A number of schools and/or community organizations host meetings and workshops to assist families with completing the cumbersome FAFSA application. Students should take advantage of these types of opportunities early in order to make the most informed decisions regarding the types of institutions they should consider. These workshops oftentimes provide families access to trained professionals who can assist them in better understanding the types of available aid and how aid can impact not only the

institutions they consider, but their obligations regarding additional loan paperwork, repayment, etc.

The final recommendation for students beginning their college choice process is to find a cheerleader. Every participant of this study expressed the importance of having a support system throughout the process. In some instances, parents fulfilled this role, but for others it was high school teachers, guidance counselors, cousins, aunts, etc. It could also prove to be beneficial for students to begin building a community of support of peers at the beginning of their higher education experience. A number of participants shared the importance of being a part of a community of peers and older students associated with their scholarship program. Feeling supported at all stages of the college experience proved to be of great importance to the participants of this study.

Recommendations for Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities play an integral role in improving access to higher education for all students. In their efforts to grow enrollment and improve access, customized marketing and outreach efforts should be developed to target and remove barriers for first generation college students. Customized videos, webpages, and publications highlighting successful first generation students would allow first generation students to see themselves being successful at that institution and develop a higher level of self-efficacy associated with their college attendance.

Every participant of this study cited the Internet as their first method of inquiry regarding college and as one of the most useful sources of information about institutions. Institutional leaders have an opportunity to invest in information technology infrastructure in ways that will further integrate stand-alone systems such as customer relationship management systems, text message communication campaigns, and chat features on webpages.

Today's student is looking for instantaneous information that is accurate and complete from a reliable source. It is crucial that institutional leaders are investing in website platforms that are easy to navigate and mobile friendly as students are using college and university websites as a crucial source of information in their college search process. It is also important to invest in the human resources necessary to ensure that the information on the webpage is maintained and curated in a way that makes it informative and easy to traverse.

Although messaging delivery methods are important, it is also critical to invest in a communications development team to create and maintain dynamic content that is personalized for targeting specific population segments. Consistent messaging to all stakeholders in the college choice process is critical to ensure that all involved are on the same page regarding deadlines for admission and attendance, ways to support students through the search, application, and transition process associated with post-secondary attendance, etc. Each audience, including students, parents, community organizations, teachers, guidance counselors, K-12 administrators, etc., should receive communication in ways that are best suited for their consumption in voice, tone, and platform.

The campus visit experience proved to be an important factor in students' college choice process, but students are often limited in their ability to visit all of the institutions being considered as a result of time off from school, finances, travel, etc. Institutional leaders should invest in virtual tour technologies that highlight facilities and grounds as well as faculty and current students from diverse backgrounds so that students can imagine themselves at the institution. Providing a virtual platform for students to envision themselves on campus among students like them will allow future students to make a more informed decision of whether or not to further pursue the institution.

Cost of attendance is the most critical factor in determining whether or not a first generation student will attend an institution as evidenced by the findings of this study. Institutional leaders should prioritize expanding their offerings of scholarships and grants to first generations college students. Providing these types of opportunities as early as possible in the process could prove to be mutually beneficial to students and the institutions as it would allow students to have more information early regarding the most critical factors in their decision-making. Such an investment in growing the first generation student population on campuses not only advances the mission of American higher education of providing access to quality higher education to as many students as possible, but it also adds an additional dimension to the diversity of the student body that is critical for all who attend.

Finally, colleges and university leaders should continue to cultivate and value their relationships with high school teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators as many students, especially first generation students, rely on these individuals as significant sources of information regarding the college choice process. It is critical that these employees are supported in their work and are confident in their ability to assist students with their college choice process. They should be equipped with the most accurate and up-to-date information to share with their students and a point of contact for students who are interested in gaining additional information regarding the institution.

Recommendations for High Schools and Community Organizations

Throughout the data collection process as well as the review of literature and approximately eight years of professional experience working in student affairs and enrollment management, a theme has emerged regarding the ways in which teachers, family members, school structures, etc. treat students differently based on their academic performance. Students

who perform better in school are placed in courses designed to engage them in college preparatory work while others are not engaged in the same way to consider pursuing post-secondary attendance. The diverse landscape of higher education institutions in the United States provides access for any student interested in furthering his or her education whether at a university, community college, trade school, etc. Post-secondary educational pathways are as unique as every student. Parents, families, teachers, and community organizations should work to engage all students from an early age in dialogue regarding post-secondary attendance regardless of current academic ability as a natural next step following high school graduation. All students deserve the opportunity to explore all of the options available to them when deciding their future.

K-12 schools should also work to require a career discovery/college application preparation course as part of the middle school and high school curriculum to provide students with structured support services aimed at exploring various fields of study and what will be required of them to achieve their career goals. These types of courses are excellent opportunities to engage local industry, universities, community colleges, and trade schools to educate and inform students on the vast array of opportunities available to them beyond the most common paths that many of their peers, teachers, and family members have taken.

Schools across the country have employed technology in many of their classrooms over the years. Encouraging students to utilize the technology available to them to learn about the college choice process as early as possible through classroom assignments may assist students in considering their predisposition to pursue post-secondary education and prompt them to have conversations with their parents about their futures. Through these conversations and research they will be more likely to view college attendance as a natural next step for them.

Lastly, parents of high schools students, especially parents of first generation students, could greatly benefit from the development of informational sessions offered by either high schools or community organizations on the topics of college application timelines, financial aid/FAFSA processes, and ways to support their student through the college choice process, as well as facilitated discussions on the topic of transition. It would be important to video record these sessions and make them available via website or to email the information discussed for parents unable to attend due to family or work obligations.

Study participants expressed a desire for their parents to support them throughout their college choice process but understood that many of them were not equipped with the knowledge or experience to understand how to effectively do so. By attending these types of sessions, parents could gain additional information and insight regarding the college choice process and possibly better support their students in an informed and engaged way.

Limitations

By selecting a qualitative methodology, the findings of this study are limited to the experiences of the 20 students that elected to participate in the study. Although the findings are narrower in scope than the results gleaned from a quantitative study with dramatically larger sample sizes or participants from multiple sites, a qualitative analysis provided the level of in-depth accounts that tell a more comprehensive story about the college choice process and the role of parental involvement.

An additional limitation of the study was the scholarship program selection criteria, which limited the type of participants to freshman, first generation college students who were eligible to receive the scholarship based on their Alabama residency, demonstrated financial need, and proven academic performance. While these limitations did bound the type of first

generation student that participated in this study in certain ways, it provided me the opportunity to delve deeper with each participant into specific aspects of their lived experiences and draw common themes among some and identify dramatic differences in how students of similar profile arrived to where they are through varying paths.

As the researcher, decisions made throughout the data gathering process, from methodological decisions regarding the subject matter discussed in the interviews to the selection of the criteria for participation in the study, limit the findings and narrative of this study to the confines of these choices. While the decisions were made consistent with the findings of previous research, unique parts of the college choice process specific to some students may have been inadvertently omitted from the interview conversation as a result of these limitations.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study, as well as the recommendations for practice, suggest the need for continued research on how first generation college students come to access higher education, the role their parents play in getting them there, and level of support desired once they arrive. The themes that were discovered as a result of this study were surprising to me, and several of them left me wanting to know more about how participants arrived at their way of thinking. Additionally, several themes prompted questions regarding how experiences in these students' lives may have contributed to certain personality traits and consequently allowed students to overcome obstacles and hardships that they have face throughout their lives.

Based on the findings of this study, there are a number of areas of future inquiry that could prove to be beneficial in better understanding how first generation college students come to access higher education and the role their parents play either directly or indirectly related to the activities associated with the process. First, additional research is needed regarding the ways

in which parents without a post-secondary degree raise their children. The findings of this study indicated that many of the participants were raised to face the world with an incredibly strong sense of independence, autonomy, and resiliency. Currently, the topic of resiliency or grit is of great interest to researchers and higher education practitioners as it relates to student success; the results of this study may indicate that it may also play a role in how students from underrepresented or otherwise disadvantaged groups may navigate and/or successfully complete the college choice process.

It could be beneficial to better understand how parents influence their students' ability to persevere through the rigor of academia and the challenges and barriers presented throughout the college choice process. This additional inquiry could provide an opportunity for an interdisciplinary study as there are likely sociology or psychology scholars currently studying the impact of child rearing based on varying factors such as educational attainment of parents.

Second, participants of this study discussed the level of support presented by their parents as a critical factor in their ability to navigate the college choice process. Based on this finding, one of the most meaningful ways a parent of a first generation student can assist their student through the college choice process is to serve as an unwavering source of support. At the conclusion of their interviews, a number of participants indicated that they wished their parents had been more supportive throughout the process and taken a more active role in understanding the process that their students were attempting to navigate. It would be interesting to know if parents who were more outwardly and unwaveringly supportive of their student's academic pursuits would have a greater influence on their student's likelihood to attend a college or university, the type of institutions they attend, and/or their success once they begin.

Another interesting finding of this study relates to birth order and the potential psychological correlation between first born or only children and their academic achievement and successful acquisition of scholarship funds and subsequent college matriculation. Of the 20 participants of this study 17 of them identified as either the oldest or only child in their family. Although this finding may be mere coincidence, it could prove to be an interesting indicator in predicting matriculation behavior, academic success, or the acquisition of scholarship awards among prospective first generation college students or prospective college students in general.

One of the limitations of this study is that all of the participants were high academic achievers resulting in their receipt of a scholarship to attend The University of Alabama. It would be interesting to replicate the current study with first generation, freshman non-scholarship recipients to evaluate potential differences in the role of parents in their college choice process. It would also be interesting to know if non-scholarship recipients would feel a similar level of pressure to succeed as they would likely be lower academic achievers from high school than the current participants.

Additionally, many of the participants who identified as the oldest or only child in their family expressed a heightened pressure to succeed as they were taking on a task without precedent in their family and did not want to attempt the task of attending a college or university only to be unsuccessful once they arrived. This conclusion is consistent with research of students who identified as part of the millennial generation (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). It may be worth further inquiry to explore whether or not this heightened pressure to succeed could serve as a predictor of matriculation and/or future student success.

Finally, a number of study participants said that they developed ambitious career trajectories at a young age. It would be interesting to know if students who develop a career path

early in life are more likely to follow through with earning the necessary credential to achieve that career goal than those who enter college without a clear career goal.

Future of the Framework

The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice served as the theoretical framework for this study. The distinct phases of the model informed the development of the guiding research questions, structure of the interview protocol, development of themes that were created as a result of data analysis, and presentation of results. The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model has served as the seminal work regarding the understanding of the college choice process of students.

Although the model is now 30 years old, it still seems to capture the essence of how students come to decide whether or not to pursue post-secondary education and their subsequent navigation of the college choice process. The model provides definitive benchmarks of achievement necessary before progressing to the next phase and allows for a great deal of individual flexibility in how and when a student negotiates his or her way through the application and admissions process.

I anticipate the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model will continue to serve as a formative and foundational model for future college choice scholars to utilize while further developing more customized and specific models of a predictive nature to better understand the behavior of different groups of potential students. College and university recruitment has evolved over the years in its use of student data to develop predictive modeling techniques that inform the recruitment strategies employed by enrollment management administrators. While the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model remains relevant and foundational to the study of college choice, technology has provided administrators with access to a vast array of resources to build

customized recruitment plans for students based on considerable data points about their individual academic and social profile.

Researcher Reflection

After careful reflection on the results of this study and the review of existing literature I found many of the outcomes to be surprising. Previous studies on the topic of parental involvement have found that parents have played an integral role in their student's college choice process (College Board & Art & Science Group, 2007; Noel-Levitz, 2009). In many cases, students have expressed satisfaction with the level of involvement of their parents throughout major decisions in their lives with many students indicating that they wish their parents had been more involved. This was not the case for the majority of the participants of this study.

Throughout the data collection process, many of the participants were satisfied with their parents playing a more passive role throughout the process. As presented in chapter four, most of the participants self-identified as independent and autonomous individuals and expressed a feeling of pride as a direct result of this character trait. It is possible that the intrinsic satisfaction associated with having completed their college choice process on their own reinforced the sense of pride related to their independence.

Technology also played an essential role in all phases of these students' college choice process. Having access to quality information directly from institutional sources may have decreased a need for these students to engage their parents more in their choice process. In a way, access to the Internet and digital communication platforms may have replaced some of the traditional information gathering involvement that parents would have customarily played.

Although the participants of this study may not have disclosed a substantial level of involvement by their parents in achieving the benchmarks associated with their college choice process, they did identify their parents as considerable sources of support. Feeling supported was identified as an important aspect of their overall decision to navigate through the process and ultimately matriculate at The University of Alabama. Parental involvement may have transformed as students and technology have evolved, but the presence of support and care by these participants' parents remained an important influence on their accessing higher education.

Summary

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to better understand the role of parents in the college choice process of freshman, first generation scholarship recipients at The University of Alabama, a four-year, public research university. The findings of this study reflect the stories and journey through the college choice process of 20 students. Although participants shared a similar generational status and residency, each presented unique relationships with their parents and life experiences that shaped not only the people they have become but how they have come to now share a common experience with each other.

This study represents a small sample of students at a single institution but supports the importance of understanding the experiences of these students to inform the practices of institutional decision-makers in reaching these students. Although the sample size was small, it represented a wide and diverse range of different cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and sexual orientation differences among a singular population group.

Despite the obstacles that these students faced, they were all able to achieve a significant goal that will likely shape the future of their families for generations by gaining access to a post-secondary education. Specifically, the findings of this study provide both researchers and

practitioners with additional information regarding the unique challenges facing first generation college students as they navigate the college choice process. These data should be used to shape future research on how to best serve this population of students and inform future practice of administrators to ensure that the unique needs of these students are being met.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

1. Describe what it means to you to be a first generation college student.
2. Do you remember when you first decided that you were interested in pursuing post-secondary attendance?
 - a. Did your parent(s) talk about you attending college during your childhood?
 - b. Were your parents involved in your K-12 academic experience? (Did they volunteer at school? Did they help you with homework?)
 - c. Did they encourage or support extracurricular involvement?
3. Were there any people that were influential in your decision to pursue post-secondary attendance?
4. (If parents aren't mentioned as influential) What role did your parent(s) play in your decision to pursue post-secondary attendance?
5. When did you begin to actively seek out information about different institutions?
 - a. What institutions did you research?
 - b. Why did you decide to research those particular institutions?
 - c. Did your parent(s) have any influence over what institutions you sought information about?
6. What were your main sources of information about the institutions?
 - a. If your parent(s) were involved at this point of the process, were there sources of information that they found particularly important?

7. Did anyone help you through the information gathering process?
 - a. If parents aren't mentioned: What role did your parent(s) play in your information gathering process?
8. What information did you find most valuable? (personal conversations, mail pieces, emails, social media)
9. Did you go on a campus visit?
 - a. If so, did your parent(s) go with you?
 - b. If so, what types of questions did they ask (if any)?
 - c. If not, why did you decide not to visit the campus of the institutions you were considering?
10. When did you begin the application process?
 - a. How many schools did you apply to?
 - b. What schools did you apply to?
 - c. Why did you choose to apply to those schools?
 - d. What role, if any, did your parent(s) play in determining which schools to apply to?
11. How important were finances in determining whether or not to apply to those schools?
 - a. What role, if any, did your parent(s) play in determining whether or not a school could be considered as a result of cost?
12. How important was the availability of a specific academic program to your decision to apply?
 - a. Did your parent(s) play a role in determining what academic program you were interested in?
13. Did your academic profile (GPA and test scores) limit the schools that you applied to?

14. Did you apply for financial aid?
 - a. Tell me about your experience with the FAFSA.
 - b. What role did your parent(s) play in your completing of the FAFSA?
 - c. Did you apply for additional scholarships other than the Coca Cola/First Generation scholarship program?
 - i. If so, how did you find out about the availability of these scholarships?
 - ii. Did your parent(s) play a role in helping identify scholarship opportunities?
15. How many of the schools that you applied to were you accepted to?
16. Tell me about your process from acceptance to school decision.
 - a. How influential, if at all, were your parent(s) in the decision?
 - b. What factors, if any, were most important to your parent(s) in your final decision?
17. How important was your Coca-Cola or First Generation Scholarship to your decision to attend Alabama?
18. Was there any part of the process that you would have liked additional assistance with?
19. Tell me about your overall perceptions about your parents' involvement in your college choice process?
 - a. Were they too involved or not involved enough?
 - b. Were there parts of the process that you would have liked them to be more involved?
 - i. If so, what parts?
 - ii. If not, why not?

APPENDIX B

List of Participants

Emory	African American female, middle child of three, raised in a single parent household by her mother
Jessica	Asian male, first generation American, oldest of two children, raised in a household by both parents
Matthew	Caucasian male, oldest of three children, raised in a household by both parents
Frank	African American male, only child, raised in a single parent household by his mother
Trisha	Caucasian female, only child, raised in a household by both parents
Hannah	Caucasian female, only child, raised in a household by both parents
Bethany	African American female, oldest of five children, raised in a household by both parents
Mark	Caucasian male, only child, raised in a household by both parents
Darren	Caucasian male, oldest of four children, raised in a household by both parents until they divorced
Erika	Asian male, first generation American, oldest of two children, raised in a household with both parents
Ronald	Caucasian female, oldest of two children, raised in a household with both parents
Marcus	Caucasian male, only child, raised in a single parent household with his mother
Melinda	Caucasian female, youngest of two children, raised in a household by both parents
Patricia	Caucasian male, oldest of four children, raised in a household with his mother and stepfather
Laura	Caucasian female, oldest of two children, parents divorced when she was 10, she was later adopted by her grandfather as a result of her parents' addiction struggles
John	Bi-racial male, oldest of three children, raised in a household with both parents until they divorced when he was 4 or 5, he and his sibling then lived with his mother until he was in 10 th grade when he went to live with his grandmother
Lyndsey	African American female, youngest of two children, raised in a household by both parents
Rachel	Caucasian female, oldest of three children, raised in a household by both parents
Haley	Bi-racial female, oldest of two children, raised in a household by both parents
Alex	Caucasian female, only child, raised in a household by both parents

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval

July 26, 2016

Ronald Hebert
ELPTS
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 16-OR-260 "The College Choice Process: A Qualitative Review of the Role of Parental Influence in Freshmen, First Generation Scholarship Recipients' Access of Higher Education"

Dear Mr. Hebert:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. You have also been granted the requested waivers of parental permission and informed consent. 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 July 25, 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 Study Closure Form.

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

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,