

THE ROLE OF SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS IN COLLEGE CHOICE: A QUALITATIVE
EXPLORATION OF FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to gain a better understanding of how socioeconomic status influences college choice of first generation college students. Three overarching goals guide the research inquiry: To gain knowledge of how the college search process differs for first generation college students; to better understand how financial factors, such as socioeconomic status, influence the eventual college choice of first generation college students; and to apply knowledge and understanding of the college search and selection process for first generation college students with the intent of providing support, opportunities, resources, and programming for this student population they might not otherwise receive. This dissertation is guided by four research questions: What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role or purpose of higher education; What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the influence of socioeconomic status – as defined by the combination of the parent/guardian’s education, income, and occupation – in their decision to pursue higher education; What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role of socioeconomic status in navigating their college search and selection process; and What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role socioeconomic status played in their ultimate college choice? This research is grounded in Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice by evaluating the first generation college students’ choice through three distinct phases (predisposition, search, and choice).

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of Study.....	6
Significance of Study.....	10
Research Questions.....	12
Summary and Organization of Study.....	13
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
First Generation College Students.....	15
Who are first generation college students in America?.....	16
Family Background	19
Social Background	22
Socioeconomic Status	24
The College Choice Process.....	27
Three-Phase Model of College Choice.....	37
Other Models of College Choice.....	41

Model of College Choice	41
Model of College Choice Refined	43
A Conceptual Model of College Choice	47
Social Reproduction	49
Cultural Capital	51
Social Capital	55
Summary	61
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	62
Research Questions	64
Research Design	64
Setting and Site Selection	67
The University of Alabama	68
Site Access	70
Participant Selection	70
Legacy Scholars Program	71
Participants	73
Data Collection	75
Data Analysis	77
Researcher Positionality	78
Trustworthiness	81
Limitations of the Study	82
Summary	83

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS.....	84
Themes.....	85
Researcher Notes.....	85
Independence.....	86
Determination.....	88
Motivation to Succeed.....	90
Self-Sufficiency.....	92
Attending College was the Next Step.....	95
Dreaming of College at an Early Age.....	96
Committed to College No Matter the Circumstances.....	98
Support.....	102
The Role of High School Guidance Counselor(s).....	103
The Role of University Personnel.....	106
The Role of Sibling(s).....	108
The Role of Parent(s)/Guardian(s).....	109
Researching Higher Education	113
Internet.....	115
Campus Visits.....	117
The Role of Financials.....	121
Cost is Not an Issue.....	122
Researching the Cost of College.....	125
The Ultimate College Choice.....	127
Summary.....	130

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	132
Discussion of Findings.....	132
Research Question 1.....	132
Research Question 2.....	134
Research Question 3.....	136
Research Question 4.....	138
Limitations.....	140
Recommendations for Practice.....	142
Recommendations for Students.....	142
Recommendations for Colleges and Universities.....	145
Recommendations for High School Guidance Counselor(s)	147
Recommendations for Future Research.....	148
The Level of Support Provided by the Parent(s)/Guardian(s).....	149
The Relationship with the High School Guidance Counselor(s).....	150
The Role of the Campus Visit.....	151
Future of the Framework.....	152
Researcher Reflection.....	153
Summary.....	155
REFERENCES.....	157
APPENDIX A INTERVIEW PROTOCOL.....	162
APPENDIX B IRB APPROVAL.....	165

LIST OF TABLES

1. List of Participants.....	75
2. Data Collection Timeline.....	77

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Average Published Tuition and Fees in 2018 Dollars by Sector, 1988-89 to 2018-19.....	3
2. A Three Phase Model of College Choice.....	41
3. A Model of Student College Choice.....	43
4. An Expanded Model of the College Selection Process.....	46
5. Proposed Conceptual Model of Student College Choice	49
6. Total Student Enrollment at The University of Alabama from Fall 2002 to Fall 2018....	70

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Education in America has become synonymous with “the American way of life” (Lazerson, 2010, p. 13). Regarded as one of the great American wonders, higher education helps fuel aspirations for educated citizens who desire upward mobility in social rankings. The desire to expand educational opportunities is aimed at generating higher income returns and increasing access to professions later in life. Now, students are overcoming more obstacles than ever before in an attempt to achieve successes in hopes of living out the American dream.

It is the accessibility to American higher education and the flexibility of student access that makes an education obtained from a college or university so highly prized and sought after. But has this highly prized and sought-after education from a college or university become more competitive to attain for citizens? Has all this global attention and an ardent desire to obtain a baccalaureate degree made it more difficult for citizens to achieve? The answer is no. However, changes to the field of higher education continue to impact who can enroll in a college or university in the United States, making it more difficult for individuals to expand their educational opportunities further decreasing their odds of attaining upward social mobility.

The field higher education continues to evolve and be impacted by several external factors, including but not limited to financial, political, and social and cultural factors. While some of the changes stemming from these external factors are for the better, other factors are hindering the continued growth and expansion of the landscape of higher education in the

United States, thus hindering the country's future economic prosperity. The primary objective of higher education is viewed as fulfilling the purpose of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all. One of the greatest concerns the field of higher education currently faces stems from financial concerns – higher education is no longer accessible and attainable and affordable for all, especially for those students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students.

Statement of Problem

The price of a college education continues to place financial burdens on students and their families, and with the continued rising costs of tuition at colleges and universities across the country, it is easy to understand why so many families are struggling with the decision of whether to send a child to a college or university. In a recent study conducted by the College Board, the total yearly published cost for tuition and fees at an in-state four-year public institution is approximately \$10,230. Between the 2008-2009 and 2018-2019 academic years, the average yearly published cost for tuition and fees at four-year public institutions rose by approximately \$2,670. The same study revealed this cost increases at an average rate of 3.2% annually beyond the inflation rate (Trends in Higher Education, 2017, retrieved from https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2017-trends-in-college-pricing_1.pdf).

Tuition and Fees Over Time



Figure 1: Average Published Tuition and Fees in 2018 Dollars by Sector, 1988-89 to 2018-19. Retrieved from <https://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/tuition-fees-room-board-over-time>.

It is not surprising at all that students and their families are asking themselves, “Is college really worth it?”. It is nearly impossible to turn on the TV, surf the Internet, or read a daily copy of the newspaper without encountering a report on the drastic rising costs of college tuition. As the costs associated with attending a college or university continue to rise annually, the primary purpose and objective of higher education is beginning to look like more and more of a dream for so many disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students, as opposed to a reality.

The students who are most affected by the continued rising costs of tuition at colleges and universities across the country are often the students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations because the hefty price tags associated with the pursuit of higher education are too daunting to comprehend.

However, students from these backgrounds are continuing to evolve the makeup of higher education population. And much of the diverse makeup of undergraduate students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations stems from first generation college students.

First generation college students are defined as students whose parents have “no more than a high-school education” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004, p. 275). The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) defines first generation college students as those “who are the first in their family to attend college” (NASPA, 2019). For the purpose of this research study, first generation college students will be defined according to NASPA, with the exception of the usage of a hyphen between first and generation. The decision to refer to these students as first generation, as opposed to first-generation, college students is in accordance with The University of Alabama’s definition of this student population. When referencing traditional first generation college students throughout this research study, traditional is used to define a first generation college student who is matriculating to college for the first time immediately following the summer after high school graduation.

The decision to send a child to college might be an easy decision given the opportunities a college education can provide throughout one’s life. However, it is the financial burdens associated with attending a college or university placed on the students and their families that make the decision so difficult. This decision is even more daunting for first generation college students, who often come from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations. The Economic Policy Institute in Washington released a study in 2013 stating that on average, college graduates with a baccalaureate degree earn 98% more an hour than their counterparts (Leonhardt, *The New York Times*, 2014). Figures such as

these reveal the financial struggles first generation college students face because on average, their parents' lack of education limits the earning potential, thus reducing the amounts of funds available to pay for higher education.

The likelihood of a student enrolling in postsecondary education increases as the parents' education level increases. The parents' education level is only one factor contributing to a student's postsecondary enrollment – other factors include educational expectations, peer influence, academic preparation, family income, and parental involvement. However, it is the parents' education level – having a bachelor's degree – that has the most significant impact on the likelihood of a child's postsecondary enrollment (Choy, 2001). It is the parents' lack of a higher education that significantly reduces their child's, the first generation college student, likelihood of enrolling in a college or university.

Many first generation college students are not only lacking the financial resources needed to obtain a baccalaureate degree, but these same students are facing other difficulties when it comes to obtaining a baccalaureate degree – lacking adequate academic training and preparation to progress to the post-secondary level of education – leaving them at a large disadvantage compared to their peers. When compared to peers, first generation college students are often at a disadvantage in regard to general knowledge about the collegiate experience. They lack information surrounding cost, the application process, academic preparation during high school, and educational attainment plans and aspirations. Students whose parents pursued higher education clearly have a distinct advantage over first generation college students, or students with uneducated parents, because students who have educated parents have a better understanding of higher education, its culture, and its operation (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004).

For the students and families who can pull together enough funds to attend college with the goal of obtaining a baccalaureate degree, their goal often ends far too soon. Students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations, including first generation college students, are often not able to obtain the large amount of funds and financial resources necessary to attend college for the entire four years. Additionally, these students are often lacking the prerequisites and educational foundation needed in order to advance their studies. This issue and other similar issues continue to be a growing concern plaguing advocates in the field of higher education, including “social scientists, educators, and policy makers” (An, 2013, p. 407). By identifying these issues and by recognizing how to provide resources to help first generation college students enroll in and graduate from college, social scientists, educators, and policy makers can work to improve academic success of the first generation college student population. An examination of ways in which such resources can be provided will enable researchers and practitioners to look at overcoming these obstacles as an anti-deficit approach – applauding the efforts of those first generation college students who go on to enroll in and graduate from college. As a result of these data, increasing both accessibility and affordability to higher education for first generation college students will continue bringing national attention to the need for support, opportunities, resources, and programming for this student population they might not otherwise receive. Results of the study will add to previously existing knowledge of how socioeconomic status influences college choice of first generation college students, as well as bring greater attention to a higher education issue that needs immediate attention and should become a top priority.

Purpose of Study

Access to higher education has increased within the last several years due to the lowering of demographic and socioeconomic barriers of prospective students. The removal of such

barriers has provided the opportunity for almost any high school student to obtain enrollment into some portion of the higher education system. However, because of institutional stratification, access is not completely open to all. Today's barriers lie with where a high school graduate can attend, as opposed to whether or not the high school graduate can actually attend college (Hearn, 1991). Even with the diverse institution types across the country, higher concentrations of wealthy students at highly selective colleges still exist creating inequality between the "haves" and the "have nots" (Bastedo and Jaquette, 2017).

Even though higher education claims to be both equally accessible and affordable for all, evidence still exists today of institutional differentiation. Higher education institutions in America are organized by disciplines, which "are unequal with respect to power, prestige, and economic payoffs" (Davies and Guppy, 1997, p. 1419). Three main processes provide an explanation into the stratification by class within higher education: middle-class and high-class students are more academically successful than their counterparts because of their resources, preparatory education, and advantages at home; affluent students have greater access to the best schools because they are not hindered with high tuition fees; and class differences create discrepancies in knowledge about higher education. Additionally, students from high socioeconomic households who have access to more cultural resources are more likely to enroll in selective institutions, thus contributing to the continued stratification by class within higher education (Davies and Guppy, 1997). Until change is implemented, accessibility and affordability to higher education will not be equal for all. The institutional stratification will continue, especially for students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations such as first generation college students who are more likely to attend institutions with lower-selectivity, as well as lower-spending institutions.

The field of higher education accounts for 40 percent of the total education expenditures within the United States. Therefore, it is important to understand how a student's college choice impacts the labor market and helps one to better understand the role of human capital. When selecting a college, a student moves through a series of three events: the student decides the set of colleges to apply to for admission; each college independently decides whether to admit or reject the student; and the student, with one's parents, decides which college or university to attend from the subset of colleges that admitted the student (Dale and Krueger, 2002).

Students are more knowledgeable about their own academic potential, compared to the collegiate admissions decision committee. Based on the schools the student applies to, the student reveals one's potential ability – this is known as the student “self-revelation” model (Dale and Krueger, 2002, p. 1499). Students, along with their families, ultimately decide on the top college choice to attend from a list of options.

Fit is important for students and their families when selecting a college. It is important for students and their families to consider the collegiate fit of the school they eventually attend. The biggest concern of the second phase of the series of three events stems from the admittance of students from higher social backgrounds. Elite colleges and universities are more likely to admit a student who has a background with higher earnings and a higher earning capacity, thus eliminating the opportunity for students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, such as first generation college students to enroll. These students are not able to decide on a school based on fit raising the question of which college is best for whom? (Dale and Krueger, 2002).

Students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations are much more likely to be forced to choose lower-spending, less prestigious

institutions, as opposed to choosing the institution of their choice. Additionally, first generation college students with less educated, low-income parents are much more likely to attend lower-selectivity institutions. Even if these students were high academic achievers in high school with promising academic ability at the collegiate level, the parents' education level and parental income are more likely to influence the eventual college selection of the first generation college student completely negating the college or university that is the best fit for them (Hearn, 1991).

Students from the affluent and most privileged socioeconomic origins eventually attend the most famous and prestigious private schools. These same students are those who are more likely to serve in top business, financial, and political roles during their professional careers. Students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations are seldom presented with opportunities to enroll in selective institutions, notably the most famous and prestigious institutions. There are instances of first generation college students and students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations enrolling in highly-selective and high-spending prestigious institutions. However, when these students capable of doing so, it is sporadic and primarily because of their high-achieving academic ability (Davies and Guppy, 1997).

If higher education is going to fulfill its primary objective and purpose of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all, why are students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students, continuing to struggle with equal acceptance to all institution types? When these students are accepted, they are often struggling to remain enrolled in school and cannot find the financial means and resources to survive over the course of their four undergraduate years. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explain how first generation

college students perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice.

Significance of Study

The field of higher education is currently facing several areas of concern: accessibility, increasing amounts of student loan debt, competency-based education, and workforce development. While each of the aforementioned areas should be addressed, one of the biggest concerns the field of higher education is currently facing is how a student's background affects where one attends college and ultimately if the student is able to attend college at all.

A student's path to postsecondary enrollment consists of five sequential steps: the student decides if and what type of postsecondary education to pursue; the student academically prepares for college-level coursework; the student takes a standardized test (if they plan to enroll at a four-year institution); the student chooses institutions and submit applications; and the student gains admittance to a higher education institution. Parental involvement, along with financial resources, serves as a key determinant in a student's preparation for college. Parental involvement in college choice and college planning activities was associated with higher post-secondary enrollment rates (Choy, 2001).

For equal opportunity and accessibility to be one of the primary goals of higher education, changes must be implemented to increase enrollment diversity and retention of students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, especially specific student populations such as first generation college students. Educational attainment is directly linked to academic rigor – the more rigorous the academic preparation during secondary education, the more likely it is that the student will obtain a bachelor's degree. It is the role of educators to make adjustments early on in a child's academic

career and to be keenly aware of the needs for more academic rigor in both the elementary and secondary classrooms college (Harrell and Forney, 2003).

The key question educators should be asking is “How are we preparing students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students, for college?” Coming from a higher family income background translates to students having access to more materials and experiences than those from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, such as first generation college students. It is important to note that not all first generation college students come from lower family income backgrounds. However, a large majority of first generation college students generally have lower levels of education, which translates to a minimal understanding of the college selection process. The lower the level of income, the less likely it is for the parents and the student to fully understand the collegiate search and eventual decision process, the collegiate admissions process, and the costs associated with attending college (Harrell and Forney, 2003).

If students from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations are not afforded the opportunity to enroll in a higher education institution, it is imperative to understand why. A lack of financial resources contributes to the overall hindrance of obtaining a baccalaureate degree for first generation college students. Additionally, the lack of other various external resources decreases their accessibility to higher education. Higher education professionals are not be able to measure retention and graduation rates of first generation college students if they cannot even enroll. To increase the enrollment of first generation college students in higher education institutions across the United States, financial funding should be increased for this student population and others with the intent of helping to

offset or pay the cost of tuition at colleges and universities across the country, which continues to steadily increase each year. Additionally, to improve both college readiness and academic success of first generation college students, we need to provide students with a solid educational foundation prior to their entrance into higher education (Iatarola et al. as cited in An, 2013). Further research such as this study is needed to educate higher education scholars and practitioners on ways to implement an anti-deficit approach through both the discovery and implementation of interventions to meet the unique and everchanging needs of first generation college students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the inquiry into better understanding how first generation college students perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their college choice:

1. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role or purpose of higher education?
2. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the influence of socioeconomic status – as defined by the combination of the parent/guardian’s education, income, and occupation – in their decision to pursue higher education?
3. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role of socioeconomic status in navigating their college search and selection process?

4. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role socioeconomic status played in their ultimate college choice?

Summary and Organization of Study

While first generation college students are continuing to diversify enrollment in higher education institutions across the country, this student population group continues to be underrepresented. If colleges and universities across the country want to continue to fulfill their primary objective of providing higher education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all, higher education researchers and practitioners must dedicate their time, energy, and resources to understanding how socioeconomic status influences college choice of first generation college students.

This study is categorized into five chapters and aims to contribute to the pre-existing field of scholarship in the areas of first generation college students, socioeconomic status, and college choice. Chapter one served as an introduction to and statement of the problem and presented the four primary research questions that will drive this inquiry. Chapter two will serve as a review of the pre-existing literature on first generation college students, how socioeconomic status impacts the lives of first generation college students, and an overall exploration of the college choice selection process. Chapter three will provide the methodology chosen for this study and will help to further explain the design of the research study. Chapters four and five will present both the findings and the discussion of the research study. Additionally, these chapters will provide recommendations for further practice informed by these data, limitations of the study, and the conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with an overview of first generation college students, including an exploration of their family, social, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Next, the chapter will introduce a historical review of literature surrounding the college choice process. The purpose of this literature review is to provide a review of historical literature, which seeks to better understand how first generation college students identify and select their college of choice. Lastly, the chapter will introduce cultural capital and social capital.

The intent of this chapter is to introduce pre-existing scholarship in the fields of first generation college students, socioeconomic status, and college choice. The introduction of these concepts will be synthesized utilizing Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice as the theoretical framework of choice for the current study. The goal of the current study is to examine how socioeconomic status played a role in the college choice of first generation college students. The following four research questions seek to examine the experiences of these first generation college students at a large, state public institution, The University of Alabama, and guided this dissertation:

1. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role or purpose higher education?
2. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the influence of socioeconomic status – as defined by the

combination of the parent/guardian's education, income, and occupation – in their decision to pursue higher education?

3. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role of socioeconomic status in navigating their college search and selection process?
4. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role socioeconomic status played in their ultimate college choice?

First Generation College Students

For a large number of high school graduates in the United States, the next logical progression for them is to enroll in a college or university. For years, the obtainment of a college degree “and the associated personal, social, and economic benefits” that come with it has been considered a definite part of the American Dream (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1995, p. 1). With over 18 million students enrolled in postsecondary education in fall 2017, it appears that higher education is continuing to fulfill its primary purpose of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all. However, even with such a large enrollment number, in fall 2017, postsecondary enrollments for all sectors of higher education in the United States decreased one percent from the previous fall (2016), which was down 1.4 percent from the previous fall (2015) (Term Enrollment Estimates, 2017, retrieved from <https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollment-Fall2017a.pdf>). These data raise the question of why are enrollments at colleges and universities continuing to decrease? Are the declines attributed to a lack of accessibility, due to financial burdens associated with the cost of attending college? Or are the declines attributed to a lack of college

preparation and readiness?

While higher education enrollment trends continue to be on the decline, the overall student population of colleges and universities continues to increase and diversify. As the makeup of higher education continues to evolve, much of the diversity of the overall student population can be attributed to first generation college students (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007). This introduction of first generation college students will describe their backgrounds and further explore a student population that could possibly be key to the reversal of enrollment trends in colleges and universities.

Who are first generation colleges students in America?

At first glance, first generation college students are not very different than their counterparts. Both student types are products of the American K-12 education system and have prepared for college in a similar fashion. They have completed assignments, both written and verbal, completed group projects, and taken standardized tests. At the surface, first generation college students very closely mirror their peers, or so it seems.

Students enter college for the first time with a range of emotions, including excitement, nervousness, and anxiety. First generation college students are no stranger to those same emotions. Defined as a student “whose parents have not completed a college degree program” (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007, p. 963) or a student “whose parents had no more than a high-school education” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004, p. 275), first generation college students, too, experience all the same emotions – fears, anxieties, and difficulties – upon entering college. However, their emotions often stem from other places and often involve a cultural component, as well as social and academic transitions (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1995).

First generation college students are more likely to come from low income, or low socioeconomic backgrounds, including disadvantaged and underrepresented population groups. They also tend to be a few years older than the traditional aged first-time freshmen when they first enroll in a college or university. (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Prior to their enrollment in college, first generation college students are less likely to receive support from family members when deciding to attend college (Ishitani, 2003).

Compared to first generation college students, non-first generation college students usually have higher standardized test scores and have taken more rigorous high school courses (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Students whose parents have a minimum of a bachelor's degree are more likely to come from higher family income backgrounds and are more likely to have higher grade point averages (Harrell and Forney, 2003). In addition to lower test scores, GPAs, and less rigorous high school coursework, first generation college students are also more likely to have weaker cognitive skills, lower critical thinking skills, have lower degree aspirations, and have been less involved previously with teachers, counselors and administrators during their four high school years (Ishitani, 2003). Overall, first generation college students come to college less well-prepared than non-first generation college students (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1995).

First generation college students are already at a disadvantage in terms of pursuing higher education in America beginning with the collegiate search and selection process. They are less likely to be knowledgeable about the collegiate experience and cannot rely on relatives to share with them first-hand details about college finances and budget management and the operations of higher education. First generation college students are often unable to navigate the college search and selection process because they are struggling to find their own collegiate culture.

They are often negotiating how to incorporate college into their lives at home with those who know little to nothing about the topic. Additionally, first generation colleges students struggle to find balance and harmony often created by tensions the discussion of pursuing higher education brings (Thayer, 2000).

For the first generation college students who are fortunate enough to attend college, they often bring “background characteristics that differed” from non-first generation college students, including both in-class (instructional and curricular) and out-of-class experiences, with them (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1995, p. 13). These “background characteristics” tend to translate to different perceptions of the same institution, when compared to their counterparts.

A large majority of first generation colleges students work full time while enrolled to help pay, or offset, the costs associated with attending college (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007). For those first generation college students working a job, even part-time, they often find themselves struggling to balance all priorities and requirements and tend to spend “fewer hours studying” (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1995, p. 13). Once the first generation college students enter their collegiate years, they are much more likely to face obstacles – psychological and emotional – and are more likely to have higher levels of anxiety due to the stressful changes and situations associated with attending college. As a result, these students are much more likely to encounter negative experiences during their collegiate years. Demands – both academic and non-academic – hinder the opportunity for first generation college students to experience all college has to offer (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1995).

During the collegiate years, first generation college students spend less time socializing with peers and collegiate faculty and staff, often because they do not understand the importance of relationships and mentorships, especially faculty mentorships, to their successes (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1995). Once a first generation college student has enrolled in college, together, academic integration and social integration increase the likelihood that the student will become acclimated to collegiate life and increase the likelihood of the return for a second academic year (Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Family Background

College participation rates among high school students in the United States has increased drastically from nine percent in 1939 to 66 percent in 2006. This great increase is not attributed to only one social class. Instead, this great increase is attributed to all social classes, thus creating a more diverse population in American higher education. While it appears that higher education is continuing to fulfill its primary purpose of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all, there is a catch. Over the last several decades students from all social classes, or family backgrounds, have seen a rise in their college enrollment rates (An, 2010). However, their access to all institution types is limited, thus once again limiting accessibility to higher education and creating yet another barrier to their educational pursuits.

Postsecondary institutions continue to be called upon to educate an increasingly diverse student population with many varied characteristics and backgrounds (Ishitani, 2003). While the diversity in higher education is now more evident than ever, it is the diversity among college selectivity that is greatest. Enrollment in colleges and universities across institutional type (four-year public, four-year private nonprofit, four-year for-profit, and two-year public) differs based on the student's family background. Students from disadvantaged and underrepresented family

backgrounds, such as first generation college students, are more likely to enroll in a two-year public college or a less selective college or university than students from high income family backgrounds. An's (2010) research study on the impact of family background on college selectivity concluded that the disparity among college attendance differs greatly based on the student's family background (An, 2010).

It is unfortunate, but first generation students who come from low income family backgrounds are often stigmatized in the classroom. Another An (2012) research study, this time studying family background's influence on college readiness, found that factors such as family background at the high school level are negatively utilized by the affluent class with the intent of separating themselves from the lower classes (students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students) both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Families in the United States are struggling with the decision of whether to send a child to college for higher education studies. Affluent and high income families are not exempt from the decision, but they are more likely to have the financial means necessary to send a child to college. They often have access to the resources needed to ensure their child pursues higher education. However, first generation college students and other students from impoverished and low income family backgrounds are not afforded with such a luxury.

For first generation college students, family background greatly influences how the student approaches the decision to pursue higher education. An's (2010) study surrounding family background, race, and where students apply to college revealed that the amount of investment and the level of investment put forth by the child's parent(s) influences a child's college decision. An (2012) discussed two types of investment, economic and intentional, put

forth for the college bound child by the family. Economic investments in a child's pursuit of higher education are the financial resources, including but not limited to savings accounts and 529 plans, put forth by the parent(s) for the purpose of paying for the child's college education. Intentional investments in the child's pursuit of higher education include the time and commitment dedicated to helping a student with the college search and selection process (An, 2010).

An (2010) recently discovered economic investments are more positively associated with child's educational attainment – students whose parents provided financial assistance in the form of economic investments during the first year of enrollment in an American college or university were 49 percent more likely to return for the second year of study. Additionally, An (2010) discovered that the amount of income earned annually is an influencer in the child's eventual higher educational decision, as well. Defined as an interactional involvement, the relationship between the student and the parent is important to the decision to pursue higher education. Students from affluent and high income family backgrounds were found to be more likely to transmit information, share resources and information, and provide aid during the college search and selection process. These students tended to enroll in four-year colleges and universities, compared to first generation college students from low income family backgrounds who tended to enroll in two-year colleges (An, 2010).

An's (2010) final significant contribution to understanding the relationship between family background and college choice revealed parental education strongly influences the family background of college bound students. For the first generation college students in the United States, they are not only lacking the financial funds, or economic investment, but they are also lacking the intentional involvement, which plays a key role in the decision to pursue higher

education. Educated parents have experienced the college transition process and have a better understanding of the steps involved in one's college choice. They are able to share their knowledge and experiences with their children. First generation college students and other students from disadvantaged and underrepresented family backgrounds are at risk of ever enrolling in a college or university, much less ever achieving successes, both personal and academic, at the collegiate level (An, 2010).

Social Background

Many recognize education as the key to success in America. Scholars and politicians have long agreed that educational attainment opens the door to social mobility and one's well-being. As access to higher education has continued to increase across a more diverse population, more students, including first generation college students, are now being afforded with the opportunity to pursue some form of higher education in the United States. While these students are pursuing higher education at higher rates than ever before, students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations are not reaching the same levels of education attainment in their early school years. As a result, first generation college students and students from these populations are not always granted acceptance to their first college choice. Instead, they are forced to choose their safety school (Mangino, 2012).

Bol, Witschge, Van de Werfhorst, and Dronkers's (2014) research explored how social background impacted student achievement prior to college search and entry through the implementation of curricular tracking. Curricular tracking, or the sorting of students into different educational tracks, at the primary and secondary educational levels has long been recognized as the strongest indicator of student academic achievement. When students are placed into a large number of different educational tracks at an early age, the impact of the

student's social background is more easily identifiable because of key discrepancies in two areas of education: achievement and attainment. One mechanism, the social selection mechanism, is the way in which social background influences the educational track where a student is placed. A second mechanism theorizes that factors such as socio-psychological aspects, resources available, and means of instruction help students to show greater gains in learning when placed in a certain educational track. When these mechanisms are in place at the primary and secondary education levels, it is much easier to recognize the differences among social backgrounds, especially if students from low-income social backgrounds are placed in an educational track where they do not have the appropriate support and resources at home (Bol, Witschge, Van de Werfhorst, and Dronkers, 2014). Recognizing the impact social background plays on education achievement and educational attainment even in the early educational years is key to identifying ways to reduce division among students, such as curricular tracking, with the intent providing support, opportunities, resources, and programming for specific student populations, first generation college students, they might not otherwise receive.

Mare's (1980) research study revealed how social background impacts school continuation decisions. Identifying the key role educational attainment plays on college choice depends heavily on one's family structure, as well as on the family's social background. The parents' social background significantly impacts the child's college attendance, and both socioeconomic and financial factors affect the student's continuation of education past the secondary level. Parental characteristics with respect to family origins and social background influence a student's decision to pursue higher education. The benefits of being raised in a family from a more affluent, or prestigious social background, increases the likelihood of school continuation past high school. Additionally, parental encouragement strongly affects

continuation decisions from high school to the university level in the United States (Mare, 1980).

A 2003 longitudinal study conducted by Ishitani explored pre-college characteristics, mainly social background, and their influence on attrition behaviors among first generation college students. The key finding of Ishitani's (2003) study revealed that high-risk students, such as first generation college students, had higher instances of academic departure than low-risk students, non-first generation college students. First generation college students were also less likely to be retained from one academic year to the next (Ishitani, 2003). Similar research conducted by Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007) also found one of the key determining factors of academic persistence. Their research revealed the continuation of higher education is most accurately predicted for the students who have college educated parents. The parents' education level(s) is important and is associated with success in higher education.

Socioeconomic Status

Most recently, higher education in America has been associated only with the rich and the wealthy. Higher education institutions have catered to those students and families from middle to high socioeconomic status backgrounds. However, with the changing landscape of higher education, the focus has shifted – higher education is becoming more socially inclusive as a whole (Ramburuth and Hartel, 2010). Yet, as the costs associated with attending a college or university continue to rise annually in the future, the landscape of higher education will no longer change by becoming more and more diverse.

Higher education is costly because it requires tuition and additional charges and fees not required for public school. And with the continued rising costs of tuition at colleges and universities across the country, it is easy to identify why students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations, such as first generation college students, who lack the financial

means to pursue higher education fail to continue their educational pursuits past high school. If the average yearly published cost for tuition and fees in the United States continues to increase annually, higher education will continue to remain inaccessible for first generation college students and other students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, thus further widening the educational gap for the haves (high socioeconomic status) and have nots (low socioeconomic status) in the United States.

Socioeconomic status is defined by one's "social standing or class" and is "often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation" (American Psychological Association, 2016). According to Okioga (2013), an individual's socioeconomic status is determined by a combination of three key factors: household income, earners' education, and earners' occupation. Typically broken into three categories (high, middle, and low), Okioga (2013) defined socioeconomic status as a combined total measure of one's ecological and sociological experiences.

Families from high socioeconomic backgrounds typically have more access to resources and programming that support development, including cognitive and learning development. Okioga's (2013) research concluded that students from high socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be prepared academically. These students have often been provided with books, toys, and high-quality care at home and in various activities throughout their lives encouraging both learning and development. One's social class, ethnicity, and housing/neighborhood were also found to affect access to these resources, thus impacting one's enrichment or deprivation. The key conclusion from Okioga's (2013) research revealed students from low socioeconomic status families, including first generation college students, often lack financial, social, and educational support systems to provide to their children, and as a result, children from these

populations are often not adequately prepared for primary and secondary schooling, much less prepared for the pursuit of higher education.

Similar to Okioga's (2013) study, Ramburuth and Hartel (2010) conducted research with the intent of understanding how to meet the needs of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. With the goal of identifying how to address changes for a more socially inclusive higher education population in America, Ramburuth and Hartel (2010) discovered students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, such as first generation college students, are more likely to have had little formal schooling. These same students are more likely to have poor literacy and mathematical skills and poor study skills. Additionally, they are more likely to be less college ready, or less adequately prepared for higher education.

The same study conducted by Ramburuth and Hartel (2010) revealed students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are not able to identify themselves as able learners as easily as their counterparts, students from high socioeconomic status backgrounds. It is important for students to develop their own strong learner identity prior to enrolling in postsecondary institutions because their self-recognized identity serves as a "key precursor to their participation in higher education" (Ramburuth and Hartel, 2010, p. 156).

Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds often face three major inequalities in their pursuit of higher education: they attend college in fewer instances; they complete college at lower rates; and they attend more selective schools much less, often more generally attending regional, public four-year institutions. Tuition and fees at colleges and universities across the country are spiraling out of control, and with the ever-growing income inequality in the United States, fewer students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are pursuing higher education. In addition to the three major inequalities students from low socioeconomic

backgrounds are facing in their pursuit of higher education, the “sticker shock” of the total cost of higher education further discourages these students from pursuing higher education. Only one in five students from the bottom socioeconomic quartile attend college, compared to two in every three students from the top socioeconomic quartile (Kahlenberg, 2004).

Once first generation college students and other students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are represented in the higher education student population, they need to be nurtured and provided with extra support to ensure they are retained. The primary objective of higher education is viewed as fulfilling the purpose of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all. If higher education wants to continue to fulfill its purpose, any and all barriers to the pursuit of higher education should be removed. This process can be viewed as a long and daunting process. However, the process is of the essence and starts early in the child’s life at the family and community level and is heavily influenced by socioeconomic status (Ramburuth and Hartel, 2010).

The College Choice Process

The field of higher education accounts for a significant percentage – 40 percent – of education expenditures within the United States (Dale and Krueger, 2002). Therefore, it is important to understand how a student’s college choice impacts the labor market and helps one to better understand the role of human capital.

Access to higher education has continued to increase due to the lowering of demographic and socioeconomic barriers. The removal of such demographic and socioeconomic barriers has now provided the opportunity for almost every high school student to obtain enrollment into some portion of the higher education system. While great strides are being made to continue increasing accessibility to higher education for all, institutional stratification

continues to create barriers for first generation college students, students from low income backgrounds, and students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations. As a result of this widespread institutional stratification, access is still not completely open to all (Hearn, 1991).

Hearn's (1991) research study identified the barriers in existence limiting access to higher education. Barriers no longer lie with if the high school graduate can attend, but the barriers now lie with where can the high school graduate attend? The results of this study revealed lower socioeconomic status students were more likely to attend lower-selective, less prestigious higher education institutions. Additionally, students with less educated parents, such first generation college students, were more likely to attend institutions with lower spending budgets. Hearn (1991) revealed that college choice was greatly influenced by two key factors: father's and/or mother's education and total annual parental income. Even for the high achieving high school graduates with promising academic ability who would go on to be first generation college students, the parents' education level combined with the total annual parental income were more likely to influence the eventual college choice.

When selecting a college, a student moves through a series of three events: the student decides the set of colleges to apply to for admission; each college independently decides whether to admit or reject the student; and the student, with one's parents, decides which college or university to attend from the subset of colleges that admitted the student (Dale and Krueger, 2002). Students tend to be more knowledgeable about their own academic potential, as opposed to the admissions decision committees at higher education institutions across the United States. Based on the schools the student applies to, the student reveals one's potential ability – this is known as the student “self-revelation” model (Dale and Krueger, 2002, p. 1499). Students,

along with their families, ultimately decide on the top college choice to attend from a list of admitted options.

Dale and Krueger's (2002) study on the importance of fit in the college choice process revealed that fit is a principal factor for students and their families when going through the college selection and eventual choice process. Students and their families should strongly consider the collegiate fit of the institution the student eventually attends. Often regarded as the biggest concern of the three events in the college choice process, the second phase is based solely on the admittance of the student. Often, this phase, the second phase, favors students from high income backgrounds, as opposed to first generation college students and students from low income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented populations. Elite colleges and universities across the country are more likely to admit a student from a family and social background with higher earnings. These same colleges and universities often overlook students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations assuming these students will not succeed academically throughout their enrollment, will never graduate, and are not capable enough to have a higher earning capacity in their future careers (Dale and Krueger, 2002). When selecting a college, a student moves through a series of three events. First generation college students, students from low income backgrounds, and students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations hardly ever progress through the three phases in the series of events as they should – they are often limited in terms of their college choice because the “right fit” is already and unfittingly decided for them.

Davies and Guppy (1997) also previously conducted research seeking to understand the influence of student inequalities in college selectivity and the eventual college choice. Their researched provided a significant finding in the field of college choice scholarship. The

identification of three main processes provides an explanation into the stratification by class within higher education that unfortunately is still evident today in higher education: students from upper-middle and high socioeconomic status backgrounds are more academically successful than their counterparts because of access to resources, preparatory education, and home advantages; affluent students continue to have greater access to the best schools (at both the primary and secondary levels, as well as at the collegiate level) because they are not hindered with high tuition and fees; and class differences create discrepancies in knowledge about higher education.

Results of the Davies and Guppy (1997) study found that students from high socioeconomic status households who have access to more cultural resources are more likely to enroll in highly selective and highly competitive higher education institutions across the country, thus contributing to the continued stratification by class within higher education that still exists today. These same students from the most privileged socioeconomic origins often go on to attend the most famous and prestigious institutions of higher education. After graduation, it is highly likely that these students will go on to serve in top leadership and management roles in world renowned businesses, once again creating stratification but this time in the economic and business sectors. First generation college students and other students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are seldom presented with opportunities to enroll in highly selective and highly competitive institutions. However, when this does occur, it is primarily because these students are capable of doing so based solely on academic ability alone. Much work is being done to eliminate the stratification among higher education, but the process to remove the barriers that continue to create the stratification will continue to be an on-going process for many future years to come.

One of the barriers continuing to create stratification among higher education institutions is the continued rising costs of tuition. Even the wealthiest families are struggling to decide if pursuing higher education is worth the time, effort, and financials. If the wealthy are struggling with the decision, it is highly likely, or almost certain, that students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students, will not pursue higher education. Higher education researchers have long studied the college choice process, but few have examined the college choice process through the lens of financials. The few studies existing on the influence of financials, such as college price and increasing tuition costs, revealed that financials or the access to additional financial funding is often the driving factor for a low-income student's ultimate college choice.

Flaster's (2018) research looked deeper into the influence of financials on college choice. Her research examined the offer of financial resources to the child, or student, from the parent(s)/guardian(s). Flaster (2018) found that parental involvement "is positively related to the likelihood" of a child's enrollment in a college or university (p. 982). Financial factors such as economic conditions, college price, tuition increases, and decreases in tuition subsidies influence the college search and selection process. The continued rising costs of tuition and the decreasing amounts of tuition subsidies, including grants and scholarships, have a negative effect on college enrollment, particularly among low-income students" (Flaster, 2018, p. 982). Additionally, Flaster (2018) expanded her research to measure the degree in which the parent(s)/guardian(s) plans to pay for college. The parent(s)/guardian(s) who are more forthcoming with the costs associated with pursuing higher education have children who are more likely to choose a college or university within their financial means. When financials are conveyed to the child, the child is more likely to matriculate and eventually graduate from the institution of choice. Flaster (2018)

found that parent(s)/guardian(s) who “emphasize the importance of information in the college choice process” (p. 982) have children who understand their own expectations of financial support. Children who are not communicated with regularly regarding the financials associated with pursuing higher education often also “lack relevant knowledge of how the financial aid and admissions systems work” at their institutions of interest (Flaster, 2018, p. 982). As a result, these children often do not make the best decisions when navigating the college search and selection process.

Flaster’s (2018) research also found that the plans the parent(s)/guardian(s) has to pay for college has a causal impact on the child’s ultimate college choice. Data collected through Flaster’s (2018) college choice research revealed a strong relationship between the children’s matriculation and the ability of the parent(s)/guardian(s) to pay for higher education. Cited as plans that are “merely correlated”, the plans of the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the child’s ultimate college choice are often related, including similarities in key factors such as academic aspirations, involvement in education, and academic preparedness and academic potential (Flaster, 2018, p. 983). Ultimately, the college choice of a student is decided not how the parent(s)/guardian(s) plan to pay for college, but how much the parent(s)/guardian(s) plans to pay. Financial factors continue to create barriers hindering the opportunity to pursue higher education for students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students. Financial factors are barriers that cannot be controlled. Other additional external factors cannot be controlled and also continue to exist, thus controlling specific student populations from pursuing higher education.

Engberg and Allen’s (2011) research examined the uncontrolled destinies that control

low-income students' decision to pursue higher education. Utilizing data from the Educational Longitudinal Study, Engberg and Allen (2011) explored the power that demographic and biographical data have in predicting where low-income students will pursue higher education, if they even choose to pursue higher education at all. Only 40 percent of low-income students in America enrolled in a college or university right after high school graduation, compared to 84 percent of the students whose family has a minimum income of \$100,000. Almost double the number of students from higher income backgrounds pursue higher education, creating an even further divide and generating even more stratification across socioeconomic backgrounds.

Results of Engberg and Allen's (2011) study found that the college choice decision making process was strongly related to two key factors: family financials and the student's "access to various forms of capital" (p. 787). With the supporting data from the Educational Longitudinal Study, Engberg and Allen (2011) also found that when it comes to college choice, an individual's habitus closely aligns with the individual's demographics, specifically gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The third and final key finding of Engberg and Allen's (2011) study found that one's academic preparation and academic rigor throughout the K-12 education years is a key factor in understanding a student's college choice. Additionally, both academic preparation and academic rigor throughout the K-12 education years are also key factors in understanding how a student understands and values career success, "savings efforts for education expenses beyond high school, and "human capital investments" much later in life (Engberg and Allen, 2011, p. 789). When a student's upbringing denies the student access to capital of some kind – human, social, cultural, or financial – the student is more likely to perform poorly when enrolled in college. There are stark differences existing across socioeconomic backgrounds in terms to access to capital. This study looked further to see how the access the

capital not only hindered successes at the collegiate level but how the lack of access to capital even hindered how low-income students navigate the college search and selection process.

Rhoades (2014) looked at the college search and selection process through a different lens – through the American colleges and universities. Much of the existing research on college choice looks at the college search and selection process through the eyes of the student.

Utilizing Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three phase model, many researchers examined the navigation of the process through the eyes of the student through predisposition, search, and choice model. However, Rhoades (2014) decided to examine the college choice process in a new light – exploring the processes and practices of the college and university.

Rhoades (2014) suggested examining the role colleges and universities play in the college choice process through three processes and practices: college costs and family processes; the college's physical placement; and college marketing. The first, college costs and family processes, suggests that financials and the student's access to financial aid funds are the driving force behind a student's ultimate college choice. For students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students, they are left with no college choice. Instead, they are forced to choose a college based on the amount of funding they receive to help offset the continued rising costs of tuition. Next, the college's physical placement, suggests that a student ultimately chooses a college or university based on proximity to their home. For the students desiring to save money by living at home, a nearby institution, often a community college or a regional institution, become the ultimate college of choice. Lastly, the college's marketing suggests that colleges and universities choose themselves the type of students to attract. Selective enrollment management techniques often tend to market to and recruit students from higher income backgrounds so that they can afford to live in the new

state-of-the-art dormitories and pay the extra fees to join clubs on campus.

In Rhoades' (2014) research, college choice does not lie with the student but with the institution. Instead of the students being the consumer who exercises "choice in an open market by voting with their feet" (p. 926), Rhoades suggests that colleges and universities are the driving force behind how a student navigates the college search and selection process. Rhoades is unique in that his research examines college choice through a different lens. His research contributes to the existing college choice literature and sparks new interest by advocating for change and higher education reform. Rhoades (2014) challenges higher education scholars and administrators to reframe their questions surrounding college choice by looking at price, rationing of support, opportunities, resources, and programming for students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students, and strategic enrollment management techniques and strategies. Such an approach utilizes the anti-deficit approach. This approach identifies both factors and efforts that work to ensure the needs of a specific student population such as first generation college students are not only met but also replicated. By doing so, the college choice process is at the hands of more than just the student, and the colleges and universities are held more accountable for their processes and practices, thus helping to limit the socioeconomic divides and social stratification currently existing in higher education today. Higher education reform through a change such as this suggested by Rhoades (2014) can be the first of many great strides attempting to make higher education both equally accessible and affordable for all.

Higher education has long been regarded as "one of the great drivers of social mobility" (Baker, Klasik, and Reardon, 2018, p. 1). Higher education can do more for an

individual that solely contribute to income – higher education is linked to “an array of benefits” (Simmons, 2014, p. 260) not easily measured, including but not limited to personal, spousal, and child health; child educational gains; and greater longevity and happiness. However, if students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, including first generation college students, are not provided equal access to higher education, these student populations will never be able to achieve social mobility and will not be exposed to the “array of benefits” (Simmons, 2014, p. 260) that higher education can provide. Recognizing that the overall distribution of low-income students in higher education is skewed due to its “complex hierarchical structure” (Baker, Klasik, and Reardon, 2018, p. 1), this set of researchers recently conducted research examining enrollment selectivity gaps in a longitudinal study utilizing supporting data gathered from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (between 1986 and 2014). Findings of Baker, Klasik, and Reardon’s (2018) study revealed the importance of college choice in a student’s potential for academic success at the collegiate level. Financials are often the primary driving force behind one’s ultimate college choice for students from low-income backgrounds. However, if a low-income background student possesses the academic ability to be admitted to a more selective American college or university, the student is much more likely to yield a higher potential for economic returns, thus greatly increasing their opportunity to move up and out of their current socioeconomic background. Baker, Klasik, and Reardon’s (2018) recent research tracking enrollment selectivity gaps provided an understanding of how college choice impacts the low-income background student’s opportunity for future successes, both inside the college classroom and after obtaining a baccalaureate degree. The students from low-income backgrounds who were accepted to a more selective college or university were much more likely to enroll in that particular institution and achieve educational attainment, thus increasing their

potential to achieve financial freedom and increasing their “ability to manage student loan debt” (Baker, Klasik, and Reardon, 2018, p. 2). These students have a much higher probability of completing their degrees, compared to their counterparts from low-income backgrounds enrolling in lower selective colleges and universities. After degree completion, this small percentage of a larger specific student population has an increased probability of making great strides to benefit the American labor market.

Higher education even benefits society – associated with reduced poverty and inequality; decreased criminal justice costs and crimes rates; decreased health care costs; and greater social cohesion. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have inferior access to college and financial aid information, compared to their affluent counterparts (Simmons, 2014). While higher education scholars and administrators continue seeking to find answers to reduce the stratification and unequal accessibility to higher education that still exists today, many have come to recognize and agree upon the fact that finding one’s fit in the college search and selection process is crucial. Additionally, they can almost all agree that obtaining a “bachelor’s degree provides one of the best changes for an economically secure life” (Baker, Klasik, and Reardon, 2018, p. 1).

Three-Phase Model of College Choice

The topic of college choice continues to an area of question in the field of higher education. Institutions are continuing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to build state-of-the-art dormitories, expand dining offerings, and provide incentives for student life and student support in order to attract new students every year. While the newly adorned glitz and glamor of higher education is appealing to many and helps institutions achieve and surpass their enrollment goals, several collegebound students are not concerned with all the “extras” a higher education

institution has to offer. Instead, these students are only concerned with the basics and the necessities needed in order to pursue higher education.

Take away the newly constructed student recreation centers and 24 hour dining halls. Remove the enticing student union building, the modernized library, and the newly updated living learning communities. Even with all the extras added to entice new students in hopes of helping to simplify the college choice process, every collegebound student in the United States, regardless of race, gender, and background will experience the process of selecting the college or university of their choice...within reason.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) studied the college choice process. They were not the first and only researchers interested in the college choice process. However, their contribution to the field of college choice scholarship continues to be one of the most highly regarded, recognized, and cited works within the discipline. Often regarded as a pivotal framework in the field of college choice, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) research looked further than previous scholarship. Previous scholarship on the college choice process explored the ways in which student background influenced the ultimate decision. Their research examined how factors such as "background characteristics, aspirations, and achievements" influenced the student's decision to attend college and eventually shaped the student's "selection of a specific institution" (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987, p. 207). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) research is grounded in the creation of their Three-Phase Model of College Choice. To this day, the Three-Phase Model of College Choice has become one of the most widely referenced theories in the field of college choice scholarship. Due to its influence in the field of college choice scholarship, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice will serve as the primary framework for developing this study.

Hossler and Gallaher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice was derived from pre-existing literature on the college choice process. A comprehensive synthesis of the literature was utilized to generate their developmental framework. Hossler and Gallagher's developmental framework, based largely on the previous works of Litten (1982) and Jackson (1982) who both also suggested that the college choice process was comprised of three steps, revealed that selecting a college or university is a dynamic process comprised of three distinct, or developmental, phases: predisposition; search, and choice. When deciding to pursue higher education, a student moves through these three phases with the final stage eventually resulting in their college or university of choice. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the first phase is the predisposition phase. This phase is developmental in nature and is grounded upon the decision to continue one's education after high school, or at the post-secondary level. If the student decides to pursue higher education, the student moves to the second phase, the search phase. During this stage, the student will "gather information about institutions of higher education" (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987, p. 209). After much time and attention is given to the second phase, the student moves to the third and final phase, the choice phase. This is the conclusion of the college choice process and ultimately ends when the student decides which college or university to attend.

It is during the first phase, the position phase, that students explore their own "individual aspiration" to pursue higher education (Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, and Schmidt, 2009, p. 664). A student's exploration of colleges and universities is strongly influenced by several factors including but not limited to the following: gender; ethnicity; socioeconomic status; parental education; parental expectation; and high school quality and academic rigor. Shaw, Kobrin, Packman and Schmidt's (2009) study utilized both demographic and geographic data to explore

college aspirations and the college choice process of collegebound students in the United States. Results of their study revealed that characteristics such as those aforementioned are not only considered and explored during the first phase, the predisposition phase, but these characteristics are also present and evident throughout the entire college choice process. Characteristics such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and parental expectation are all influential indicators of college aspirations and strongly influence the college choice process for students pursuing higher education. More recent research from Shaw, Kobrin, Packman and Schmidt (2009) utilized demographic and geographic characteristics to generate their framework for college choice. Previous research from Litten (1982) and Jackson (1982) created a framework outlining the impact personal characteristics had on influencing a student's ultimate college choice. But it was the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) that built upon the previous college choice research and scholarship of Litten (1982), Jackson (1982), and others. Their work is vital to providing an inclusive model of the ways in which students experience the college choice process. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) work has become one of the, if not the, most formative works in college choice scholarship – which is why the Three Phase Model of College Choice will serve me well as the theoretical framework of choice for this study.

A Three Phase Model of College Choice

<u>Phases</u>	<u>Influential Factors</u>		<u>Student Outcomes</u>
	Individual Factors	Organizational Factors	
Predisposition (Phase 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Characteristics • Significant Others • Educational Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Characteristics 	Search for: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. College Options b. Other Options
Search (Phase 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Preliminary College Values • Student Search Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College and University Search Activities (Search for Students) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Choice Set b. Other Options
Choice (Phase 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice Set 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College and University Courtship Activities 	*Choice

Figure 2: A Three Phase Model of College Choice. Adapted Hossler and Gallagher's Three Phase Model of College Choice, 1987.

Other Models of College Choice

Hossler and Gallaher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice was selected as the theoretical framework of choice for this study. Comprised of a total of 11 interview questions ordered as the student navigates the college search and selection process, the interviews were structured to closely follow the three distinct, or developmental, phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice: predisposition; search; and choice. Even though they were not utilized in the research study or did not serve as the theoretical

framework of choice for this study, it is important to include other models of college choice: Model of College Choice, Model of College Choice Refined, and a Conceptual Model of College Choice.

Model of College Choice

Previous research has been conducted exploring the range of factors impacting a student's decision to pursue higher education, as well as the factors impacting their desires for educational attainment. To enhance the pre-existing literature in the field of college choice scholarship, Chapman (1981) decided to study the several factors impacting a student's ultimate college choice. Conclusions from his research generated the creation of a conceptual model of student college choice.

A Model for Student College Choice (Chapman, 1981) "suggests that, to understand a student's choice of which college to attend, it is necessary to take into account" a variety of factors (p. 492). This model was implemented to describe "the pattern of influences affecting traditional age (18-21) prospective students" and takes into account the following influential factors: the student's background; current characteristics of the student; the student's family; and the characteristics of the college or university (Chapman, 1981, p. 492).

Chapman's (1981) model suggests that a student's college choice is ultimately influenced by a combination of student characteristics (socioeconomic status, aptitude, level of educational aspiration/expectation, and high school performance) and a series of external factors broken down into three categories (the influence of significant persons, the fixed characteristics of the institution, and the institutions own efforts to community with prospective students). The model also suggests that relatively fixed college characteristics such as location, campus environment, and cost tend to influence the student's college choice.

A Model of Student College Choice

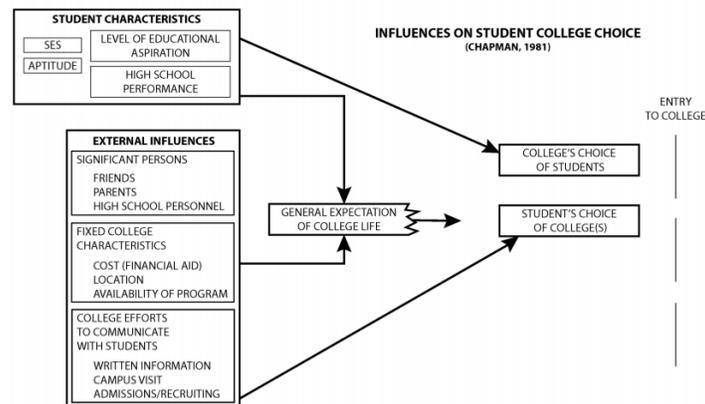


Figure 3: A Model of Student College Choice. Retrieved from https://www.nactateachers.org/images/website/2017_Purdue/All_Presentations/219.pdf.

Model of College Choice Refined

Chapman's (1981) model of college choice focuses primarily on the structural attributes and their relationships with the ultimate outcome of the college search and selection process. While Chapman's (1981) contribution to the field is important, Litten (1982) identified and argued limitations in Chapman's (1981) model of college choice. Litten (1982) stated that Chapman's (1981) work had two limitations: the model is a basic generalizable model that only looks at influences on student college choice through student characteristics and external influences and the college choice process is an no way important to higher education administrators at colleges and universities across the United States. While Litten (1982) revered Chapman's (1981) work and contribution to the field, he felt strongly that the key limitations should be addressed. As a result, Litten (1982) refined Chapman's (1981) model of college choice.

Litten's (1982) work noted that Chapman's (1981) model of college choice lacked an understanding of the process of selecting a college. Although not published at the time, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) work focused on the process, or three phases, that students encountered while navigating the college search and selection process. Chapman's (1981) gap in research enabled Litten (1982) to refine the work and look at college choice as a process. Litten (1982) explained that the college selection process mimicked that of a funnel – “a broad pool of prospective students” existed “at the top” and “a much smaller pool of matriculants” were found at the bottom (p. 386). Litten (1982) suggested that enrollment management offices utilize recruitment tactics and marketing activities to generate the greatest return on their investment. By marketing to specific student populations, enrollment management offices were likely to yield a return on the type of students they were interested in recruiting, or attracting, to their institution.

Litten's (1982) refinement of Chapman's (1981) model of college choice first pulled from Kotler's (1976) seven stages of enrollment, stemming from the student perspective: decide to attend; seek and receiving institution information; inquire at specific institutions of choice; submit applications to institutions of choice; receive acceptance from institutions; select a college; and matriculate. From there, Litten (1982) generated his own list of the six “aspects of the college section process” to guide his college choice research: timing of the process (or its components); the number of options considered (colleges investigated, applied to); types of information desired or sought; college attributes consider; information media used or preferred; and influential persons (p. 387). Each of these six aspects of the college selection process would be examined for distinct groups, or populations, with the intent of suggesting “where differentiated recruiting strategies might be appropriate” (Litten, 1982, p. 387).

The groups, or populations, were segmented as follows: race; sex; ability level; parents' education levels; and geographic location. The first segmented variable looked at race and its influence on college choice. Litten (1982) found that Blacks were more likely to start their college search and selection process later than Whites. Additionally, the college search and selection process for Blacks would be take a longer period of time, compared to Whites. Sex, the second segmented variable, explored the differences in the college choice process between women and men. Women were more likely to begin the college search and selection process earlier than men and often applied for early decision at very selective colleges more than men. The third segmented variable, ability level, broken down into three ability levels, revealed that the higher ability students tended to begin the "formal application process earlier than lower ability students" (Litten, 1982, p. 391-392). Parents' educational level, the fourth of the segmented variables, found that students with parents who had some level of collegiate work often started the college search and selection process earlier than those students with parents who had not gone to college. Those same students with parents who had some level of a collegiate education were more likely to develop a list of potential institutions to explore and often reported a high school guidance counselor as another resource in their college search and selection process. The fifth and final segmented variable, geographic location, was found to have little consequence on the ultimate college choice. Geographic-specific phenomena were the driving forces behind a student's ultimate college choice. In the San Francisco Bay area, first choice schools were applied to by the end of November at the very latest, and in the Midwest, students were more interested in financial aid applications. In the Washington-area, students sought information in the form of printed materials, as opposed to from alumni.

Litten's (1982) work refined the work of Chapman's (1981) model of college choice. Litten (1982) recognized that the college search and selection process "is a complex series of activities" (p. 400). While basic enrollment patterns can be predicted utilizing demographic and biographical characteristics, Litten realized that the college search and selection process is different for every student, in spite of commonly shared characteristics. Litten's (1982) model of college choice elaborated on the college selection process itself and provided higher education administrators with a fully developed model to aid in recruitment efforts. By utilizing this refined model of college choice, enrollment management offices can ensure that they are continuing to utilize "optimally designed recruiting strategies" (Litten, 1982, p. 400).

An Expanded Model of the College Selection Process

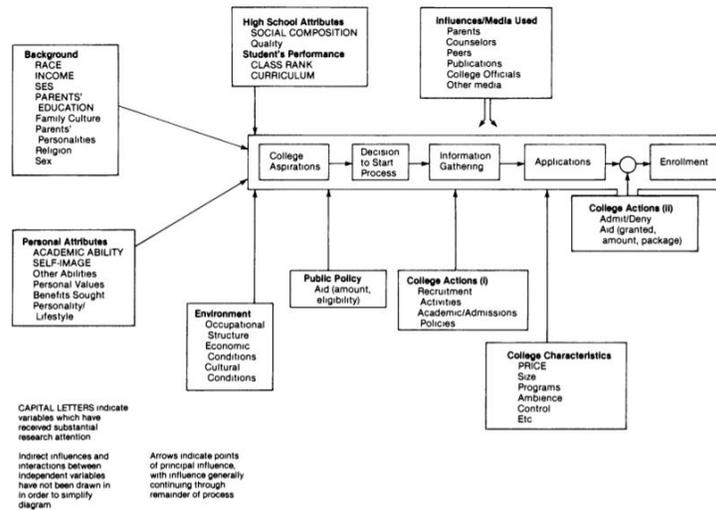


Figure 4: An Expanded Model of the College Selection Process. Retrieved from <https://www-jstor-org.libdata.lib.ua.edu/stable/pdf/1981605.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A25c1d8f8fe088c24d02835ec885d17ce>.

A Conceptual Model of College Choice

Perna (2006) called for a generation of new research and literature on college choice. Following the publications of the 1980s (Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987)), Perna (2006) desired an update to the college choice literature because of the changes to college access over the 15+ year period. Many of the previous studies utilized a quantitative approach. However, more recent studies, including Perna (2006), utilized a qualitative methodological approach to understanding the college search and selection process of particular groups or specific populations, including students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, as well as first generation college students.

Drawing on other models of college choice, Perna (2006) generated her own conceptual model of college choice. This conceptual model “draws on both economic and sociological perspectives” through the utilization of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model as a theoretical framework (Perna, 2006, p. 115). First, the model assumes that a student’s educational decisions, including the decision to pursue higher education, is predetermined by their habitus – the system of beliefs and values shaping their own thoughts, views, and interpretations. A key strength, the model also assumes “that the pattern of educational attainment is not universal” and often varies across groups and populations (Perna, 2006, p. 115). The Conceptual Model of Student Choice (Perna, 2006) presents a model of college choice where the student’s college enrollment decision is reflective of the student’s “situated context” (p. 116). While previous models of college choice focused primarily on the student, the college, or the process, Perna’s (2006) model focuses primarily on the fact that there is no one set course that leads to a student’s enrollment at a college or university. Instead, this model suggests “that multiple routes are possible” (Perna, 2006, p. 116).

The proposed model is centered around the concept of human capital. The human capital investment model suggests that college choice decisions stem from an individual's "comparison of the expected benefits" – monetary and nonmonetary – "with the expected costs" (Perna, 2006, p. 116). Additionally, the proposed model suggests that a student's ultimate college choice is influenced by four contextual layers: the student's habitus; school and community context; the higher education context; and the broader social, economic, and policy context. The first contextual layer, the student's habitus, reflects both the demographic and biographical characteristics of the student, including gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. School and community context, the second layer, suggests that a student's social structures, or "organizational habitus", influences college choice (Perna, 2006, p. 117). The higher education context, the third of the contextual layers, recognizes the ways in which colleges and universities and their policies, processes, and procedures, play a role in influencing the student's ultimate college choice. Lastly, the fourth and outermost layer, the social, economic, and policy context, reveals how a student's ultimate college choice is influenced both directly and indirectly through other contextual layers, including but not limited to economic conditions, public policies, and social forces.

Perna (2006) recognizes that the college search and selection process impacts retention. Additionally, she addresses the need for higher education reform regarding college choice arguing that higher education scholars and administrators should not be concerned with access to higher education but should be concerned with ensuring matriculated students achieve success in college.

No matter the specific topic, higher education reform is needed now more than ever. By closing the gaps in the research and in the literature, higher education scholars and administrators

can work with politicians to make great strides to reform higher education. It is the role of today's higher education researchers and scholars to pave the way to such reform.

Proposed Conceptual Model of Student Choice

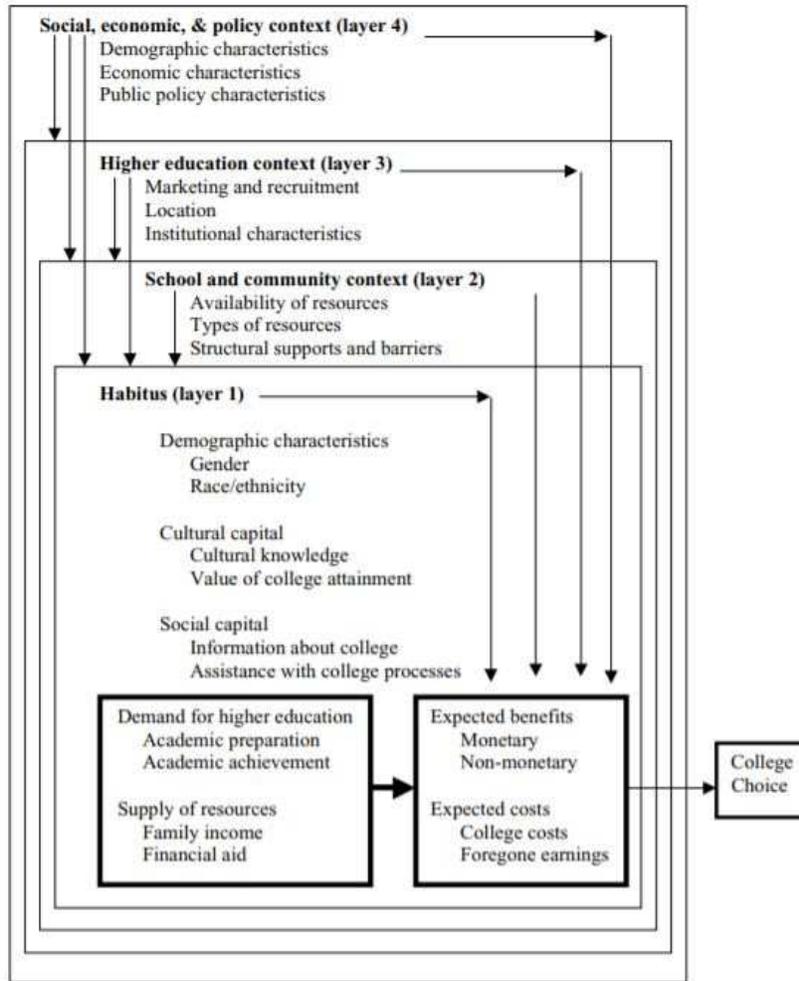


Figure 5: Proposed Conceptual Model of Student College Choice. Retrieved from https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/008f/b8d7f1ea2c0965b7bf544bb80c214cb212da.pdf?_ga=2.195426860.1858462647.1548087248-676877102.1548087248.

Social Reproduction

First coined by Pierre Bourdieu, a famed sociologist and philosopher, the idea of social stratification is utilized to explain that an individual's social status, or class fraction, is

determined by the individual's varying types of capital: cultural; economic; and social. When viewed as on cohesive unit, these three types of capital (cultural, economic, and social) influence one another to establish the social status, or class fraction, with which the individual belongs. Regarded as his most accomplished contribution to the field of social reproduction scholarship, Bourdieu (1984) stated that "There is no way out of the game of culture" in his famous work titled *Distinction* (p 12).

Derived from the central idea of another famous philosopher, Karl Marx, Bourdieu's statement aligns with the idea of social reproduction. Defined as the repetitive transfer of social inequalities from one generation to the next, Marx's social reproduction theory (1967) is a concept utilized to describe how a status within the social network is in a cyclical and repetitive fashion. Children are greatly influenced by their parents in the preliminary stages of development. Everyday life choices and actions of the parents are passed on to their children. As a result, this creates a social status where the child mimics the everyday life choices and actions of the parents (Marx, 1967). As the child enters into young adulthood and is faced with important decisions, such as the decision to pursue higher education, the transmissions of the status and social inequalities are more evident than before. The parents continue to play a vital role in the everyday life choices and action of the child, especially throughout the college choice process.

A key research study conducted by McDonough (1997) examined the "interplay of a student's social class" (p. 8). Utilizing Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital as her theoretical framework of choice, McDonough (1997) aimed to identify both "how and why class status plays a role in educational achievement" (p. 8). Walpole (2006) followed McDonough's (1997) work and found that social structures never cease to continue reproduction. Capital – cultural,

economic, and social – continues to be passed on from one generation to the next. The idea that all commodities can be used to exchange one item for another, or labor, is the overarching theme of the Marx's (1967) work, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Marx (1967) describes how capital can be obtained through one's labor. Labor, which is both unique and valuable, can be exchanged for one's own wants and needs. If the capital ceases to exist and social reproduction continues to take its course, can labor through the pursuit of higher education and one's educational attainment help students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations like first generation college students change their own trajectory?

Cultural Capital

For years, families from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been saving and sacrificing to send their children off to college to pursue higher education. For many, the desire to send a child to college fulfills the dream of educational attainment with the intent of providing a better life for their child than they had.

Numerous studies have been conducted previously seeking to understand how socioeconomic status backgrounds influence the pursuit of higher education. Data repeatedly reveals that these students are less likely to attend college and are more likely to attend less selective institutions. Additionally, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds have been found to have “unique college choice processes” (Walpole, 2003, p. 46).

The college choice process of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds differs greatly, as compared to their counterparts, students from high socioeconomic status backgrounds. Because of a lack of group identity, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are not receiving adequate support and attention from family, friends, guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators during their high school years even though the desire to

pursue higher education continues to remain. These students see a college-level education as a means to escape and as a pathway towards higher social mobility despite lower education aspirations, lower persistence rates, and lower educational attainment than their peers from high socioeconomic status backgrounds.

Such differences begin early in the life of a child from a low socioeconomic status background. Socioeconomic differences shape the experiences of children including but not limited to: parental interaction and expectations; school experiences and expectations; school structure; and overall college costs and availability of financial aid. One of the key socioeconomic differences between the groups is the lack of parental interaction and expectations. Students from high socioeconomic status backgrounds are expected to attend a “good” college or university. Whereas, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are not held to the same standards because their parents do not necessarily expect them to pursue higher education.

A lack of parental interaction and decreased school experiences translate to less accumulation of cultural capital. Defined as the “specialized or insider knowledge which is not taught in schools”, cultural capital can be recognized through one’s “knowledge of high culture” or one’s “educational credentials” (Walpole, 2003, p. 49). Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) utilized this definition of cultural capital to conduct their research on the experiences and outcomes of first generation college students in colleges and universities: “degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the ‘dominant’ culture of a society” (Bills, 2000, p. 90 as cited in Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004). Students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds may not be accumulating nearly as much cultural capital as their counterparts due to a lack of involvement in student organizations.

Instead, they are accumulating only economic capital by working while in school and are not fully investing in their own academic capital because they report spending less time studying, which affects their overall grade point average.

A student's social status origin continues to impact one's collegiate experiences. Even for the students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds who are fortunate enough to attend college, their social status origin continues to impact their collegiate experiences. Attending a college or university is not enough – students from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds continue to have more advantages throughout their enrollment because they have accumulated cultural capital over the year and now possess more varied cultural capital (Walpole, 2003).

Students with college educated parents have better access to cultural capital through two means: relationships and experiences. The relationships and experience with family members help students to accumulate cultural capital over the year. A study conducted by Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) was designed to explore both the experiences and outcomes of first generation college students. Their research study revealed that first generation college students are more likely to enter college with less cultural capital, thus often resulting in less social engagement during the enrollment in a college or university.

Higher education continues to be a valued commodity to young people, especially for students from low income backgrounds and students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations who view higher education as an escape from their current socioeconomic status with the hopes of increasing their social mobility. The expenditures involved in receiving a higher education represent an investment in one's own cultural capital. The decision to pursue higher education is not only an investment financially, but it is also an investment by the family in the child's cultural capital (Mogil'Chak, 2012).

Mogil'Chak (2012) conducted research exploring the costs and difficulties associated with pursuing higher education. Results of the study found that educated parents are more likely to introduce their students to cultural capital at an earlier age. These same parents make active use of tutors to aid in ensuring their children are more competitive than their peers and are well equipped to achieve higher levels of academic progress.

A similar study conducted by McNeal Jr. (1999) examined the influence of parental involvement as social capital and its impact on achievement, truancy, and drop outs. These research findings revealed that a child's successive educational attainment highly correlates with the education of the child's parents – school and family factors both play a key role in these findings. Additionally, parental involvement in home life and the child's accessibility to cultural capital also both positively affect the child's educational attainment.

Lam's (2014) research explored the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. Lam (2014) found that students from a low socioeconomic status background are often not placed in the more rigorous educational tracks. When they are placed in the more rigorous educational tracks, they are more susceptible to struggle and face negative academic consequences because they often lack the prerequisites needed to be successful. Through a socio-psychological approach closely resembling the Sociological Imagination proposed by Mills (1970), research findings revealed these same students lack cultural capital in the disciplines of music, drama, history, and literature. Students from a low socioeconomic status backgrounds are not spending time after school and on the weekends visiting libraries and museums, are not going to the theater, and are not given the opportunity to go on trips with their parents and other family members. Additionally, their parents are less likely to spend money purchasing reading material for their children, which hinders their vocabulary development.

Whereas, students from wealthy, or rich, families engage more in meaningful conversations with families, are read to, and are provided with more opportunities to learn and grow cognitively (Lam, 2014).

Another previous study examined elite colleges and their admissions of student based on socioeconomic status. Focused on college and university admissions decisions at elite colleges and universities across the United States, many institutions cited that their decisions were centered on the “well-rounded student” (Lee, 2013). However, Lee (2013) discovered that the “well-rounded student” tends to be the White student from a high socioeconomic status background with two college educated parents. If these are the criteria to admit students, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds are not being admitted to the elite colleges and universities across the United States, thus decreasing the diversity at these institutions. With an increase in institutional stratification, higher education is no longer fulfilling its primary objective of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all.

Lee’s (2013) research study also revealed that students from a low socioeconomic status background are not exposed to the same cultural capital as their counterparts and are not adequately prepared academically prior to collegiate entry. Low socioeconomic status background students usually attend high schools in urban areas with little to no resources and have little to no “college knowledge” (p. 788). This lack of exposure to external information and resources, or cultural capital, puts students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds at a disadvantage when it comes to the pursuit of higher education.

Social Capital

Informal social resources such as financial capital, human capital, and social capital help individuals achieve occupational mobility within the United States. These three informal social

resources make up one's family background. Financial capital measures the family's combined wealth and income. This source of capital provides the resources needed for a student to be academically successful, such as books to read, a desk to complete assignments, and a home to study. Human capital measures the parent's education level. This source of capital creates an environment that encourages learning and cognitive development for the child. Lastly, social capital measures the achievements and successes possible, which might otherwise not be possible when social capital is absent (Coleman, 1998).

A form of capital derived from relationships is social capital, which is "comprised of contacts and memberships in networks which can be used for personal or professional gain" (Walpole, 2003, p. 49). Defined by Zhou and Bankston III (1994) as a "closely-knit system of social networks", social capital helps individuals to "foster relationships between persons and among persons in a culture" (p. 824). A child's "access to and use of social ties and networks" lead to "high levels of social capital" (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbush, 1995, p. 119).

McNeal Jr. (1999) explains that social capital adheres to three key elements: form (social ties and relationships); norms of obligation and reciprocity (investment where a sense of trust and obligation exists); and resources (both internal and external). McNeal Jr. (1999) also explains how social capital is important for a child's intellectual development, and physical presence alone is not enough to serve as social capital. Continuous parent involvement serves as an example of social capital in the college choice process and can be thought of in three dyadic relationships: parent-child; parent-teacher; and parent-parent.

Parents who develop strong relationships with their children encourage community engagement and community embeddedness. A mother's expectation that a child is going to college is an example of social capital highlighting the importance of a strong parent-child

relationship during the college choice process. It is the relationship between the parents and the child that define the social capital of that particular family (Coleman, 1988).

Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman (2008) conducted research to examine whether capital at home matters more than capital at school. Results of the study mimicked the results of Coleman's (1988) study from twenty years earlier: physical presence from the parents is not enough to influence a child's social capital. Instead of only being physically present, parents should make sacrifices and choices that enable their child for the best opportunities possible to foster learning and cognitive development. Invested families expect to see higher levels of academic achievement, all the while knowing the investment at such an early age will pay off once the child is ready to enroll in college (Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman, 2008). Affluent and high socioeconomic status background families recognize the investment needed at an early age for their children to be successful at the collegiate level. However, low socioeconomic status background families are not always equipped with such knowledge. If they were to be educated on the importance of the social capital investment early in the life of their child, they might be more susceptible to encouraging the pursuit of higher education.

It is the tie between a child and parents that is strongest and most intimate and has the most influence on academic achievements, college pursuit, and successes later in life. How parents choose to invest in their children have effects that are both powerful and long-lasting. Upper class and upper-middle class families use concerted cultivation to foster their relationships with children by arranging activities and experiences that are coordinated with school and encourage academic development. Whereas, children from working class or low-income families have "unequal childhoods" in comparison (Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman, 2008, p. 3). Those parents are less likely to spend time playing with their children and talking with their

children about their experiences at school earlier that day. Working class or low-income families are also less likely to be involved in school. Parents are less likely to make requests to speak with teachers and administrators and are not at all assertive in their child's education. This lack of social capital and discordance hinders the child's likelihood of achievement academic success.

Teachman, Paasch, and Carver (1997) explored how social capital is generated through human capital, focusing on longitudinal data obtained from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Data revealed that parents who are more educated are more likely to interact with their children and their children's schools. As a result, their children are much more likely to remain enrolled in school – this social capital is important, along with financial capital and human capital, for the well-being of the child. Resources from all three types of capital are important. However, the presence of social capital is most important in regard to providing resources that can be transmitted to the children, one generation to the next. Results of the study revealed a strong and consistent pattern: low-income families do not have access to the same resources as middle- to high-income families. This lack of social capital, coupled with a lack of other resources, is a strong predictor of how well the child will perform (Teachman, Paasch, and Carver, 1997).

A research study conducted by McNeal Jr. (1999) examined the influence of parental involvement as social capital and its impact on achievement, truancy, and drop outs. Results of his study revealed that both race and socioeconomic factors play a significant role in explaining the potential differences in parent involvement across families. Data showed White and average socioeconomic status families are more likely to form social relations and have higher levels of accessibility to resources. Results of McNeal Jr.'s (1999) study also revealed social capital is associated with increased academic achievement and less defiant behavior. A child's

experiences and socialization lead them to perceive the world through a particular lens. This lens outlines how the child is expected to act within strictly structured boundaries limiting opportunities for progress and growth outside of the child's current lens. Levels of parent involvement during the key development years play a significant role in predicting the future. Social capital affects a range of behaviors – course selection, preparedness, dropping out, and pregnancy – which all directly impact academic achievement immediately and in one's future (McNeal, Jr. 1999).

Coleman's (1988) significant contribution to social capital scholarship explained that social capital should not only be found inside the home, but that social capital should also be found inside the classroom. Commitments from both home and classroom strongly depend on the social environment. Adding to Coleman's (1988) research, Dufur, Parcel, and Troutman (2008) also found that social capital should exist past home life and into the schools and classrooms by encouraging community ties that aid the child in developing a strong relationship with teachers, administrators, and principals. Ties between the child and the child's teachers are strong, although not as strong as the parent child relationship. If strong social capital exists in a child's life both at home and at school, the child will generate social capital for one's own children in the future, resulting in the continuous investment in social capital for several years to come (Coleman, 1988).

Zhou and Bankston III's (1994) study examined how parental involvement – social capital – played a role in promoting academic achievement of immigrant families in New Orleans, Louisiana. Results of the study revealed that support from parents and the surrounding community provided both strength and stability to the child's learning and cognitive development, even with the existence of little human capital. Results also revealed the

importance of community support. Even when human capital is almost nonexistent, community support is vital to supporting growth of a family's social capital. Zhou and Bankston III (1994) discovered that social capital is crucial and much more important than human capital in terms of an individual's opportunity for academic achievement and successes at both the secondary and postsecondary levels.

Sun (1999) describes social capital as being created through relationships among family members – particularly the intimate relationship between the parents and the child. This relationship, or bond, can differ based on the family size and family structure. However, social capital can and should exist outside of the home, inside the classroom, and in the community. In instances such as these, the key institutional agents are not the parents but the teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders. These agents can either foster or inhibit institutional resources, such as information about the college selection process, academic help, and guidance inside the classroom.

In the community, these agents, or community stakeholders, can either foster or inhibit cultural resources. Communities with a large representation of nontraditional families, which also tend to be poor, usually have low levels of academic performance and educational attainment. Economically deprived communities tend to have less direct and routine interactions between child, or student, and parents. Results of the Sun (1999) study demonstrated that the level of participation and engagement with the child from parents, teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders needs to be high enough so that the student forms a large pool of successful role models. These role models can help set the students up for success in hopes that the students will one day reciprocate by serving as a role model for another. Once social capital has been established, the child can pass along the social capital through social reproduction to a

future family and begin helping to generate capital in the second generation (Zhou and Bankston III, 1994).

Summary

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (first generation college students and students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations) continue to diversify the student population of higher education. The unique experiences and backgrounds they bring with them to a college or university help to create a broad worldly experience for all. However, they continue to be greatly underrepresented in colleges and universities across the United States. Even though the diversity of student populations among higher education institutions continues to increase, it is the ongoing concern for the underrepresentation of these students and their populations that continues to cause concern. Understanding how family background, social background, socioeconomic status, social reproduction, cultural capital, and social capital all play a pivotal role in the college choice process of first generation college students will help higher education scholars and administrators identify how to provide support, opportunities, resources, and programming for this student population they might not otherwise receive. By utilizing an anti-deficit approach to the establishment of such support and resources for first generation college students, interventions can be both identified and implemented to better meet the specific needs of this specialized student population. The next chapter will outline the methodology utilized in this dissertation with the intent of explaining how socioeconomic status of first generation college students influences their college choice process.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Postsecondary institutions continue to be called upon to educate an increasingly diverse student population with many varied characteristics and backgrounds. While the many varied characteristics and backgrounds bring a uniquely broad and worldly experience to higher education, certain student populations tend to be at high-risk for failing at the collegiate level, if they even enroll in a postsecondary institution at all. Students from these populations are not adequately prepared to enter postsecondary studies and often do not have the financial means necessary to pursue higher education. In order to minimize the potential risks of declining enrollments and decreasing retention rates associated with high-risk students from these populations, including first generation college students, students from low income households, and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, institutions should create and implement efficient and effective retention efforts targeted at those students (Ishitani, 2003).

For the students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds who are fortunate enough to pursue higher education by enrolling in college, their enrollment is often cut short, well before the student achieves the ultimate goal of educational attainment. These students are less likely to be retained through degree completion citing exceptional circumstances and characteristics such as possessing lower critical thinking skills and significant lower standardized test scores. Additionally, these same students are less likely to be knowledgeable about the collegiate experience as a whole because they do not have parents or relatives who are able to share with

them first-handed details regarding college finances and budget management and the operations of higher education. When enrolled in college, these students often struggle to find their own life within the collegiate culture of America (Thayer, 2000).

Institutional efforts aimed at the retention of high-risk groups, including first generation college students, students from low income households, and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations, will also likely be successful and transferrable for the general student population as a whole. However, institutional efforts designed specifically for the general student population will not likely translate to the high-risk student populations due to the failure to take into account exceptional circumstances and characteristics of first generation families and low income backgrounds (Thayer, 2000).

Understanding how the exceptional circumstances, characteristics, experiences, and backgrounds of first generation college students, students from low income households, and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations impact their ultimate college choice will provide higher education scholars and administrators with the knowledge necessary to address the risk factors earlier. Ultimately, this information can help address dropout rates of these student populations at colleges and universities.

The identification of such potential risk factors will add value to the field of college choice scholarship with the intent of increasing the enrollment of these student populations and increasing retention rates. Additionally, higher education scholars and administrators can identify how to provide support, opportunities, resources, and programming for these student populations they might not otherwise receive. Recognizing the issues and addressing the issues through the implementation of new and innovative ideas will help to alleviate the institutional stratification that emerged and is still evident today. And once again, higher education can go

back to continuing to fulfill its primary objective providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the inquiry into better understanding how first generation college students perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their college choice:

1. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role or purpose higher education?
2. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the influence of socioeconomic status – as defined by the combination of the parent/guardian’s education, income, and occupation – in their decision to pursue higher education?
3. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role of socioeconomic status in navigating their college search and selection process?
4. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role socioeconomic status played in their ultimate college choice?

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study seeks to explain how first generation college students perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their college choice. A qualitative methodology was selected with the intent of obtaining data through interviews. Interviews are utilized to generate “description and interpretation of people’s social worlds”

(Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, and Ormston, 2014, p. 178). The collection of interview responses and data that are descriptive in nature and full of rich examples will provide a better glimpse into the college choice process for first generation college students desiring to pursue higher education. A quantitative research approach was not selected as the research method of choice because the completion of surveys to obtain research data would not provide the holistic descriptions needed to better understand the college choice process for first generation college students at The University of Alabama. Responses compiled through the obtainment of survey data would lack both the descriptions and explanations necessary to draw conclusions regarding the perceptions traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the influence of socioeconomic status in their decision to pursue higher education.

Whereas, qualitative methodology was selected because the approach provides a level of depth needed in order to present a theory in the role socioeconomic status played in traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama navigating their college search and selection process.

A thorough review of existing literature revealed that far fewer studies examine the role of socioeconomic status in college choice from a method of qualitative inquiry. The largest majority of existing studies examine the role of socioeconomic status in college choice utilizing large data sets. Many existing studies are older and look at various institution types. As a result, these studies only examine the pursuit of higher education by traditional first generation college students through the lens of demographic and biographical characteristics, or through a quantitative approach. While factors such as these – demographic and biographical characteristics – can play a key role in predicting the likelihood of enrolling in college, these factors do not tell the entire story and lack descriptions and explanations. These factors only

examine the likelihood of enrollment through a quantitative lens. The decision to utilize a qualitative approach enabled the data to yield insight into the role socioeconomic status played in traditional first generation college students' ultimate college choice to enroll at The University of Alabama.

Considerations such as these are worthy of further investigation. A need to explore how financial factors, nonexistent external resources, and the lack of accessibility to information about colleges and universities will aid in helping higher education scholars and administrators identify how to provide support, opportunities, resources, and programming for specific underrepresented student populations, such as first generation college students, they might not otherwise receive. Additionally, it is imperative for future higher education reform to better understand how existing processes at colleges and universities impact the college search for first generation college students and the matriculation to their ultimate college choice.

Qualitative interviewing enables researchers to speak “to those who have knowledge of or experience with the problem of interest” (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, and Ormston, 2014, p. 178). A qualitative interview explores both depth and breadth in an attempt to gain knowledge of or experience with a problem of interest. This exploration lends itself to understanding more about a phenomenon than simple numbers, demographics, and biographical characteristics. Through a qualitative research approach, inferences can be made, and conclusions can be drawn in an effort to understand the meaning of a phenomenon – perceptions of the role socioeconomic status played in the decision to pursue higher education, navigate the college search and selection process, and ultimately decide where to attend.

Data was collected through 14 semi-structured, 45-minute, individual interviews. Each interview explored the experiences and backgrounds of traditional first generation college

students at a large, state public institution, The University of Alabama. Interviews were conducted in the late summer and early fall months of 2019.

Setting and Site Selection

Research regarding socioeconomic status and academic success exists. However, many researchers and several institutions across the United States continue to ignore numerous significant barriers that limit education attainment for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, including first generation college students. Of the existing research, many studies illustrate the low enrollment numbers of capable students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are derailed in the pursuit of obtaining a baccalaureate degree. A vast majority of those academically capable students are much more likely to enroll in community colleges and vocational training programs. For the other portion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, a large number of them forego higher education altogether – due to a lack of financial assistance. Today, community colleges account for nearly half of all higher education enrollment, and from 1999-2009, they accounted for the highest overall increase in higher education enrollment (Simmons, 2014).

Recent statistics show that thirty-one percent of students seeking higher education enroll in a four-year college or university (twenty-one percent attend public institutions and ten percent attend private institutions) (Simmons, 2014). While students from low-income backgrounds often face major inequalities in their pursuit of higher education – often more generally attending public four-year institutions, compared to highly selective and highly competitive private institutions – state public institutions are beginning to play a vital role in the successes of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, including first generation college students

(Kahlenberg, 2004). For these reasons, The University of Alabama was selected as the research site for this dissertation.

The University of Alabama

Located in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, The University of Alabama is a public four-year student-centered research institution. Founded in 1831, The University of Alabama is the flagship institution of the state of the Alabama, recognized nationally as the Capstone of Higher Education, and is the oldest public university in the state of Alabama. Located in the western region of the state of Alabama, The University of Alabama is focused on the three core principles of teaching, research, and service. For the first time in its history, The University of Alabama has recently achieved Doctoral Universities – Very High Research Activity status in the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (Quick Facts, 2019).

Within the last decade, The University of Alabama has experienced major growth and expansion, as evidenced by Figure 4. From the fall of 2002 to the fall of 2011, enrollment at The University of Alabama was up an astonishing 62 percent (Andreen, 2011). Not only has The University of Alabama grown in quantity, but it has also grown in student quality, as well as increased in the diversity of the student population. Six years later, in the fall of 2017, The University of Alabama's total enrollment reached an all-time high of 38,563 students (Bryant, 2017). Enrollment reports from the fall of 2018 show that 56.7% of students enrolled at The University of Alabama hail from outside the state of Alabama (Quick Facts, 2019).

The total number of traditional first generation college students enrolled in the freshman class or within the undergraduate student population at The University of Alabama is captured in two places: on the undergraduate admissions application and on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid form. Data is self-reported on both applications, increasing the likelihood for data

inconsistencies accurately reporting the total number of traditional first generation college students enrolled in the freshman class or within the undergraduate student population at The University of Alabama at any one time.

The University of Alabama was selected as the setting of this dissertation because of its large student population. Over the last decade, recruitment efforts at The University of Alabama were aimed at enrolling out-of-state students, including those from high income backgrounds and high achieving students, leaving little focus on the recruitment of students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations. Even though The University of Alabama is not considered to be the most diverse institution, with such a large undergraduate population comprised of students from across all 50 states, the experiences, and backgrounds of the undergraduate enrollment will differ. It is likely that this institution of choice as the setting for this dissertation will yield a more accurate representation of the greater population of the United States.

Total Student Enrollment at The University of Alabama from Fall 2002 to Fall 2018

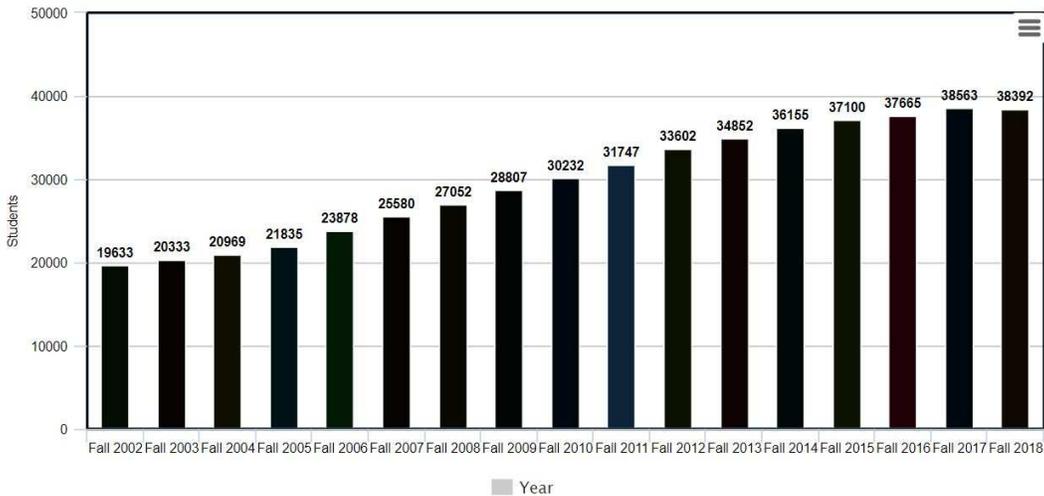


Figure 6: Total Student Enrollment at The University of Alabama from Fall 2002 to Fall 2018. Adapted from The University of Alabama Office of Institutional Research & Assessment Report, 2018. <http://oira.ua.edu/factbook/reports/student-enrollment/historical/total-student-enrollment-by-sex-1944-to-present/>.

Site Access

Data collection began once approval was granted by The University of Alabama’s Institution Review Board (IRB). The purpose of IRB at The University of Alabama is “to ensure the safe and ethical treatment of humans as subjects in research, public service, and training programs” (Institutional Review Board, 2018). Once final IRB approval was obtained, the study population, or research pool, received communication via email with further instructions providing specifics of how to register for timeslots to participate in interviews.

Participant Selection

State public institutions like The University of Alabama continue to play a vital role in the successes of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, including first generation college students (Kahlenberg, 2004). Researchers such as Hearn (1991) have found that first

generation college students and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to attend lower-selective institutions. While The University of Alabama continues to grow both student quantity and quality, the state's flagship institution has not lost sight of its primary objective – providing education that is both accessible and affordable for its citizens. The University of Alabama is currently a leader among public universities nationwide in the enrollment of National Merit Scholars, with more than 600 currently enrolled for the 2018 – 2019 academic year (Quick Facts, 2019). However, The University of Alabama has not raised its admissions requirements for traditional first time freshmen in over a decade, and for the 2018 – 2019 academic year, The University of Alabama is the only four-year state institution not increasing tuition and fees for in-state students – a committed effort for Alabamians to continue choosing The University of Alabama as their college of choice (Undergraduate Admissions, 2019).

Dale and Krueger's (2002) study on the importance of fit in the college choice process revealed that fit is a crucial factor for students and their families when going through the college search and selection process. Students move through a series of three phases when ultimately selecting a college choice. Throughout the process, students are actively recruited and are provided with information regarding the support, opportunities, resources, and programming made available to them at the institution of interest. First generation college students are often more unfamiliar with the college search and selection process and often do not have the same sources of support at home to navigate the process (Naumann, Bandalos, and Gutkin, 2003).

Legacy Scholars Program

First generation college students often lack the knowledge of the support, opportunities, resources, and programming available at the collegiate level, including unique programs such as

the Legacy Scholars program. However, first generation college students, much like their counterparts, are informed of such programs during their recruitment process or once enrolled at their institution of choice. For a few of the research study participants, they informed me of how they found out about the Legacy Scholars program – at Get on Board Day at The University of Alabama. Get on Board Day is a semester-based event on campus where student organizations are set up to promote their purpose and involvement on campus throughout the year.

The decision to study this particular group of students actively involved in the Legacy Scholars deviated from the normal traditional first generation college student presented in existing literature. These students navigated the college search and selection process and matriculated into a higher education institution. Enrolling as a traditional first time freshman at a large state public institution is a feat for these students because they defied the odds stacked against them. As the name implies, these students are “starting a new legacy as the first in their families to go to college” (Legacy Scholars, 2018).

Research study participants were selected from the students who actively participated in the Legacy Scholars program at The University of Alabama. A relatively new program at The University of Alabama housed in the Office of First Year Experience and Retention Initiatives, Legacy Scholars was designed specifically for traditional first generation college students. The intent of the program is to build “a community of freshmen” (Legacy Scholars, 2018). The Legacy Scholars program is open to all first generation college students. However, students must apply to be admitted to the cohort-based program prior to the beginning of their freshman year.

Students participating in the Legacy Scholars program at The University of Alabama are matched with a mentor at the beginning of their freshmen year. These mentors can be either

faculty or professional staff members and help ease the first generation college students into their transition to this new college life. Throughout the first year of enrollment at the Capstone, these faculty and professional staff members serve as resources for the students. Additionally, students participating in the Legacy Scholars program at The University of Alabama are afforded the opportunity to engage with other students much like themselves and build their own community and campus connections. These students have the ability to participate in social and community services events throughout their freshmen year. Participants in the Legacy Scholars program are required to attend monthly program meetings with their cohort in order to provide additional support with their academic and personal success and development at The University of Alabama (Legacy Scholars, 2018).

Students participating in the Legacy Scholars program are also eligible to receive financial funding in the form of scholarships. Recognized during Honors Week in the spring of the freshmen year, these students, many of whom are from low income backgrounds or are from disadvantaged and underrepresented communities, receive financial assistance for the upcoming year that will strongly encourage their return for a second year, aiding in retention efforts (Legacy Scholars, 2018).

Participants

Comprised of 51 students, the Legacy Scholars program at The University of Alabama is fairly diverse. The 51 first generation college students who are part of the 2018 – 2019 cohort of the Legacy Scholars Program were emailed to their Crimson email accounts in order to recruit research study participants. No recruitment materials were displayed on campus – all recruitment was conducted via email communication to the student’s Crimson email account. No incentives were offered to recruit participants, other than the opportunity to share a personal

story in hopes of generating new support, opportunities, resources, and programming for first generation college students they might not otherwise receive

Email addresses to communicate with proposed research study population were obtained by requesting access to them through the Director of the Legacy Scholars Program, Dr. Amelia Bickel. The first email was sent on August 1, 2019 and encouraged potential participants by explaining the nature of this voluntary study and outlining requirements (approximately one hour of their time to participate in an interview). Only three students responded to the first email. A second recruitment email was sent on August 23, 2019 to those who had not yet responded. Four students responded to the second email. Two more rounds of emails were sent to those who had never responded (September 15, 2019 and October 4, 2019), in which seven more students agreed to voluntarily participate. Once a student responded with a willingness to participate in the research study, interviews were conducted on a volunteer basis and scheduled at minimum of two days in advance to account for student schedules. After four separate recruitment attempts, the research study population was final. The research study population was organically diverse: in-state vs. out-of-state; racially and ethnically; and gender and sex.

List of Participants

Name	Race	Gender	State	Raised in a Household with
Amy	African-American	Female	Alabama	Both parents
Georgia	Caucasian	Female	Alabama	A mother and a step-father
Haley	Caucasian	Female	Virginia	A mother
Jason	Hispanic-American	Male	Florida	A mother and a step-father
Mary	Caucasian	Female	Mississippi	A mother and a step-father
Natalie	Caucasian	Female	Arizona	Both parents
Rick	Caucasian	Male	Colorado	Both parents
Rita	Filipino-American	Female	Illinois	Both parents
Sarah	African-American	Female	Alabama	Both parents
Shakira	Caucasian	Female	Minnesota	Both parents
Stacy	Caucasian	Female	Massachusetts	Both parents
TJ	African-American	Female	Alabama	Both parents
Tyler	African-American	Male	Alabama	A mother
Vicky	Hispanic-American	Female	Texas	Both parents

Table 1: List of Participants

Data Collection

Qualitative inquiry has been established by researchers to support social justice psychology using dialogue. In order to utilize dialogue with research subjects to both benefit the subjects and centralize their lived experiences, data for this study was collected through semi-structured, individual interviews conducted in the fall months of 2019. A total of 14 interviews were conducted with members of the Legacy Scholars program at The University of Alabama.

First generation college students who are part of the 2018 – 2019 cohort of the Legacy Scholars Program were emailed to their Crimson email account in order to recruit research study participants. Email addresses were obtained by requesting access to them through the Director of the Legacy Scholars Program, Dr. Amelia Bickel. The email encouraged potential participants by explaining the nature of this voluntary study and outlining requirements (approximately one hour of their time to participate in an interview). No recruitment materials

were displayed on campus – all recruitment was conducted via email communication to the student’s Crimson email account. No incentives were offered to recruit participants, other than the opportunity to share a personal story in hopes of generating new support, opportunities, resources, and programming for first generation college students they might not otherwise receive. Once a student responded with a willingness to participate in the research study, interviews were conducted on a volunteer basis and scheduled at minimum of two days in advance to account for student schedules.

Prior to the start of the interview, research subjects were briefed on the purpose of the study and future plans for the results of the study. Research subjects were then presented with a consent form and were asked to sign the form. The consent form provided to the research subjects is in compliance with policies and procedures outlined by IRB at The University of Alabama. Additionally, the researcher disclosed her employment as a professional staff member at the institution.

To guide each 45-minute interview through the same structure and series of questions, a prepared interview protocol was used. The interview protocol was developed ahead of time to guide the interview in a more conversational structure, given the average age of the research subjects. The intent when designing the interview protocol was to have a phenomenological oriented interview protocol that would enable the research study participants to give me, the researcher, narrative based qualitative answers. The interview protocol is comprised of a total of 11 interview questions ordered as the student navigates the college search and selection process, closely following the three distinct, or developmental, phases of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice: predisposition; search, and choice.

Additionally, the 11 interview questions are organized around the theoretical framework of choice for the study and the four guiding research questions.

The protocol for each of the 14 interviews was structured in the same fashion. Each research participant was assigned a pseudonym. The participants were given the opportunity to assign themselves a pseudonym of choice. If they elected not to choose a pseudonym on their own, one was assigned for them. Each interview was scheduled for 45 minutes. Interview subjects were recorded via audiotape, once written consent was provided. At the conclusion of the 14 interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim and stored securely for future retrieval. The interview protocol comprised of 11 open-ended questions is attached (Appendix A) and was used for data collection during the 14 semi-structured, 45-minute, individual interviews.

Data Collection Timeline

Submitted IRB Proposal	Wednesday, June 26, 2019
Began Collecting Data	Monday, August 26, 2019
Final Interview Conducted	Wednesday, November 13, 2019
Final Interview Transcription Completed	Friday, December 6, 2019
Data Analysis Began	Saturday, December 7, 2019
Data Analysis Completed	Friday, January 3, 2020

Table 2: Data Collection Timeline.

Data Analysis

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice guided the construction of the interview protocol. Interview questions were organized to closely align with the student's navigation of the college search and selection process. At the conclusion of the 14th and final interview on November 13, 2019, the researcher then transcribed all 14 interviews.

This self-transcription of data enabled the researcher to perform preliminary data analysis. Next, the researcher printed out all transcriptions and began to read through them individually (often four or five transcriptions in one sitting). Once completed, the researcher then revisited the transcriptions again to identify similarities and differences between research participants' perceptions and experiences in the data. Coding began, and different colors were utilized to identify different codes, or themes. Codes were created based on data with similar key words, stories, and/or references. The researcher was then able to take substantial amounts of raw data and place them into smaller, more concise themes, or factions of data, closely aligning with the four guiding research questions and theoretical framework of the study.

Researcher Positionality

As a product of the K-12 public school system in America, my eyes were opened to a vast world full of people from all backgrounds, cultures, and walks of life. I both welcomed and greatly appreciated the diversity of life I experienced during my public school education in the small town of Decatur, AL. I vividly recall fellow classmates who were on a free or reduced lunch plan. I recall others who longed to have their own parent(s)/guardian(s) volunteer at school. While I was fortunate enough not to worry about my next meal and could always count on my stay-at-home-mother to be at school events, this is not the story for everyone. The experiences brought attention to the fact that both my public school education and my public school experience vastly differed from some of my peers. The image continues to remain in my mind, and I am eager to conduct research that will bring attention to a current problem facing American higher education and provide assistance to students and specific student populations they might not otherwise receive.

I am not a first generation college student. My mother obtained her Bachelor of Social Work from the University of North Alabama (UNA). However, my mother's college experience was not a traditional undergraduate experience. Both she and her brother were first generation college students. She attended school full-time yet worked a part-time job as a hostess at a restaurant and lived at home to help offset the costs associated with obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Living at home eliminated her opportunities to be involved in extracurriculars at UNA. My father obtained his Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering from The University of Alabama and his Master of Business Administration through a collaboration between Alabama A&M University and Penn State University. He was not a first generation college student – his mother dropped out of high school and later returned to obtain her GED, but his father attended college with the financial assistance of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, or G.I. Bill, of 1944. If not for the federal aid from the military, my father would most likely have been a first generation college student.

I often think about their experiences when navigating the college search and selection process. My mother was limited in her college selection based on location and funds. While she praises her undergraduate experience at UNA, she often cites how she would have appreciated the opportunity to explore colleges and universities and find the one that fit her best. My father ultimately chose The University of Alabama for the scholarship funds he received. He never visited campus or explored extracurricular activities prior to his enrollment – he enjoys retelling the story of how he was dropped off in downtown Tuscaloosa one day and wouldn't see his family until the holidays. I also often think about the experiences of my peers and classmates who were happy to not go starved. They were not concerned about the pursuit of higher education; they simply wanted to live each day with the necessities to survive.

As a high school student, I was able to navigate the college search and selection process quite well. My family had the financial means necessary to visit college campuses across the country for tours, and both of my parents were very involved in my college search and selection process, much like their continuous involvement in my K-12 education. Even with their knowledge of colleges and universities and their constant unwavering support, I was still uneasy about the entire process. If I had feelings of angst and anxiety, I can only imagine the emotions and feelings of those lacking information and support.

I have had extensive experience with students navigating the college search and selection process. My first job in the field of higher education was that of a Regional Recruiter. I worked for The University of Alabama while living in Atlanta, Georgia. My primary role was to recruit new undergraduate students to The University of Alabama from the state of Georgia. For over three years, I helped students and their families navigate the application, admission, and enrollment process. I enjoyed mentoring prospective undergraduate students by helping them choose a course of study based on interests and abilities and also enjoyed assisting and providing counselors to these students. My professional experiences in the role provided me with further insight and an even deeper understanding into how traditional undergraduate students ultimately choose to enroll in higher education.

My familial history, my own subjective experiences, my previous professional experiences, and a passion for both education and student success have shaped my purpose as a researcher today. From the moment I applied to the Higher Education Administration doctoral program at The University of Alabama, I knew my calling as a researcher was to advocate for students from low income backgrounds, including both first generation college students and students from disadvantaged and underrepresented populations. I even included my intent to

conduct such research in my statement of purpose for application to the program. I want to be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves, and I fully intend to make important contributions to the overall mission and purpose of higher education through this dissertation.

Trustworthiness

In an effort to ensure her research was trustworthy, Hales (2016) communicated often with research study participants and “was transparent about the purposes and potential outcomes of the study” (p. 125). Prior to the start of each of the 14 semi-structured, 45-minute, individual interviews, research subjects were briefed on the purpose of the study and future plans for the results of the study, thus increasing the trustworthiness of the researcher in the eyes of the research subjects. Additionally, the researcher established trustworthiness with the research subjects through the clarification of her own researcher bias, as well as through prolonged engagement with the students over the course of the interview (Creswell, 2013).

In addition to obtaining data through recordings via audiotape, the researcher also took detailed notes throughout each of the 14 semi-structured, 45-minute, individual interviews. The notes were intended to capture non-verbal cues and any extraordinary circumstances that arose throughout the course of the interviews. These notes were made available for the research subjects to review for accuracy at a later time. This ensures the dissertation’s trustworthiness through the continued data comparison of the conducted interviews, enabling the researcher to generate an even greater understanding of the 14 research subjects (Golafshani, 2003). Each of these aforementioned actions are representations of the researcher’s careful attempt to ensure her research was trustworthy throughout, including both the obtaining of data and the presentation of data.

Limitations of Study

As with all research, this research study will have limitations, and as a researcher, I want to fully announce the limitations and shortcomings in my dissertation. The first limitation is grounded in the fact that I will not have ample time to build rapport with the research pool. Building strong rapport with the research pool ahead of time is important to me and my role as a researcher. Not only is this factor important to me, but I also think it helps the students, or interview subjects, to be more confident in our relationship and my trustworthiness. I am confident the rapport will enable them to “open up” to me more, thus resulting in their willingness to share more about their own stories and personal experience with me that might be potentially sensitive, especially the topics of family and social background and socioeconomic status.

The second limitation stems from the site selection. While The University of Alabama has a large diverse student enrollment that seems to be a somewhat accurate representation of the broader United States population as a whole, there are limitations to who participates in the study. I chose to recruit students for this research study from members of the Legacy Scholars program because of their identification as a first generation college student. I was also confident that a group of students already involved in specialized programming would be more likely to willingly participate in the research study examining first generation college students and their perceptions of the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice. Research study participants are members of the Legacy Scholars program at The University of Alabama, thus limiting the perceptions and experiences of traditional first generation college students to only a small number of students from the specific population.

Summary

Chapter three provided an explanation in great detail of how the research study seeking to explain how the socioeconomic status of first generation college students influences their college choice process will be conducted. Qualitative methodology was the research method of choice to provide data that was both detailed and explanatory. A series of 14 semi-structured, 45-minute, individual interviews were conducted on campus of The University of Alabama. A qualitative methodology was chosen to obtain responses and data that are descriptive in nature and full of rich examples will provide a better glimpse into the college choice process for first generation college students desiring to pursue higher education. This qualitative study fills a gap in the existing literature by examining the role of socioeconomic status in college choice through holistic descriptions, as opposed to numbers, demographics, and biographical characteristics.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explain how first generation college students perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice. Each and every student experiences one's own college search process, and the following four research questions seek to examine the experiences of these first generation college students at a large, state public institution, The University of Alabama. The following chapter will examine the themes that were discovered throughout this qualitative study:

1. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role or purpose of higher education?
2. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the influence of socioeconomic status – as defined by the combination of the parent/guardian's education, income, and occupation – in their decision to pursue higher education?
3. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role of socioeconomic status in navigating their college search and selection process?
4. What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role socioeconomic status played in their ultimate college choice?

Themes

Five themes regarding the ways in which first generation college students perceive how socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice were revealed through data analysis. In conjunction with the review of the literature outlined in Chapter two, data throughout this chapter will be presented in five themes through the utilization of quotes from participant interviews in order to paint a rich description of their experiences throughout the college search process. All interview participants will be represented with a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality.

Researcher Notes

Five themes were discovered after thorough analysis of the obtained data. The decision to present five themes follows the series of three distinct, or developmental, phases students move through during the college search and selection process. The themes are presented in the order below to closely align with the theoretical framework of choice, Hossler and Gallaher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice. The third theme, Support, yielded the most data collected, with research study participants citing support coming from various individuals in their lives. The fifth and final theme, The Role of Financials, yielded data in all 14 of the interviews. The five themes identified as a result of this qualitative study are:

1. Independence
2. Attending College was the Next Step
3. Support
4. Researching Higher Education
5. The Role of Financials

Independence

An overwhelming majority of the research study participants cited a feeling of independence in their college search and selection process. Proud to reflect on their childhood and share their own perceptions and personal experiences, several of the research study participants revealed how their childhood fostered this sense of independence. A number of research study participants reflected on their upbringing and shared how they believed their upbringing encouraged them to become independent individuals driven by the desire to succeed – with the driving force being the decision to pursue higher education. A few of the research participants shared that they worked a part-time job throughout their high school careers to aid in bettering their family’s overall financial situation, while others shared that they were responsible for aiding in raising and caring for other siblings so their parent(s)/guardian(s) could work overtime as needed or work a second job. Personal experiences such as these shared with me during the individual interviews pleasantly revealed a level of maturity well beyond their years.

Rita, a Filipino-American from Illinois, was determined to pursue higher education. She said, “I always knew that I wanted to go [to college].” Rita was forthcoming with her feelings of determination and expressed her desires for educational attainment immediately after her interview began. Sharing she had passions and aspirations of her own, Rita was able to navigate her own trajectory and summarized how so many of the other research study participants felt throughout their college search and selection process. Citing feelings of independence from the beginning of her college search and selection process, Rita was both determined and motivated to “gain more knowledge” recognizing on her own how important the decision to pursue higher education would be for her future. Rita expressed what others similarly expressed – “I am the type of person who is going to go and do what I want regardless of others.” Addressing how she

didn't need the help or assistance of others, such as parent(s)/guardians(s), in order to help her achieve her own goals and aspirations, Rita was determined to find her own way on a path to future successes that began with the ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama.

When reflecting on the college search and selection process, many of the research study participants, like Rita, shared how they navigated the process almost entirely on their own. Expressing how they needed little to no assistance revealed just how confident each of the research study participants was in one's own ability to navigate higher education. For the majority of the research study participants, the college search and selection process was a way to showcase their independence through both determination and motivation. Identifying with personal experiences and drawing from childhood situations that fostered independence and self-sufficiency, these first generation college students at The University of Alabama seized their opportunity – the opportunity to pursue higher education.

Vivid storytelling navigating through the three phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice (predisposition, search, and choice) helped the research study participants to reveal their own feelings of independence in their college search and selection process. Driven by the desire to succeed – with the driving force being the decision to pursue higher education – and motivated to act with little to no supervision from parent(s)/guardian(s) demonstrates the ways in which the research study participants revealed a feeling of independence in their college search and selection process. Throughout this section, the stories of the research study participants' determination, a motivation to succeed, and self-sufficiency will be shared in order to gain better insight into their own experiences and navigation of the college search and selection process.

Determination

For several of the research study participants, the determination to pursue higher education was evident early on in life and continued to be part of their development. Determined to attend college, these research study participants recalled how they independently navigated the college search and selection process and provided themselves with the opportunity to be the first in their families to pursue higher education. The opportunity to pursue higher education was a key opportunity for the research study participants to exercise their independence. One research study participant shared that her parents didn't grasp the vast entity that is higher education and didn't even understand the collegiate grading process. Despite the fact that she needed to explain higher education to her parents, Vicky, a Hispanic-American from Texas, was determined to pursue higher education. Vicky cited strong feelings of independence during her college search and selection process. Vicky recalled:

My parents who have never done it [applied to college], and I had to learn how to do that [pursue higher education]. And they [my parents] don't even know how college works. In fact, I had to explain that to them. It's been good though. My parents don't have the knowledge so it's just difficult as it is. I just had to learn how to navigate so much of it on my own. I have even had to explain the grading system to them.

Vicky also cited strong feelings of independence when referencing her application for Federal financial aid. She filled out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form alone "without the help of my parents who have never done it."

Shakira, a Caucasian from Minnesota, shared how she, too, completed the FAFSA application alone. Shakira shared how she was determined to apply for the funding in order to pursue higher education. She explained how she "just worked on it specifically for myself."

Throughout the FAFSA application process, Shakira shared that she constantly reminded herself that she “can do this!” Stating how pleased she was with her independence and determination, Shakira joyfully stated, “I did it on my own!”

Similarly, an African-American from Alabama named Sarah recalled that she “had to do the FAFSA form all my myself.” She recalled her parents “weren’t really that involved” and “really didn’t know what was going on” during her entire college search and selection process. Sarah passionately shared “I didn’t know and didn’t have any help” but was determined to pursue higher education and independently navigated the college search and selection process on her own.

Even though Tyler was raised in the state of Alabama and knew early in his life that he “always wanted to come here”, he still acted independently throughout his college search and selection process. Describing how little of a role his mother played in his application for Federal financial aid, Tyler navigated the process and was determined to receive funds in order to live out his dream of attending college. Tyler explained how “it was kinda mostly me.” He shared that his “mom didn’t really know what to do” and was left “doing a bunch of things and putting in the info [on the FAFSA form].” Tyler recalled that he “only needed her tax stuff and other stuff” and a small amount of “help with some wording and the grown up stuff.” He was eager to share, “I did most of it!”

Like so many of her peers, TJ, an African-American from Alabama, acted independently in her college search and selection process. She informed me that she never shared her aspiration to pursue higher education with her parents. Instead, TJ only informed them when it was necessary because she needed financial records to submit the FAFSA application. TJ recalled, “As a first generation college student it was very scary! I didn’t even tell my parents I

was applying for school. So, I did it all by myself!” She shared that “the only thing I did was tell them about the FAFSA” because she “needed their tax information.”

Rita, like several of the other research study participants, acted alone when submitting her application for Federal financial aid. She shared, “I am very independent, so I did those forms [FAFSA forms] on my own.” Rita further explained that she “only needed their [her parents] tax stuff and figured it all out from there”. Sharing her thoughts that the FAFSA application process is both “daunting and difficult”, Rita confidently expressed it was her independence and determination that aided in her navigating the process with an eventually successful completion, submission, and receiving of funds.

Motivation to Succeed

Acting independently throughout the college search and selection process, these first generation college students revealed the ways in which they are motivated to succeed. On a number of occasions, the research study participants cited that they received very little, if any, assistance from their parent(s)/guardian(s) throughout the college search and selection process. Determined to pursue higher education, several of them were forthcoming in sharing with me what motivated them to continue pursuing their dream of enrolling in an institution of higher education, despite the assistance received throughout their college search and selection process.

When reflecting on her own personal college search and selection process, Amy, an African-American from Alabama, described how she felt scared at first when searching for colleges. Backed by her intense motivation to succeed, she overcame adversity and was successful in her pursuit of higher education. Amy shared, “At first it was really scary because neither of my parents went to college. So, I had no resources or information to rely on. I didn’t know what to do.” Recognizing the need to do more to learn about higher education, Amy

became part of a program, Upward Bound, created specifically for first generation college students at her high school. Amy recounted:

During school I was in a program called Upward Bound. It was for first generation college students. We would take tours, and the program helped prepare us for college and to apply. During summer, we would stay on campus at Montevallo. Living on campus would allow us to take classes and prepare for the next year. That would help me, and because of the program, I would say I was better prepared than most first-generation college students. I didn't have that many resources other than that.

Amy's decision to become part of the Upward Bound program stemmed from her motivation to succeed. She persevered and independently navigated the college search and selection process and ultimately became "comfortable with everything and found my place".

Another motivated student, Vicky, was not going to allow the daunting collegiate admissions process to deter her from her dreams. She recalled having quite a bit of difficulty at first. However, she acted independently and navigated her way searching for colleges in her home state of Texas. Vicky shared that she "looked at schools in Texas" but ultimately only applied to one college. Vicky shared that "Alabama was the first and only school I applied to" and felt "really proud" when she got her acceptance letter. She remembered thinking "the application process wasn't that hard" because she "just had to fill out questions and stuff and send my scores, which my school helped me do." Vicky also remembered having "a lot of trouble at first." She explained that she "didn't know how to send my scores here or like I didn't know how to send my transcript" and that she was also "kinda confused on deadlines and due dates for housing." Fortunate enough to attend a high school where she received assistance, Vicky was eventually able to figure it out "all on my own!"

Sarah had a similar experience. With no one to go to for advice and no one to field her questions, Sarah, too, struggled at first. Sarah said, “I don’t have a point of reference. When I talk to my family about college, they are super encouraging, but they don’t understand because they don’t know themselves.” She explained how she had friends whose parents “would give them pointers” but she didn’t “really have anyone to share my experiences” with because it was “all new.”

When asked about her college search and selection process, Sarah recalled how she received encouragement from administrators at her high school. Support provided by her high school, coupled with her own motivation to succeed, Sarah searched for potential colleges on her own. Sarah shared how she solely applied for college thanks in part to the encouragement from her school. She explained “my school encouraged us to take tours and explore colleges and campuses across the country.” Sarah remembers her parents “really weren’t that involved”. She further explained how “they had to be involved in the financial aid part” but stated they “really didn’t know what was going on” other than that.

Self-Sufficiency

Many of the research study participants were raised in a household with both parents. Having a strong parental unit with two involved parents revealed the importance of a strong support system. However, even with this strong parental support system, several of them cited strong feelings of independence and self-sufficiency throughout their childhood. Discussing the need to assist with household chores – such as working a part-time job after school hours or aiding in the care of sibling(s) – promoted independence and encouraged strong feelings of self-sufficiency for two research study participants. Discussing a childhood move – the relocation from a home country at a young age – also promoted independence and encouraged strong

feelings of self-sufficiency for another research study participant.

Rick, a Caucasian from Colorado, and Jason, a Hispanic-American from Florida, both discussed how responsibilities outside of schooling helped aid in their development and instilled their strong feelings of independence, further inspiring their decisions to pursue higher education. Rick shared that he worked two jobs in the fast food restaurant industry while in high school. Late in his senior year he “begin to question whether I should take a year off, continuing working at my two jobs, McDonald’s and Arby’s, or just relax a year?” Rick later “considered applying to a local community college” but eventually realized that working two jobs in addition to his schooling helped to promote his ability to be self-sufficient. He was confident enough in his decision to leave his home state of Colorado, spread his wings, and prove his independence by enrolling in college.

Jason shared how his little brother was born with cerebral palsy and epilepsy back in 2010. He aided his mother and step-father by serving as a caretaker for his little brother, which also inspired Jason. Jason shared how it was then that he realized all he wanted to do was help others. He said, “my goal is to help people, and I want to be a cardiothoracic surgeon”. Jason was in junior high at that time – it was then that he “started researching where to go [to college]” because that was the only way to get to his ultimate goal. Jason discussed wanting to pursue a career in medicine and knew “that going to college is the only way I can achieve my dreams.”

One research study participant, Rita, was born outside of America. During her interview, she referenced how the move from her home country to the Philippines to America aided in the development of her independence and self-sufficiency. Not only did Rita act alone during her application for Federal financial aid, but Rita also acted alone when she visited The University of Alabama campus. Never second guessing herself, Rita elatedly recalled the 10+ hour trip from a

Chicago suburb to Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Rita recalled acting alone and shared her account of self-sufficiency during the college search and selection process. She visited during the first semester of her senior year. Rita excitedly shared:

So, I looked more into it, and I visited campus. I also visited Tulane and UGA. But it just was not the same. And so yeah...I ended up touring in October of my senior year, and then I knew I wanted to commit. My parents do not like the South, so I came alone. I am very independent and am on my own, so I was like I got this!

Rita, Vicky, Shakira, Sarah, Tyler, and TJ all shared stories of personal determination in order to achieve the goal of pursuing higher education. For these research study participants, the recollection of their navigation of the FAFSA application and submission process, alone and without the assistance of a parent or guardian, enabled them to prove they were determined to attend college no matter the circumstances. Amy, Vicky, and Sarah reflected on how their search for potential colleges across the country would not be hindered and revealed that they were always motivated to succeed. The discussions of the need to assist with household chores – such as working a part-time job after school hours or aiding in the care of sibling(s) – shared by Rick and Jason promoted independence and encouraged strong feelings of self-sufficiency. Additionally, Rita's story of moving to America aided in fostering her own strong feelings of self-sufficiency.

The opportunity to be the first in their family to pursue higher education is an enormous feat for the research study participants interviewed. Several of them expressed desire to become the first in their family to attend college and pave the way for their own future families one day, showcasing independence through determination, a motivation to succeed, and self-sufficiency.

Throughout this section, first generation college students reflected on their feelings of independence in their college search and selection process and in their ultimate decision to attend The University of Alabama. During the data collection process, a theme of independence was consistently revealed among several of the research study participant throughout their college search and section process. The identification of personal experiences and drawing from childhood situations enabled these research study participants to discuss how they believed their feelings of independence through determination, a motivation to succeed, and self-sufficiency aided in their pursuit of higher education. The next section will explore reflections of how attending college was the next step for the 14 research study participants.

Attending College was the Next Step

For these 14 first generation college students, attending college was always an option. Even though their parent(s)/guardian(s) never obtained a baccalaureate degree, this population of research study participants was determined to obtain one key goal: pursue higher education. There was no question whether or not these students would attend college. These first generation college students simply needed to figure out the logical progression to get from high school graduate to college freshman. Their road to enrollment was often cumbersome and lonely. They shared stories of how they navigated the application process, visited campus, and identified both the support and resources necessary to enroll at an institution of higher education. However, with independence, self-sufficiency, determination, and an intensely motivated desire to succeed, attending college was the next step for these research study participants in order to live out the future goals and dreams they had always planned for themselves.

Examples that will be examined in this section demonstrate the research study participants' individual and independent paths to the pursuit of higher education. While each

and every story is unique, the common theme is evident: after high school graduation, these first generation college students would enroll in an institution of higher education with the ultimate goal of obtaining a baccalaureate degree at the end of four years. The sharing of personal stories, accounts, and experiences told through the eyes of these 14 first generation college students will aid in an attempt to explain why they felt confident attending college was the next step on their own paths, or trajectories. Throughout this section, the stories, accounts, and experiences of the research study participants will be shared in an attempt to better understand the ways in which they navigated the college search and selection process.

Dreaming of College at an Early Age

Several times throughout the interviews, the research study participants shared their goals and aspirations for their own lives. For many of them, their goals and aspirations for life were planned out at a very earlier age than normal, well before senior year of high school. Dreaming of a lifelong career, the pursuit of a better life, and vowing to make her own “history”, Georgia, a Caucasian from Alabama, recalled navigating the college search process as early as her junior high school years. She shared that she “started looking and reaching out to colleges” when she was “in 8th grade.” Recognizing that higher education would help her achieve her own goals and aspirations, Georgia said, “I want to be an athletic trainer when I get older. The University of Alabama has one of the best athletic training programs in the whole country.” She told me that her both her mom and step-father “dropped out of college”. Because of this, Georgia wanted to be different and adhered to her own mantra: “I can do this, and I can make history!”

Tyler vividly recalled being a young boy in Alabama wanting to go to college, despite his mother’s plans for him to play collegiate sports and his family’s suggestion to attend community college first. Describing how he wanted to be known for knowledge, as opposed to physical

ability, Tyler was finally able to explain to his family during his first year of high school why he felt so strongly about pursuing higher education. Tyler shared:

So yeah my mom didn't really play a role [in my decision to pursue higher education], but I always told her "Of course, I am going to school!" At a young age, she and my family always pressured me to play sports so I could travel the world. But I said "No! I don't want to go to school to play sports. I want to go to school because I know something! I want people to see that I have knowledge." They, my family, finally got it through their head my plans, and I was not going to college to play sports. Finally, around 9th grade they realized it, but they still encouraged me to go to community college first. And again, I was like "No! I am going to leave, and I am going to fly my own wings and show you I can and will do what I gotta do to get what I want."

Shakira planned ahead, too. Taking standardized tests early in her high school career, Shakira always knew that she "really wanted to go to college." During the "early months of sophomore year", she began researching colleges and their admissions process. Shakira attributes her early collegiate planning to her "very much a Type A personality."

Natalie, a Caucasian from Arizona, shared her peers' sentiment regarding the importance of higher education in her own life and explained that "Ever since I was young, education was super important." Identifying college attendance as the next step, Natalie longed to become an engineer. Natalie said she thought attending college "was the only way to get a job." She felt that she was "not forced to go" but explained how she has "always associated the stereotype" of college attendance with becoming "someone one day". Natalie explained how she "never looked at the rich vs. poor stereotype." However, she noted seeing "those who go to college" being "there because they want to be better."

Desiring “to be better” and dreaming of her career as an engineer living in an Atlanta suburb after the attainment of her baccalaureate degree, Natalie began navigating the college search and selection process at the start of her sophomore year. Natalie was Valedictorian of her high school in Arizona and knew early in her high school career that because of her academic excellence and high achievements she needed to “plan ahead in order to end up where I wanted to be.”

Committed to College No Matter the Circumstances

For several of the research study participants, they were committed to college no matter the circumstances. For as long as he could remember, Rick knew he was committed to the pursuit of higher education. Even with falling grades and lower standardized test scores than he would have preferred, Rick still had a personal longing and desire to attend college. Parental support also played a factor. Rick shared how he was “committed to going to college no matter what” for the longest time. He came from a military family where “was always brought up, especially with my Dad’s G.I. Bill.” It was during Rick’s junior or senior year where he started to fall grade wise and considering taking a gap year. He then explored options in his home state of Colorado but was concerned because his “test scores were a little below what they [University of Denver] wanted”. Rick was denied admission to the University of Denver and later ended up attending “a dinner for prospective students hosted by The University of Alabama.” After the event, Rick applied and “got accepted not long after”, stating that “the rest is history!”

Rick shared his hardships navigating through the college selection and selection process. Even though he was denied to one institution, he did not let that hinder him from his pursuit of higher education. Rick persevered and applied to another institution and ultimately chose to enroll there. Now well-adjusted to collegiate life, Rick quickly “realized I needed to not be lazy

or miss class.” He learned that if he “did miss class”, he “would have too much studying to catch up.” The successful navigation of the college search and selection process, as well as the successful navigation of collegiate life, has inspired the individual and independent success of this first generation college student and Parker-Adams resident by helping him “get really involved in events.”

Mary, a Caucasian from Mississippi, was much like Rick. She, too, was committed to college no matter the circumstances. Mary recalled being a young girl desiring to do something no one in her family had done – go to college and graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Having parents who knew little about four-year institutions would not deter Mary from her own plans to pursue higher education and obtain a baccalaureate degree. Mary shared that she knew very little, almost nothing, about the collegiate admissions process. However, she navigated the college search and selection process independently and ultimately chose The University of Alabama, an institution that “gives you so many resources for other first generation college students like myself.” Mary vividly recalled her college search and selection process and shared how she would attend college no matter the circumstances – in this case, not understanding the collegiate application process as a whole. Mary recounted:

I decided to go to college because no one in my family has ever been to college past a two-year program. Even those [family members] in the two-year program didn’t even graduate. So, it is important to me to break those barriers...ya know? It’s not necessarily that everyone has to go to college, but it’s just for me, and I feel like I had to. As a first generation college student, you come in, and for me, I knew nothing. I navigated, and my parents knew nothing because my dad didn’t go to college. My mom went to some

junior college and didn't finish. No one knew anything about applying to a university. No one knew about the SAT or anything.

Similarly, Haley, a Caucasian from Virginia, was committed to college despite a lack of knowledge about higher education. She shared stories that sounded much like those of Mary. Haley explained how she endured hardships and faced difficulties at the beginning of her college search and selection process. Haley said things were "definitely hard" in the beginning. She remembered not having "anyone to tell me what this is like." Haley remembered thinking all she knew was that she "would be going to get a high education." Other than that, she "didn't have much background."

Shakira decided to go to college to pursue her dream career: majoring in Biology with aspirations of becoming a physician. Like so many of her peers, she recognized that attending college was the next logical step. Utilizing others and their chosen paths where college is key as her inspiration, Shakira was encouraged. As she grew up, Shakira realized that she needed to attend college in order to live out her own dreams. Shakira said that she decided to go to college "because it's almost kinda like a norm." She always knew that she wanted to do something in the medical field but realized "you have to go to college for that." Shakira believed she grew up "in a world where college is seen as very important and that you should go" no matter what.

Stacy, a Caucasian from Massachusetts, also shared that the decision to attend college was the next step after high school graduation. She was committed to college no matter the circumstances and vividly recalls being raised in a household that supported and never debated the decision to pursue higher education, even though her parents had never received higher education of their own. Stacy shared that college attendance "was never really something that was a debate in my house, at least not growing up." She remembered how her "parents always

just raised me to believe that I am going to college” because that was “just what they told me since I was really little.” Once Stacy reached high school age, the question went from “am I going to college” to “where am I going to college”. She always knew she “wanted to go to college” and “was raised in a way where you are not just going to just get a high school degree.” When asked to share her thoughts on college, Stacy replied, “it was always a necessity. It was always just going to happen. It was never a question. It was just where.”

For the research study participants, attending college was the next step after high school graduation. They would not stop at a secondary education. These students wanted so much more; they desired to obtain a higher education. Georgia, Tyler, Shakira, and Natalie all recalled how they dreamed of college at an early age – raised to understand college was the next step or researching higher education as a junior high school student. Rick, Mary, Haley, Shakira, and Stacy shared that they were determined to pursue higher education and were committed to college no matter the circumstances – falling grades, lower standardized test scores, or simply a lack of knowledge and understanding of the collegiate admissions process as a whole. These first generation college students were committed to the pursuit of higher education.

Throughout this section, first generation college students provided personal recounts of how attending college was the next step for them after high school graduation. However, this is not necessarily the case for all first generation college students. During the data collection process, this theme was constantly revealed among several of the research study participants throughout their college search and selection process. Dreaming of college at an early age and being committed to college no matter the circumstances stood out to the research study participants, enabling them to accomplish their own personal goal: the pursuit of higher education. The next section will explore reflections of the role support played in the college

search and selection process for the 14 research study participants.

Support

An overwhelming majority of the research study participants cited strong feelings of independence in their college search and selection process. Determined to navigate the collegiate admissions process and intensely motivated to succeed, the research study participants were self-sufficient in navigating their own trajectory in order to become a college student. While their independence was validated in the decision to pursue higher education without much guidance and assistance, these research study participants often described feeling strong support from high school guidance counselor(s), university personnel, and most importantly, strong support from family members, throughout their journey to enrollment at The University of Alabama. On a few occasions, the research study participants shared it was their high school guidance counselors or some other administrative support provided at the secondary level that provided the most support and encouragement throughout the college search and selection process. For others, it was the support during the college search and selection process by university personnel provided which proved to be the most significant contribution. Some of the research study participants explained that it was their sibling(s) who provided the greatest support and encouragement throughout the college search and selection process. For the largest majority of research study participants, it was their parent(s)/guardian(s). Whether the support came in the form of a conversation held over a recruitment dinner with a university administrator or from a parent in the form of unwavering reassurance, the first generation college students I interviewed for this research study felt greatly supported throughout their college search and selection process.

The college search and selection process is unique for each and every student. Yet, for this population of first generation college students, one consistent experience remained in the ultimate decision to attend The University of Alabama: support from many varied sources played a key role in their pursuit of higher education. Vivid recollections shared with me as the research study participants navigated through the college search and selection process helped them to reveal the ways in which they felt support. Throughout this section, the stories of the role support played in the navigation of the college search and selection process will be discussed in an effort to understand how support influenced and impacted decision-making.

The Role of High School Guidance Counselor(s)

Only a small number of the research study participants recalled having high school guidance counselors that were helpful, but not influential, in providing the needed support throughout their navigation in the pursuit of higher education. When asked if she had an influential guidance counselor during high school, Vicky shared that her counselor was supportive when it came to completing college applications but was “not really” influential in her ultimate college choice. Georgia recalled her high school counselor being enthusiastic about the college search and selection process but shared it was her high school guidance counselor’s first year on the job “so she didn’t really know what to do.”

Rita received some encouragement from her high school guidance counselors, but they encouraged her to only explore colleges and universities close to home, which was not what she wanted. Knowing was what best for herself, Rita decided to expand her horizons and venture south. Rita joyfully shared:

The little push I got from my high school counselors...they didn’t help me at all. They were only exposing me to colleges in the Midwest. I knew that’s not where I wanted to

be. I wanted to get out and spread my wings. I literally thought of the last place on earth to go to...which is the South. My parents were like “You will spend four years down there”. And I am so surprised I loved it! But I am so happy for my 17 year old self for choosing to go here. I love it down here! I found my home here in college.

For a small few research study participants, the role their high school guidance counselors played did not provide the proper support in their college search and selection process. These first generation college students needed proper support, adequately aligning with their own strengths, passions, and career aspirations. Luckily enough, for four other research study participants, proper support provided in the role of the high school guidance counselor was there.

Four research study participants reflected on the influence their high school guidance counselors played throughout their college search and selection process. For these students, it was the strong supportive role the guidance counselor played enabling them to achieve their ultimate goal. When asked about the what knowledge she had about colleges and universities in prior to attending The University of Alabama as a traditional first generation college student, Haley shared she “didn’t have much background” and “just knew I would be going to get a high education.” Lacking what she referred to as the general knowledge necessary to be adequately prepared for the college search and selection process, Haley still knew college attendance was the next step after high school graduation. She utilized the support provided by her high school guidance while navigating her pursuit of higher education. Haley explained how she thought “college was always in the picture” because of “where I grew up.” She stated how she thought it was “just something that everyone did” citing how that made her “decision much easier.” Haley

also stated how her “career counselor in high school was really helpful” in the college search and selection process.

Similarly, Sarah’ “didn’t know” much about higher education and “didn’t have any help” from her parents. Instead, she relied heavily on the role of her high school guidance counselors to provide support. When asked about the prior knowledge she had about colleges and universities as a traditional first generation college student, Sarah recalled that the assistance, support, and encouragement came “just from my counselors in high school”. She further explained a large part of the support came during the time she applied for funding in the form of scholarships and financial aid. Sarah recalled having to complete the FAFSA form all by myself” citing “I didn’t know and didn’t have any help.” Regarding the application for scholarships, she recalled not knowing “anything about that either.” Sarah remembered how her “high school counselors really had to help” stating that “the only knowledge” she had was “what schools specialize in what.” Through her research Sarah learned “UA has a great engineering school”, which played “a big factor” in her decision to attend.

Natalie excelled in academics early in her school, and her high school guidance counselor recognized her potential early on. Desiring to major in engineering and pursue higher education outside of her home state of Arizona, Natalie “applied to Clemson, UNC, and UA.” It was the role of her high school guidance counselor that persuaded Natalie to begin the college search and selection process early (during sophomore year). Natalie discussed the support and encouragement she received. She shared how her counselor helped because she graduated top of her class. Natalie shared how she was encouraged to apply early and “took the PSAT twice.” Because of the assistance she received, Natalie ultimately “ended up where I wanted to be!”

When Jason's college search and selection process didn't go quite as he intended, he relied on the support provided by his high school guidance counselor to push forward. He shared his parents didn't provide much, if any, support. Jason stated how he couldn't "rely on support from my parents because they just don't understand." After several rejections from institutions across the state of Florida, Jason did not give up and was still motivated to succeed in his pursuit of higher education. He felt greatly supported by his high school guidance counselor in his quest to become the first in his family to attend college. Knowing his strengths, passions, and desire to one day become a surgeon or obtain a terminal degree, Jason's guidance counselor recommended he apply to The University of Alabama, which eventually became his ultimate college choice. Jason recanted explaining that he "applied to all Florida schools in October [of senior year]." He shared that he "got rejected to all of them because of my AP Calculus grades". Jason felt his high school AP Calculus teacher "didn't care about our grades and only wanted us to pass the AP exam, which didn't help me". After he was "rejected to Florida schools", he then realized he needed to "look outside my home state". Jason applied to "UA, Boston College, and the University of Denver" citing he applied to these institutions "because of family history and UA because my counselor suggested it."

The Role of University Personnel

While some research study participants relied on the role of their high school guidance counselor(s) to provide unwavering support throughout their college search and selection process, others relied on the support provided by university personnel. Two research study participants vividly recalled the ways in which they felt greatly supported as they navigated their pursuit of higher education.

TJ discussed how being a first generation college student felt “very scary!” In fact, she “didn’t even tell my parents I was applying for school” and navigated the college search and selection process without the assistance of her parents. Instead of relying on her parents for assistance, TJ relied heavily on her Regional Recruiter, Molly White, for assistance with the application process, especially when applying for scholarships and financial aid. TJ said, “As far as the scholarship application and application for financial aid, my recruiter helped me with that”. Additionally, TJ cited a recruitment event, a “reception dinner”, where she met with a university administrator, Dr. Carlton McHaugh, as the key factor influencing her decision to attend The University of Alabama. TJ was always “passionate about continuing education” and “always wanted to work with special needs children”. An early childhood education major, TJ remembered being invited to the event via snail mail stating that the “they sent that [the invitation] to the house” and saying to herself, “I might as well go! I didn’t want to pass up a free dinner!” TJ recalled:

I met Carlton from the College of Education. I met him, and we were sitting down and talking just like this. I said, “This is what I want, and I know I want to go to school for special education.” He told me his wife was over at Crossing Points. That kinda sold me.

I asked TJ if the personal recruitment experience and her interactions with university personnel at The University of Alabama influenced her decision and ultimate college choice. She answered with a resounding, “Yes!”

Unlike TJ, Georgia’s parents played a role in her decision to pursue higher education. She shared that “They were very much for it and behind the decision. They wanted me to get a higher education and complete what I wanted to do when I get older.” However, Georgia

explained “both my mom and my step dad dropped out of college” so she was unable to rely on them for support. She instead turned to the role of university personnel to provide support throughout her college search and selection process. Georgia explained how her recruiter for the Huntsville area, Caroline Sassano, was ultimately why she “wanted to come to Alabama.”

Georgia said Caroline “sold” her on UA.

The Role of Sibling(s)

Two of the research study participants explained that it was their sibling(s) who they felt strongly supported and encouraged them throughout the college search and selection process. The experiences and the ways in which the support was provided were different; yet, the support was consistently there.

TJ never shared with her parents that she was applying to college and desired to obtain a higher education. However, she shared that her “parents have always supported us no matter what!”. It was the support provided by her two sisters, one of whom is also pursuing a baccalaureate degree, and brother, that encouraged TJ’s perseverance. TJ explained how the one sister who currently “is in nursing school” served as both an inspiration and a role model for her own future. TJ shared that no matter the path – as long as it involved some form of higher education – her sister (and other siblings, too) would be supportive, even in the form of campus visits and overnight stays. TJ joyfully shared, “no matter what I chose...technical school, junior college, or a big university...I knew they would find some way to help me in any way form or fashion, which they have.” He also shared with me how excited he was that they would be visiting him for the weekend.

Rita, like TJ, has an older sister who is serving as an inspiration for her pursuit of higher education. Rita’s sister initially declared fashion merchandising as her major and later changed

to nursing after Rita's diabetes diagnosis. Even though Rita's sister was not happy with her decision to pursue a career in the field of nursing, "she pushed through it" with family at the core of her decision making. Overcoming her own personal struggles, Rita's sister continued her own pursuit of higher education. As Rita watched closely and soon followed in her sister's footsteps, Rita began her college search and selection process. Together, the two can navigate the uncharted waters of higher education by providing support to one another and following their own paths and finding their own passions. Rita vividly recalled:

Basically, seeing her [my sister] go through college helped me. And I always knew I wanted to go. I saw her just gain more knowledge. I got really jealous of that. I was like, "OK, what am I going to do?" Seeing her persevere through her science courses and all of that pretty much just inspired me to look into college.

The Role of Parent(s)/Guardian(s)

Some of the research study participants revealed feeling great support from their sibling(s). However, it was the role of parent(s)/guardian(s) that was revealed as playing the greatest factor in terms of support from family members. For the largest majority of research study participants (six), it was their parent(s)/guardian(s) who provided the greatest amount of support in the pursuit for higher education.

Stacy, a Caucasian from Massachusetts, grew up in a family where her father played the biggest role in influencing the importance of education. She explained that her "dad was always the one who kinda did like the schooling with me and my sister" and would be "the one who would help us with all our homework." With high school graduation quickly approaching, Stacy explained how her father became more involved in her education, pushing her to pursue higher education. In Stacy's personal account, her father played the largest role of supporter by taking

her on campus visits and aiding in her college search and selection process. Stacy shared how her father was the one who really pushed her and helped her to see what she “could get involved in” or where she “might be able to go” when it came time to apply for college. During “junior year for April vacation” Stacy and her family “drove...we toured...from Massachusetts all the way down the coast, the East coast to Florida, and we visited colleges all the way down.”

For Haley, it was her mother that played the largest role of supporter in her decision to pursue higher education. When asked about her decision to pursue higher education, Haley shared that the choice was left “for the most part up to me.” Despite her mother’s lack of knowledge surrounding the college search and selection process, Haley’s mother was “most definitely OK with my decision to go to college.” Providing such unwavering support in the form of encouragement was important for a first generation college student like Haley when making such a momentous decision.

Shakira’s mother played the largest role of supporter. Shakira shared that her “dad graduated from like a two-year college.” However, her mother did not attend college at all and attributes that to her reasoning behind her advocacy for higher education. Shakira’s mother played a large supporting role in her college search and selection process. Shakira explained that her mom “didn’t go to college so that’s why she made all three of her kids...me, my brother, and my sister...to go to college because she didn’t go, and that is the one experience she regrets.” For Shakira, “that was another kicker because she wanted us to go and pushed us.”

Similarly, Rick’s mother provided the most support in his college search and selection process. Growing up, Rick explained how his mother would often talk about college. Thinking she would encourage him to stay close to home and pledge his allegiance to their football team of choice, Rick was surprised to learn that his mother provided support otherwise. She

encouraged him to explore schools outside of her home state of Indiana, where “she grew up not far from Purdue, so she got a little sneak peek into what college life was like”. Rick’s mother wanted to find the best fit for Rick’s ultimate college choice. Rick said his mother was always “a big advocate [in the college search and selection process]” because “would always talk about college.” He remembered getting the invitation to attend the UA, “she pushed me.” Rick recalled it being “weird at first because we are Purdue fans and Big 10 football fans, but she suggested I go.” At that point, Rick “was fully committed to the University of Denver, but she wanted me to go and see what it was all about.”

For Mary, the support role also came from her mother. Mary’s mother was her strongest supporter growing up. Throughout the college search and selection process, Mary’s mother pushed her to pursue higher education. Desiring for her daughter to climb the social ladder and move into a higher socioeconomic class in order to have financial access to the nicer, or finer things, Mary listened to the encouragement. Mary ultimately decided to become the first in her family to pursue a baccalaureate degree. Mary vividly recalled:

Yes, so, my mom pushed me my entire life. She pushed me to go to college. I come from a middle-class family in Mississippi so, you can imagine we don’t have a lot of money. We are not poor by any means...but it’s like you’re comfortable, but you don’t have any room to grow. And so, for my mom, it’s important for her to see me...she wants to see me that if I want to go buy a Porsche on a Tuesday morning, I can! So, she pushed me. Yeah, so she pushed me!

For Sarah, the strongest support throughout her college search and selection process came from both parents. Even though “they really didn’t know what was going on”, Sarah joyfully shared that both her mother and her father “were super supportive and encouraging.” Sarah

described how her parents were even involved during Bama Bound, including course registration and acclimating to campus life. She exclaimed, “my parents came with me to Orientation!” Sarah was confident in sharing that her parents were so “supportive and encouraging” during the college search and selection process because they never went to college themselves. Wanting their daughter to accomplish something neither of them ever did, Sarah’s parents pushed her and supported her decision to pursue higher education. Sarah recalled, “both of my parents didn’t go to college, so they really pushed me to get an education. They both had big regrets about it. They want to see me succeed and be the person I always wanted to be.” Sarah knew that “school would help me get where I want to be...I want to be an engineer. And if I didn’t go to college, I would never be able to live out my dream!”

All of the research study participants felt some form of support throughout their college search and selection process. For some, the support came from high school guidance counselor(s) and university personnel. Haley, Sarah, Natalie, and Jason all reflected on the positive influence their high school guidance counselor(s) had on their college search and selection process. Whereas, TJ and Georgia relied on the positive influence of university personnel for such support. For other research study participants, the support came from family members. TJ and Rita received unwavering support from siblings. The largest majority of research study participants (six) – Stacy, Haley, Shakira, Rick, Mary, and Sarah – received the greatest amount of support from their parents. No matter where the support originated from, at some point during the college search and selection process it was there for these research study participants desiring to become the first in their families to pursue higher education.

Throughout this section, first generation college students reflected on the role support played in their college search and selection process. During the data collection process, a theme

of the presence of support was consistently revealed by research study participants highlighting the ways in which they confidently believed high school guidance counselor(s), university personnel, siblings, and parent(s)/guardian(s) played a key role in their ultimate decision to attend The University of Alabama. The next section will explore reflections of the role research played in the college search and selection process for the 14 research study participants.

Researching Higher Education

The vast majority of research study participants expressed obtaining very little, if any, knowledge about colleges and universities in the United States prior to attending The University of Alabama as a traditional first generation college student. For several of them, they shared the little information they knew. I was not at all surprised by their answers – many responses were stereotypical thoughts or common “myths” about colleges and universities. Tyler shared “the only thing” he knew was “that you don’t always have class every day.” TJ said she always heard “the notion that it [higher education] was very expensive.” Rick stated, “In general, much of it [knowledge of colleges and universities] was stereotypes I had seen in movies or heard from my mom”. Georgia recalled thinking it would “be so hard” based on what high school administrators “tell you about it [higher education].”

The research study participants were unanimously confident in their decision to pursue higher education. However, the knowledge and information they already obtained about colleges and universities was not adequate enough to aid them in a thorough and successful college search and selection process. These students needed to conduct a well-informed and thorough college search and selection process that yielded with an ultimate college choice that was the proper collegiate “fit”; some of the research study participants understood that. And for many of them, they also strongly felt as if they had something to prove.

Desiring to be the first in their families to attend college, the research study participants had to rely on sources other than their parent(s)/guardian(s) for knowledge and information about higher education. For some, information, like support, came from high school guidance counselors and university personnel. For others, they had to seek knowledge and search for information regarding higher education elsewhere – by conducting their own research.

Examples of the various means of research conducted throughout one's college search and selection process will be examined in this section. Gaining new knowledge and access to higher education didn't always come easy for these first generation college students. They could not rely on the personal accounts or first-hand experiences of their parent(s)/guardian(s). They found themselves relying on other external resources to generate new knowledge and obtain access to new information surrounding higher education during the search phase of the college search and selection process. During this second and crucial phase of the college search and selection process, the research study participants explained how they conducted vast research – utilizing technology via webpages, YouTube videos, and/or Google searches – and collected new information about potential higher education institutions of choice. As the research study participants moved into the third and final phase of the college search and selection process, the ways in which they researched higher education proved to be most beneficial. When the time came to make the ultimate college choice, research conducted by physically visiting their campuses of interest served as the final decision factor. Throughout this section, personal accounts explaining the role researching higher education played in the college search and selection process for this population of research study participants will be revealed in hopes of better understanding how the theme can be applied to a larger, broader first generation college student population.

Internet

This population of research study participants was born in the early 2000s, making access to utilize technology fairly simple. These students were raised with an increased exposure to technology, which helped them to understand how to easily conduct research about colleges and universities in the United States by utilizing an online search engine. For Jason, the college search and selection process was “very stressful” overall. His parents “were very much against it [his decision to attend college]”, mainly because it’s “9 1/2 hours away from home.” However, Jason began navigating the college search and selection process early in order to gain support from his parents and to prove his step-father wrong. It was the time spent during the search and research phase of the college search and selection process that provided Jason with information necessary to make an informed decision in his ultimate college choice. Jason shared he “was in junior high at the time and started researching where to do and what I can do to get to my ultimate goal”. He remembered how his step-dad would always tell me “just be a PA.” Jason shared his frustrations citing how his step-dad “doesn’t understand...he thinks it’s less schooling, which it is, but if I am going to do that much schooling, I either want the doctorate or be an MD.”

Jason also revealed how he needed to conduct research in order to provide information to his family so they could be better informed of his goals and aspirations. Jason explained:

My family is from Colombia, and my parents and grandparents have no understanding of higher education. I have a lot of pressure...pressure I have placed on myself...but it’s pressure to be successful and help my family. I was born in Boston, lived there for five years and was raised in Florida. It is important for me to make a difference, and my goal is to help people, whether I am a surgeon, a psychiatrist, or a psychologist. Here at UA, I

only have faculty, friends, and peer mentors to help me. I can't rely on support from my parents because they just don't understand. My dad doesn't know why I am not already in medical school. I had to explain to him that I have to get a bachelor's degree first...then medical school for four years, a residency and then a fellowship.

Jason vividly discussed how research he conducted on the Internet played a key role in his pursuit of higher education. Desiring to pursue a terminal degree, Jason needed such research in order to identify how to achieve his ultimate goal. Jason shared how he "spent lots of time doing my research [online]." Jason shared with me how he has "known for years" what he wants to be when he grows up. He also shared, "I researched exactly how I could get there. I outlined the prerequisites for medical school and know my trajectory."

Mary, like Jason, had to do her research. A political science major with aspirations of attending law school, Mary relied not solely on the Internet for research but also on friends and acquaintances. When asked about the knowledge she had about colleges and universities prior to attending The University of Alabama as a traditional first generation college student, Mary truthfully replied that she had no knowledge. Mary explained, "umm...to be honest, nothing. Absolutely nothing. I had to start from scratch. I did my research". She further explained how she "asked peers and people I knew who were transitioning from junior college or graduating with an associate degree" but shared "I really didn't know anything." Mary relied on "word of mouth" for some research. However, it was Internet searches conducted utilizing the search engine Google and college websites that proved to be most beneficial. Mary said, "Yeah, I used Google and all of UA's websites. Like I found out through UA that I needed to take the ACT. So, I had been studying on how to take the ACT. So basically, Google!"

While some research study participants utilized college websites and online search engines for their collegiate preparation and planning, Vicky, instead, watched videos on YouTube. When asked about the knowledge she had about colleges and universities prior to attending The University of Alabama as a traditional first generation college student, Vicky said, “I watched YouTube videos on students going to college. I knew what to expect a bit because of that.” She explained, “That’s kinda how I learned.”

Campus Visits

For some research study participants, a virtual search of a college website would suffice in providing information to make an informed ultimate college choice. Digital photos and uploaded videos would provide adequate knowledge and information to make an informed ultimate college choice. However, for other research study participants, they needed to set foot on a college campus in order to make an informed ultimate college choice. The role campus visits played in the final phase of the college search and selection process proved to be most successful in aiding in the research study participants’ ultimate college choice. Georgia reflected on her numerous visits to The University of Alabama campus. Sharing that both her mom and step-dad “attended University Days with me”, Georgia’s parents “were very much for it” and behind her final decision. Even though they did not attend college themselves, Georgia’s parents were involved in her college search and selection process. They provided support by taking her to visit “the campus many times.”

Sarah conducted her own research, both online and by visiting college campuses. Sarah said, “I did research on my own” but shared that her parents “were super supportive and encouraging” of her decision to pursue higher education. She gleefully explained, “My parents came with me to Orientation!”. Sarah further explained she received additional support and

encouragement from high school administrators. They suggested to her that she physically visit some college campuses. Sarah said, “I did it [research higher education] by myself, but my school encouraged us to take tours and explore colleges and campuses across the country.”

Sarah welcomed the support and encouragement provided by her parents and listened to the advice shared by administrators at her high school. She expanded her college search outside the state of Alabama and “applied to Mississippi State, Ohio State, Michigan State, and Florida.” Sarah attributes the ease of her ultimate college choice to early research and campus visits. Sarah recalled that she “was ready [to apply] my junior year...actually I was ready my freshmen year! I have been researching colleges since 8th grade honestly.” She shared how it “was really easy for me when senior year rolled around. I knew exactly where to apply!” citing “tours during junior and senior years” as what “really helped”. Sarah researched “the steps and what I needed to do to apply.”

Mary’s mother was vocal and supportive of her daughter’s decision to pursue higher education from the beginning. When her mother could no longer assist with the college search and selection process due to pregnancy, her father stepped in and provided even more support. He was the one who took Mary for an official campus visit. It was on that campus visit when Mary selected her college of choice. For her, the ultimate college choice was not all that difficult. Mary shared:

My mom helped me do my research and figuring out my actions for school. We figured out that I was only going to apply to UA because UA...for whatever reason...I was just really attracted to UA! I came from a “Roll Tide” family anyways. And my Dad brought me on my campus visit because my mom was about 9 months pregnant at the time and could not walk across this campus. So, my Dad brought me for a campus visit, and I

remember walking across campus. It was almost sunset, and I walked in front of the Ferg and thought “This is my home. Like this is it!” So, I applied and got in. My mom was the one who helped me with like the applying, doing my research, and my Dad was the one who brought me and helped me decide this is what I am going to do.

In the fall of her senior year, Shakira was still navigating the college search and selection process. It was a campus visit in late spring of her senior year that finally aided Shakira in making her ultimate college choice. Thanks to her visit, she knew she had found the right fit. Shakira joyfully shared that she applied in October and received her acceptance letter in November. At the time, she “was bouncing between here and South Dakota State because I have family at South Dakota State...I didn’t know anybody here. I was just going back and forth.” She applied for scholarships at both schools “and sadly didn’t get any from UA. And SDSU did, and I kept bouncing back and forth.” Despite being awarded any scholarships, Shakira ultimately decided to attend UA after the campus visit. She remembered, “as soon as I came on a campus visit...I didn’t come to campus until April of my senior year...but something just kept calling me to Alabama. As soon as I stepped on campus, I realized that I didn’t care how much this cost!”. Shakira recalled her dad expressing concern, “Are you sure because you are paying for this by yourself Shakira?” She remembered thinking, “I will be fine! I can figure it out. I can do this!”

Similarly, it was the campus visit that was the ultimate deciding factor in Stacy’s decision. In April of her junior year, Stacy’s dad took her on a trip along the East Coast to visit many varied institutions of higher education. He pushed her and encouraged her to research colleges and universities early in her high school career. Stacy said, “He had me thinking about

it [pursuing higher education] right when I went into high school. He would say, “What are you doing to do for college? What are you thinking about doing for college?”

During this college and universities across the United States research road trip, Stacy visited several college campuses throughout the Southern and Eastern part of the country. Stacy recalled visiting North Carolina State, University of North Carolina, University of Georgia, and University of Florida. She said, “We went to a bunch of different colleges. And that got me thinking...helped me to get an idea of what I wanted. Did I want a big school or a small school?”. After the campus visits, Stacy realized, “I definitely wanted a big school!”

Stacy also recalled thinking that it wasn't even worth her time to visit The University of Alabama. She knew she would pursue higher education. However, her ultimate college choice was merely an afterthought in the beginning. Stacy vividly shared, “I remember we were driving here, and I said there is no point in touring here! I am not going to give Alabama a chance. And I didn't think anything would come of this university. I just applied for the sake of it.”. Stacy “had never really looked into UA”, but when she “got here, it was the whole experience” that sold her. Stacy recalled, “I had toured so many universities at that point. And it was unlike any other university I had toured!”. Her family had traveled “all the way down the East Coast” for campus tours and “even went up to New York.” Stacy remembered, “I toured a lot of universities...I checked all the ones in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and none of them were like it here!” Stacy confidently shared that “it was the campus visit!” that ultimately served as the deciding factor in her decision to attend The University of Alabama. If not for support from her father and research that resulted in Stacy physically setting foot on campus in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, she would have never found the right fit for her during the college search and selection process.

Research conducted prior to making one's ultimate college choice is key, and for first generation college students, the research often begins with general knowledge exploration such as navigating application procedures or understanding admissions decisions. Researching higher education can aid in providing the college prospect with the adequate knowledge and information needed to make an informed ultimate college choice, resulting in the proper collegiate "fit." Jason, Mary, and Vicky all utilized Internet searches to gather the knowledge and information necessary to successfully become the first in their families to pursue higher education. Georgia, Sarah, Mary, Shakira, and Stacy all relied on personal experiences from physically setting foot on college campuses to decide their ultimate college choice. The role research played in the college search and selection process for these research study participants proved to be crucial, not only in identifying where to apply but also in ultimately deciding where to enroll.

Throughout this section, first generation college students shared how they believed research played a key role in the college search and selection process, as well as in their ultimate college choice. This theme, researching higher education, recurred during the data collection process. Utilizing Internet searches and physically visiting college campuses across the country were identified as two key factors the research study participants believe enabled them to identify their own college of choice. The next section will explore reflections of the role financials played in the college search and selection process for the 14 research study participants.

The Role of Financials

Almost impossible to turn on the TV, surf the Internet, or read a daily copy of the newspaper without encountering a report of the drastic rising costs of college tuition, it is not

surprising at all that students and their families are asking themselves, “Is college really worth it?” The costs associated with pursuing higher education continue to rise annually. As a result, the primary purpose and objective of higher education is beginning to look like more and more of a dream, as opposed to a reality. For this population of first generation college students, they were determined – no matter the cost – to make their dream of pursuing higher education a reality.

Each and every research study participant discussed the role financials played in their college search and selection process at least once during one’s interview. The interviews were semi-structured and closely aligned with the series of events over the course of one’s college search and selection process. Some of the research study participants explained to me how significant of a role financials played in the research process. Others explained to me financials played a key role in their ultimate college choice. For this reason, the role of financials was identified as the fifth and final theme identified after thorough review of the research findings. Throughout this section, the role of financials will be discussed with the intent of identifying perceptions the research study participants had about the influence of financials in their college search and selection process.

Cost is Not an Issue

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the students from disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations are the students who are most affected by the continued rising costs of tuition at colleges and universities across the country. The students from these backgrounds are continuing to evolve the makeup of the higher education population, and much of the diverse makeup of undergraduate students from these populations stems from first generation college students. Some first generation college students, like the ones interviewed in

this research study, are cognizant of the costs associated with pursuing higher education. These students allowed the role of financials to play a factor in their ultimate college choice, resulting in a sound financially-based decision. However, for other research study participants, the costs associated with pursuing higher education would not deter them from living out their dreams. With determination and an intense motivation to succeed, this faction of students followed their hearts and ultimately decided on the college that was the best fit for them.

Rita applied to three institutions – “Tulane, UGA, and Columbia” – in addition to applying to The University of Alabama. Recognizing the costs associated with pursuing higher education, Rita decided to apply for financial support. When Rita submitted her application for admission to those institutions, she applied for financial assistance. She said, “I did apply for both [scholarships and financial aid].” Rita shared that she “did those forms on my own” because she is “very independent.” Rita’s independency and motivation to succeed were factors that would play a much larger role in her decision to pursue higher education, as opposed to the role financials would play. She explained how she strongly felt “they [her parents] underestimate me, which has made me want to work even harder to get the opportunities I have right before me now.” Rita’s passion for success, kickstarted by the pursuit of higher education resulted in her decision to not allow access to financial resources impact her decision to enroll at The University of Alabama. In the final concluding comments from Rita’s interview she exclaimed, “I was going to come no matter what!”

TJ was confident in her decision to pursue higher education. She found her “calling at an early age and knew exactly what I wanted to do!” TJ knew exactly what she needed to do in order to accomplish her lifelong goal of working with special needs children. TJ was also confident in herself and her ability to be admitted to any college or university in the United

States. She confidently said, “When applying, I was so confident. I said, “I got this! I can get into any school I want!” With strong confidence and a motivation to succeed, TJ was not going to let the costs associated with pursuing higher education defray her plans, even if it meant taking out loans, working a job, and saving money to pay for her education. TJ shared, “I was going to college one way or another. Even if I had to take out a million loans, I was going to college!” She shared that his scholarships helped to pay tuition and fees but explained how he “never minded working”. During the summer months, TJ goes home to his “job at the waterpark,” to save his money so he can “go back and do it [go to college] all over again.”

Similarly, Stacy shared in both Rita and TJ’s confidence about pursuing higher education. All three research study participants were united in their predisposition phase – the decision to continue one’s education after high school, or at the post-secondary level. Some individuals in Stacy’s life tried to discourage her from pursuing higher education. Stacy recalled, “Everyone always says, “it’s not worth the money!” And that I am going to be in debt for a really long time.” She ignored what others said and continued on with her college search and selection process. Even though she did not receive financial assistance from The University of Alabama, she ultimately decided to enroll after a campus visit. Stacy recalled applying for scholarships and financial aid for “all the colleges I went and visited and applied to.” Stacy did not receive any financial aid from UA, unlike other institutions. But to Stacy that didn’t matter because once she toured UA, she “just knew this was the place I wanted to go!” Stacy had confidence in herself from the beginning and did not let others persuade her from giving up on her dream to obtain a baccalaureate degree. Stacy visited campus and never looked back. Stacy joyfully said, “For me, I always felt like I could go anywhere and do anything. Because financially, what’s the

difference? I mean if it's all going to be the same cost, why don't I do something crazy and go somewhere fun?"

For Shakira, financials played a role in her college search and selection process. However, she was always destined to pursue higher education and was predestined to do so, by following her heart. Shakira joyfully recounted, "Money would have been a good factor in my ultimate decision, but it wasn't the only factor." For Shakira it was more about being happy, as opposed to the money. She explained to me, "If I was going to an out-of-state college, my own philosophy was I would rather pay the money to go where I am happy rather than get a full-ride scholarship and go to a college I hate." Desiring to pursue a degree in the "health field" and work "more in the research side of things", Shakira was very much pleased with her decision to do what made her happy, especially when financial support was an added bonus. Shakira shared:

I just feel like my personal experience went with the heart, instead of looking for financial reasons. Which is interesting because most first gen students think of the money part of it. Most first gen students are more concerned with money because their parents can't afford it. But thankfully, I got a lot of FAFSA for it. And it was definitely worth it in the end. I followed my heart and am happy.

Researching the Cost of College

Many first generation college students not only lack the financial resources needed to pursue higher education, but they also lack the general information surrounding the costs associated with doing so. With a need to research the cost of pursuing higher education, as well as understanding how to pay for it, Vicky and Amy were both cognizant of the costs and allowed the role of financials to play a factor in their ultimate college choice.

During Vicky's college search, she learned just how expensive the pursuit of higher education could be. Vicky shared that her access to financial resources and the identification of ways to help pay for college played a strong role in her college search and selection process. Vicky said, "Yeah, it [access to financial resources] play a pretty big factor." An out-of-state student, Vicky researched ways to help offset the costs associated with pursuing higher education and ultimately resided on the decision to work while in school. Vicky explained, "I knew I wanted to work on campus and didn't want to have to worry about like paying as much for college. So, that was a big deal for me!"

When Amy started navigating her college search and selection process, she did not know how costly it would be to pursue higher education. Her participation in the Upward Bound program enabled her to learn more about Higher education, including the application process, dormitories, and tuition. When she researched The University of Alabama further on her own, Amy was hesitant to look any further. Amy remembered, "So, when I first saw UA, I saw it was super expensive and deterred my decision". She continued on with her college search and selection process and decided to visit for an official campus tour. Amy then knew this was the place for her. She applied for financial assistance and researched other ways to help offset the costs of college tuition. Amy ultimately figured out a way. She recalled that when she "found out how much financial aid I would receive", that was what helped make her dream a reality. Amy later explained that financials played a role in her ultimate college choice but was relieved that she didn't have to worry about costs. She said, "I live close. So, I commute to help with costs. My tuition was covered, and I didn't have to worry about it."

Tyler "never really looked into it [pursuing higher education]." He shared that he "always heard you have to go to college to have a nice life" but "never really looked up stuff."

However, when Tyler became a senior in high school, he knew it was time to make a change. Tyler recalled that his college search and selection process “really started in my senior year. Then I knew it was time to get serious about continuing to further my education.” It was then, during the search phase, that Tyler became well-aware that pursuing higher education would not come cheap. During the search phase, Tyler learned just how costly higher education can be. Tyler remembered, “I didn’t think it would be that expensive. Well...I knew it would be expensive, but I didn’t know it would be that expensive!” When Tyler applied, he also applied for financial assistance in the form of scholarships and financial aid. Tyler explained how he received “a good bit of money” from The University of Alabama. He further explained that his semester tuition is “not that bad” because “it’s in-state tuition.” Focused on the path to becoming a nurse, Tyler was determined to succeed and shared how he felt his access to financial resources – in the form of scholarships, financial aid, and loans – impacted his decision to pursue higher education. Tyler said:

If I need to take out loans, I would do what I need to do to be where I need to be. But the downside, it’s a lot of money. But I am happy knowing that every cent is going here for a good cause and my betterment. It will be worth it in a few years!

The Ultimate College Choice

One might argue that the decision to send a child to college is an easy decision, given the opportunities a college education can provide throughout one’s life. However, the financial burdens associated with pursuing higher education placed on the students and their families can make the decision quite difficult. More often than not, the decision is even more daunting for first generation college students, who often, but not always, come from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations. For two research study

participants, both of whom are out-of-state students, financials played a significant and sole role in their ultimate college choice.

Rick was fortunate to rely on funding received in the form of the G.I. Bill to cover his college tuition. He was “committed to going to college no matter what”, but access to financial resources aided in paving the way for Rick’s pursuit of higher education. Rick explained that his family looked at the Pell Grant “but ended up not needing it because the GI Bill covers it all”. Rick is happy because he only has “to pay for Dining Dollars.” He explained how his “major expenses are covered, such as classes, tuition, etc.” Rick further explained the role financials played in his ultimate college choice. Although he was always committed to pursuing higher education, Rick also theorized that life might have taken a different turn if not for financial assistance. When asked if he thought he would still be attending The University of Alabama if he didn’t have access to financial resources, Rick answered with a resounding, “No.” Rick discussed, “I would not be here. I wouldn’t be able to cover the out-of-state tuition.” If not for the financial assistance, Rick confidently stated, “I would have ended up at CCSS, a smaller community college back home and probably kept my old job.” Instead, Rick insisted it was his mom and her support that led him to UA, “but my mom just wouldn’t have that. She wanted me to go to college and do more.” Later in his interview, Rick revisited the discussion of financials stating, “I wouldn’t be at Bama without the G.I. Bill...that’s why I am here. If I didn’t have those funds, I would have ended up taking a gap year and prob never ended up enrolling.” When asked how his plans after high school graduation might be different if not for the role of financials in his pursuit of higher education, Rick answered, “I might have gone straight to work and fully invest in the workforce and never go to college.”

Similarly, Natalie relied heavily on financial support. Yet, she also relied heavily on support in the form of encouragement from her parents. Natalie shared, “No one in my family has gone to college. I am the first. My dad didn’t even graduate high school.”. She explained how both of her parents “wanted the best for me”. For as long as she could remember, Natalie remembered hearing her parents say “You have to be better than we are. We didn’t go to college because we couldn’t afford it, but we will make sure you can go!”. Ever since she “was young”, “education was super important in Natalie’s family”. Natalie researched colleges and universities across the United States and eventually “applied to Clemson, UNC, and UA.” She shared that the funds awarded by UA heavily influenced her ultimate college choice. Natalie said, “UA offered the most money so here I am!” When asked if financials played a role in her college search and selection process, Natalie explained it was the access to funds and the funds received that enabled her to go out of state. Natalie further explained:

My parents’ financial resources? Oh yes definitely! I know a lot of kids from my high school stayed in state because they couldn’t afford out- of-state [tuition]. Both of my parents said, “We can afford it for you. We will send you to college because we want you to get out of this small town.”

Every research study participant cited financials as playing somewhat of a role in their college search and selection process. For nine of the research study participants, the role of financials played a significant role in the ultimate college choice. Rita, TJ, Stacy, and Shakira discussed how the absence of financials played a role. These four research study participants were predestined to pursue higher education, and no factor, especially not money, would stand in their way. Vicky, Amy, and Tyler all had to conduct research to better understand the costs associated with pursuing higher education. They also researched ways to offset the costs and

ultimately founds other means to help pay. For Rick and Natalie, the role of financials was the ultimate deciding factor in their ultimate college choice.

Throughout this section, first generation college students shared how they believed financials – whether the access to or absence of – played a significant factor in their college search and selection process, as well as in their ultimate college choice. Financials may not play a role in the college search and selection process for all first generation college students. However, for this population of 14 first generation college students, that it not the case. During the data collection process, this theme, the role of financials, continuously was revealed among all of the research study participants throughout their college search and section process. An overwhelming majority cited financials as playing a key, and sometimes the only role, in their ultimate college choice. The absence of financials played a role for some, while the need for research surrounding the costs associated with pursuing higher education played a role for others. For two research study participants, the role of financials served as the ultimate deciding factor in their decision to pursue higher education.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explain how first generation college students at a large, state public institution, The University of Alabama, perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice. Five themes were discovered after thorough analysis of the obtained data: (1) Independence: Research study participants shared how they believed their strong feelings of independence enabled them to pursue higher education. Determination, a motivation to succeed, and self-sufficiency were all factors aiding in their independent college search and selection processes; (2) Attending College was the Next Step: Research study participants revealed they were confident early in life that attending college

was the next step for them after high school graduation. Dreaming of college at an early age and committing to college no matter the circumstances served as inspiration; (3) Support: Research study participants described feeling strong support during their navigation of the college search and selection process, even though they acted independently. The roles high school guidance counselor(s), university personnel, siblings, and parent(s)/guardian(s) played in the college search and selection process provided an encouraging foundation for these first generation college students; (4) Researching Higher Education: Research study participants explained the role research played in the college search process and eventually in their ultimate college choice. Internet searches and campus visits were most beneficial when researching the colleges and universities that were the best fit for these first generation college students; and (5) The Role of Financials: Research study participants shared how financials played a role in all three phases of their college search and selection process. Cost is not an issue, researching the cost of college, and the ultimate college choice were identified as subthemes and influenced in some way the eventual enrollment at The University of Alabama.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The previous chapter presented findings of this research study as the research study participants navigated through the three phases of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice (predisposition, search, and choice). Five themes regarding the ways in which first generation college students perceive how socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice were revealed through data analysis: Independence; Attending College was the Next Step; Support; Researching Higher Education; and The Role of Financials. Throughout this chapter, data will be summarized and discussed by the four guiding research questions. Next, limitations of the research study will be shared. Lastly, recommendations for both future practice and future research will be presented.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role or purpose of higher education?

The research study participants unanimously dreamed of being the first in their families to pursue higher education. However, their paths to pursuing higher education differed greatly. Whether they ultimately decided to attend their dream school or they applied to their ultimate college choice because of a recommendation from a high school guidance counselor, the 14 research study participants fulfilled their destiny of becoming first generation college students.

First generation college students are defined as students whose parents do not have any education, or schooling, past high school. For the parent(s)/guardian(s) of these first generation colleges who participated in the research study, their children were achieving a feat they had not previously accomplished themselves.

For many of the research study participants, the decision to pursue higher education resulted in their action to prove a point or assume a new and greater responsibility. When discussing the decision to pursue higher education, the desire to set an example for a future family one day was shared by many. For some, it was the opportunity to live out the dream one's parent(s)/guardian(s) never got to experience and ultimately accomplish. For others, pursuing higher education was both a privilege and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that would not be taken for granted.

Several research study participants shared that the pursuit of higher education placed an added level of stress to the navigation of the college search and selection process due to both a lack of knowledge and understanding surrounding colleges and universities across the United States. A large majority of research study participants expressed obtaining very little, if any, knowledge about colleges and universities prior to attending The University of Alabama as a traditional first generation college student. However, for those students, the lack of knowledge and understanding would not deter them from persevering and achieving an ultimate goal. Instead, they utilized the disadvantage to their advantage. They were able to showcase their own determination, motivation to succeed, and self-sufficiency throughout the college search and selection process and in their journey towards enrollment.

Recognizing the importance a baccalaureate degree plays in the pursuit of dream jobs, lifelong careers, and an improved financial well-being, the research study participants reflected

on their understanding of the role or purpose of higher education. Several participants explained how confident they felt in their belief of the strong role higher education will play in the pursuit of their dream jobs or in living out their dreams. For others, obtaining a baccalaureate degree was the only way to advance into the next, or higher, socioeconomic status in order to buy the materials items one has always desired.

When asked to reflect on their perceptions about the role or purpose of higher education, the traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama who participated in this qualitative research study offered many varied opinions. For some, the role or purpose of higher education was to achieve a goal or live out dream their parent(s)/guardian(s) were never able to accomplish. For others, it was the only step to the pursuit of a dream career, and for many, it would help them to climb higher in the social ranks. No matter the perceived role or purpose, higher education continued to be significant to this population of research study participants.

Research Question 2

What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the influence of socioeconomic status – as defined by the combination of the parent/guardian’s education, income, and occupation – in their decision to pursue an higher education?

During their interviews, all 14 of the research study participants discussed the role financials, including socioeconomic status, played in their college search and selection process at least once. For the vast majority of the research study participants, the role of financials and the importance of money was discussed frequently and in-depth over the course of the semi-structured interviews. Designed to closely follow the three distinct, or developmental, phases of

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice (predisposition; search; and choice), the interview protocol was prepared ahead of time and was comprised of 11 total interview questions. The interview questions were asked in chronological order as the student navigates the college search and selection process.

During the first phase, predisposition, the research study participants shared their passion for the pursuit of higher education. It was during this first phase of the college search and selection process that the research study participants determined whether or not they would pursue a higher education after high school graduation. Several research study participants shared how they dreamt of college at an early age. Others revealed how they always assumed college was the next step. For these research student participants, they were united in their destiny to pursue higher education, no matter the circumstances.

Some research study participants recalled college being spoken of highly and frequently in their home life throughout childhood, despite the fact that their parent(s)/guardian(s) never pursued education past high school graduation or only enrolled in a handful of classes at a local community college. A few shared how the pursuit of higher education was greatly encouraged in their home life throughout childhood even though the parent(s)/guardian(s) annual earnings, or income, made them eligible for need-based financial funding. Other research study participants explained how their parent(s)/guardian(s) wanted them to pursue a career that was better than their own occupation.

When asked to reflect on their perceptions about the role or purpose of socioeconomic status in the decision to pursue higher education, the traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama who participated in this qualitative research study discussed how their own backgrounds, including family, social, and/or financial, influenced their decision in

some way. The path to the pursuit of higher education was different for each and every research study participant. However, one common theme remained constant – socioeconomic status was the driving factor. These first generation college students witnessed their own families wish for a higher education, aspire to make more money, and even dream of what their careers might have been, if they had only been able to pursue higher education themselves.

Research Question 3

What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role of socioeconomic status in navigating their college search and selection process?

Exhibiting strong levels of independence, the research study participants navigated the college search and selection process often almost alone, or with very little shared information. With intense determination, a motivation to succeed, and self-sufficiency, the research study participants persevered. The research study participants took the little bit of knowledge they had and researched colleges and universities across the United States exploring admission criteria, support services, and most importantly, the costs associated with pursuing higher education.

The research study participants were unanimously confident in their decision to pursue higher education. As they moved from the first phase, predisposition, to the second, phase, search, the research study participants explained that the knowledge and information they already obtained about colleges and universities was not adequate enough to aid them in a thorough and successful college search and selection process. In order for these students to conduct a well-informed and thorough college search and selection process, the research study participants relied on researching higher education to aid in their efforts.

As first generation college students, the research study participants had to rely heavily on

sources other than their parent(s)/guardian(s) for knowledge and information about higher education. Information came from high school guidance counselors and university personnel for some, and for others, they had to seek knowledge and search for information regarding higher education elsewhere – by conducting their own research via the technology and the Internet (college webpages, YouTube videos, and/or Google searches) and campus visits.

The individual socioeconomic status of each research study participant did impact how research played a role in navigating their college search and selection process. Some of the research study participants had the financial means necessary to travel across the country and take official campus visits at colleges or universities of interest across the United States, which aided in their ultimate college choice. Others were not as fortunate, lacking in financial means or parental support, and instead relied heavily on virtual campus tours to replace a physical visit. The socioeconomic status of the research student participants never deterred them from the pursuit of higher education. However, it did play a role in how their research was conducted during the second phase of the college search and selection process.

When asked to reflect on their perceptions about the role or purpose of socioeconomic status in navigating their college search and selection process, the traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama who participated in this qualitative research study shared consistent opinions. One's socioeconomic status did not limit the navigation of the college search and selection process. Instead, one's socioeconomic status altered the navigation of the process. Even if the research study participant was unable to physically visit a college or university of interest across the United States due to external factors such as lack of financials or a lack of parental support, the research study participant could still virtually explore the campus. For this population of research study participants, it was not a question of whether or not

socioeconomic status played a role in navigating their college search and selection process. It was instead how socioeconomic status played a role.

Research Question 4

What perceptions do traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama have about the role socioeconomic status played in their ultimate college choice?

Every research study participant explained how one's financials, including their socioeconomic status, played a role in their college search and selection process. For a large majority of the research study participants interviewed, it was their background, including family, social, and financial backgrounds, that played such a significant role in their ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama. The costs associated with pursuing higher education in America were considered. Additionally, the family's previous experience, or lack thereof, with American higher education was considered.

As the students transitioned from the second phase, search, to the third and final phase, choice, of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice, the role of financials and the importance of one's socioeconomic status were revisited. Topics such as the parent/guardian's highest level of education and the family's access to financial resources resurfaced. A few research study participants shared stories of how a lack of higher education in their family inspired them to do something their parent(s)/guardian(s) had never done. For others, they came from a family with limited access to financial resources and wanted to pursue higher education in hopes of earning more over the course of a lifetime as a result of their obtainment of a baccalaureate degree. To the research study participants, it did not matter how socioeconomic status played a role in their ultimate college choice. All that mattered to them was that socioeconomic status did, in fact, play a role in their ultimate college choice.

This population of first generation college students shared a common belief that financials, driven by the combination of the parent/guardian's education, income, and occupation, not only played a factor throughout the navigation of their college search and selection process but also played a factor in their ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama. For an overwhelming majority of the research study participants, financials – whether the access to or absence of – played a large, and sometimes the only role, in their ultimate college choice.

First generation students, like those who participated in this qualitative research study, are often cognizant of the costs associated with pursuing higher education because they tend to come from low-income backgrounds and disadvantaged and underrepresented student populations. For these students, the role of financials, including one's socioeconomic status, can play a significant factor in their ultimate college choice. A few of the research study participants decided to stay in-state and enroll at The University of Alabama. Citing in-state tuition as a way to aid in reducing the overall costs associated with pursuing higher education, the five Alabamians chose to make a financially-based decision. Parent(s)/guardian(s) who were living on a limited income would not have the means necessary, or disposable income available, to pay for four years of higher education. These in-state students were lucky because their ultimate college choice, The University of Alabama, was not only the best “fit”, but it was also the best decision for them and their families financially. For the remaining research study participants, the nine out-of-state students, the cost of pursuing higher education was not an issue. They were determined to not let the costs associated with pursuing higher education deter them from living out their dreams. This faction of research study participants was united because they did not have their parent(s)/guardian(s) to rely on for past college experiences and information about

higher education. However, they were not at all united in their financial backgrounds. The financial situations of the out-of-state students differed greatly – some had parent(s)/guardian(s) who could afford the hefty price tags of out-of-state tuition, while others had to rely on external funding and financial assistance. No matter their financial backgrounds, all out-of-state research study participants were determined to follow their hearts, no matter the costs, and ultimately decided on best college “fit” for them.

When asked to reflect on their perceptions about the role or purpose of socioeconomic status in navigating their ultimate college choice, the traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama who participated in this qualitative research study revealed how the cost of pursuing higher education weighed heavily on their ultimate college choice. Recruitment efforts and the official campus visit were also cited as playing a major role in the ultimate college choice. However, for this population of first generation college students, it ultimately came down to socioeconomic status and the role of financials – whether the access to or absence of – when making their ultimate college choice.

Limitations

A qualitative research study, like any other research study, has limitations. One limitation to the research study was the requirement for research study participants to be selected from the students who actively participate in the Legacy Scholars program at The University of Alabama. The Legacy Scholars program is open to all first generation college students. However, students must apply to be admitted to the cohort-based program prior to the beginning of their freshman year. By limiting the research study population only to students actively involved in this small, cohort-based program, the size of the research study pool would be smaller than usual.

The utilization of qualitative methodology limits the findings of the already smaller than usual research study to only the 14 first generation college students who participated in the interviews. A quantitative research approach would have yielded larger and broader findings but was not selected as the research method of choice because the completion of surveys would not have provided the holistic descriptions needed to better understand the college choice process for first generation college students at The University of Alabama. The decision to utilize and implement a qualitative approach enabled the data to yield both a comprehensive insight and a holistic story into the role socioeconomic status played in this student population's ultimate college choice to enroll at The University of Alabama.

As with any recollection of past occurrences, it can often be difficult for individuals to recall facts and remember information surrounding a specific event. The utilization of qualitative methodology allowed the research study participants to relive vivid stories and describe detailed personal accounts through a semi-structured interview. However, there may have been incidences when the research study participants were not able to accurately recall facts or precisely describe situations relating to their college search and selection process. Despite the limitations, the research study participants were able to recall past experiences and share stories descriptive in nature. The collection of interview responses and data were full of rich examples providing a better glimpse into the college choice process for first generation college students desiring to pursue higher education.

Lastly, not all data collected through the interviews were shared in the findings. Depth and breadth in order to gain knowledge of or experience with a problem of interest are needed when conducting qualitative research. Qualitative interviews enable the researcher to explore both. However, due to both the depth and breadth of data collected through qualitative inquiry,

some data were left out of the findings. Even though some data was omitted unintentionally from the findings, the decision to utilize and implement qualitative methodology proved to be successful. The findings presented in this research study were able to provide the level of depth and breadth necessary to accurately present the role socioeconomic status played in traditional first generation college students at The University of Alabama navigating their college search and selection process.

Recommendations for Practice

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explain how first generation college students perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice. The results of this research study have provided me, the researcher, with a better understanding of how first generation college students navigate the college search and selection process overall, with much emphasis placed on the role of socioeconomic status. Research study findings revealed commonalities that can be utilized to the advantage of first generation college students in order to implement services that will provide support, opportunities, resources, and programming for this student population they might not otherwise receive. I will now outline the recommendations for practice for the following groups: students; colleges and universities; and high school guidance counselor(s).

Recommendations for Students

The 14 first generation college students who participated in this research study all shared one common goal – the desire to pursue higher education. While they are all currently living out their dreams, their path there was not at all the same. For many research study participants, they began considering the decision to pursue higher education earlier than usual, during their childhood or as early as junior high school years. For others, they always knew they wanted to

pursue higher education past high school graduation; yet; their path along the way was less straight.

It is recommended that all students desiring to pursue higher education, especially first generation college students, begin the college search and selection process early. By doing so, the students are setting themselves up for success by gaining advantage over others who are navigating the college search and selection process at the same time. The research study participants who began navigating their college search and selection process earlier than usual in their high school careers allowed themselves ample time to thoroughly conduct research about colleges and universities across the United States. As a result, these students were able to navigate a much more thorough college search and selection process, yielding an ultimate college choice that was the proper collegiate “fit”.

Another recommendation for students desiring to pursue higher education is to visit colleges of interest, if at all possible. Financials may limit the possibility. Or in the case of one of the research study participants, the parents did not support the visit. If external factors are not an issue, making a college visit and taking an official campus tour is an important step in the college search and selection process. For first generation college students, the college visit and tour may prove to be most beneficial in the pursuit of higher education. Not only will an official campus tour educate the student on the necessary information surrounding colleges and universities, but the physical presence on a college campus will also enable the student to envision being there in the future. The research study participants who visited college campuses during their college search and selection process felt strongly that such visits played an instrumental role in their research and led to their ultimate college choice.

Research conducted early in the college search and selection process also enabled those students to be better prepared financially to address the costs associated with pursuing higher education. Another recommendation for all students desiring to pursue higher education, especially first generation college students, is to become educated on all the financial requirements surrounding the pursuit of higher education. A sound understanding of the financial obligations that come with obtaining a baccalaureate will help prospective students identify ways to pay tuition, fees, etc. and plan accordingly for the next four years. Early planning and preparation could possibly lead to job opportunities on campus as a student worker, intern, or research assistant, as well as off campus at any local restaurant, business, or retailer. Early planning and preparation may also increase the likelihood of receiving financial assistance in the form of scholarships, grants, and financial aid. If a student waits too long, the student misses the deadline to apply for funds and is disqualified from any potential financial awards. For the research study participants who researched colleges and universities across the United States early in their college search and selection process, they were able to apply for financial funding in plenty of time to make an informed decision. For many of them, their access to such funds played a significant role in the ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama

In addition to researching and visiting colleges and universities across the United States, the research study participants who cited strong levels of support throughout their college search and selection process confidently believed it was the support that validated their decision to pursue higher education. Though all acted independently at some point during their college search and selection process, the research study participants that described feeling strong support from high school guidance counselor(s), university personnel, and most importantly, strong

support from family members, were the students who were most vocal about their successes in pursuit of higher education. It is recommended that all prospective students desiring to pursue higher education find someone to act as a cheerleader and encourager for them throughout the college search and selection. Having a strong support system will prove to be most valuable in the journey to enrollment.

Recommendations for Colleges and Universities

When selecting the ultimate college choice, a student moves through a series of three separate events. First, the student decides the set of colleges and/or universities to apply to for admission. Each college then independently decides whether to admit or reject the student. In the third and final event, the student with or without assistance, decides which college or university to attend from the subset of colleges that admitted the student. It is important to recognize the key role in the second of a series of three events colleges and universities play in the college search and selection process. Much of the decision surrounding one's ultimate college choice resides with the college or university. With that in mind, it is imperative for colleges and universities across the United States to realize just how important their roles are. If higher education is going to continue fulfilling its primary objective and purpose of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all, it is recommended that colleges and universities across the United States provide targeted and specialized marketing for specific student populations, especially growing student populations such as first generation college students.

The University of Alabama has already been proactive in efforts aimed at increasing the success of first generation college students by partnering with The Coca-Cola Company to offer scholarships to first generation college students and most importantly, by the creation of the

Legacy Scholars program. However, The University of Alabama, like so many others, should do a better job advertising such support, opportunities, resources, and programming in order to attract more first generation college students. It is recommended that The University of Alabama, in addition to all other higher education institutions, outline efforts to increase information disseminated about higher learning for first generation college students.

First, The addition of targeted email campaigns aimed at first generation college students utilizing the institution's CRM (customer relationship management) system during their recruitment process may yield more interest. The majority of CRMs have the functionality to send targeted messages at a scheduled time making this recommendation easy to implement. The recruitment process and discussions with university personnel proved to be beneficial for several of the research study participants. Emails drafted from key university personnel and sent through the institution's CRM can have a positive influence on the student's recruitment process and may prove to be the sole factor in deciding one's ultimate college choice.

Additionally, the creation of a specialized webpage with information tailored to the first generation college student population may also help the prospective first generation college student feel confident in one's potential success, thus resulting in an increased likelihood to enroll. The inclusion of general higher education terminology, a schedule of upcoming deadlines, links to other on-campus program and support services, and most importantly, financial information including links to applications for scholarships and financial aid are all recommended examples to include. The research study participants explained the role research played in their college search and selection process. By simplifying the research process for a student population who has little, if any, knowledge about higher education, colleges and universities can bring information to the forefront and make it much more easily accessible.

Such actions as these recommended would not only enable first generation college students to feel increased access to American higher education, but it would also most likely increase their likelihood to enroll.

Lastly, the creation and sharing of short informational videos may enable the first generation college student to feel one's access to higher education is not limited. By bringing the information to the first generation college students in a format that speaks specifically to them, they can feel more confident in their own abilities. The campus visit or official campus tour was revealed by many research study participants as playing a key role in their ultimate college choice. The inclusion of a virtual campus tour video hosted by a first generation college student may allow other prospective first generation college students to relate to their peers. This recommendation can prove to be essential if a first generation college student is unable to travel and take an official campus tour. Campus tours, offered both virtually and in-person, enable the prospective first generation college students to visualize their own successes by setting foot on campus, thus hopefully producing higher levels of confidence in their abilities and eventual decision to pursue higher education.

Recommendations for High School Guidance Counselor(s)

Some of the research study participants graduated from high schools with active and influential guidance counselors. Whereas, others were not so fortunate. I, too, was one of those who was not so fortunate. I navigated the college search and selection process without any assistance from my high school guidance counselor. That has been over 15 years ago now. However, I vividly remember the only information she shared with me was the upcoming dates of standardized tests. I received no formal counseling or recommendations for life after high school graduation from her. Yet, I did receive information and strong support from my parents,

both of whom are college graduates. This made my college search and selection process much easier because they were both knowledgeable regarding the admissions process, applying for scholarships, etc. For the 14 first generation college students who participated in my research study, they did not have such a fall back because their parent(s)/guardian(s) did not attend college. Instead, they needed to rely solely on high school guidance counselors.

It is recommended that high school guidance counselors take the time to personally get to know each and every one of their students. If they do not, they are doing a disservice to their students. I recognize that due to school funding models the sheer volume of students is often too much for a high school guidance counselor to handle. However, if at all possible, it is imperative that all high school guidance counselors learn the personal needs and wants of all students. By doing so, the students will receive tailored advice recommending the next steps deemed best for their lives after high school graduation. As revealed throughout the interviews, many of the research study participants relied only on the support provided by high school guidance counselors throughout the college search and selection process, whether it comes in the form of a recommended back-up institution or in the form of counseling for a student whose academic achievements were much higher than her peers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Many of the previous studies conducted examining first generation college students utilized a quantitative approach. However, more recently, studies have begun utilizing a qualitative methodological approach to understanding the college search and selection process of first generation college students. It is intended that my research will add to the growing library of first generation college students research, with my qualitative research study making a significant contribution to the field of higher education.

The four primary research questions guided this qualitative study and yielded five common themes of presented findings. The findings of this qualitative research study have only scratched the surface on the need for an increased knowledge of and a better understanding for the ways in which first generation college students navigate the college search and selection process. With the everchanging of landscape of American higher education, it is imperative that researchers never stop their quest of exploration of first generation college students in order to identify new, varied, and creative ways of providing support, opportunities, resources, and programming for this student population they might not otherwise receive. In order for social scientists, policy makers, and educators like myself to work to improve academic success of the first generation college student population, conducted research must do the following: inform issues and areas of concern; provide direction for change; guide the implementation; and ultimately aid in recognizing how to further provide resources for continuous improvement. My recommendations for future research will further explore the level of support provided by the parent(s)/guardian(s), the relationship with the high school guidance counselor(s), and the role of the campus visit or official campus tour.

The Level of Support Provided by the Parent(s)/Guardian(s)

A large majority of the research study participants often described feeling strong support from family members throughout their college search and selection process. The role of parent(s)/guardian(s) was revealed as playing the greatest amount of support in the pursuit for higher education. While the findings of the qualitative research study revealed strong levels of support from parent(s)/guardian(s), it is important to better understand what constitutes “strong feelings of support”. It is recommended to conduct future research exploring the level of support provided by the parent(s)/guardian(s).

In order to further explore the level of support provided by the parent(s)/guardian(s), I recommend a follow-up quantitative research study be conducted. By asking first generation college students to quantify the level of support received during their college search and selection process, one can better understand at what level support does not influence the decision to pursue higher education. I recommend generating a survey with sliding scale questions to aid in quantifying the responses from students. Additionally, it is recommended to further examine the ways in which the support was provided. For this future research, I foresee that either a quantitative or a qualitative research study will suffice. By utilizing a quantitative methodology approach, my research could be conducted via a survey instrument with multiple choice options defining how the support was provided. This option would yield larger and broader findings. Whereas, a qualitative option would yield most descriptive and holistic findings. By utilizing a qualitative methodology approach, the research could be conducted via interview. A prepared interview protocol would enable me, the researcher, to conduct the interview with the intent of collected desired findings.

The Relationship with the High School Guidance Counselor(s)

For many of the research study participants, their independence in pursuit of higher education was validated in the navigation of their own trajectory in order to become enrolled. However, the research study participants revealed that they still needed some form of encouragement or support. The findings of the qualitative research study revealed feelings of cited support from high school guidance counselor(s) and/or some other form of administrative support provided at the secondary level. It is recommended to conduct future research exploring the first generation college student's relationship with the high school guidance counselor(s).

In order to further explore the relationship a prospective first generation college student has with a high school guidance counselor, I recommend a two-part follow-up research study comprised of a quantitative component and a qualitative component. I would first conduct the quantitative component of the research study. I would utilize a short survey questionnaire to quantify how often the student interacts with the high school guidance counselor. Within the questionnaire, I would also inquire about the types of interaction (face-to-face, group, email, etc.). Then, I would follow up with the second phase, the qualitative component, of the research study by conducting short, semi-structured interviews. I would prepare an interview protocol ahead of time and ask questions exploring the research study participants' perceptions of the ways in which their relationship with a high school guidance counselor, or lack thereof, impacted their decision to pursue higher education.

The Role of the Campus Visit

Some of the research study participants shared that a virtual search of a college website with access to digital photos and uploaded videos would suffice in providing information to make an informed ultimate college choice. However, for many of the other research study participants, they needed to set foot on a college campus in order to make an informed ultimate college choice. The findings of the qualitative research study revealed the important role campus visits played in the first generation college students' research prior to enrolling at The University of Alabama. It is recommended to conduct future research exploring further the role of the campus visit in the college search and selection process.

In order to further explore the role of the campus visit in the college search and selection process, I recommend an additional, or follow-up, qualitative research study be conducted. I would like to prepare an interview protocol delving deeper into the campus visit. I recognize

that some of the questions posed could be asked utilizing a quantitative survey instrument.

However, I desire to conduct future research that yields a more comprehensive description of this part of the college search and selection process. Questions would surround themes such as how early the campus visit was taken, how many times a campus was visited, whom, if anyone, the student met with, and what, if any, research was conducted prior to the official campus visit.

Future of the Framework

Due to its influence in the field of college choice scholarship, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice (predisposition, search, and choice) was selected as the theoretical framework for my qualitative research study. The model not only served the research study by guiding the creation of the four primary research questions, but the model also served by guiding in my creation of the 11 question interview protocol.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) were not the first higher education scholars to study the college choice process. They are not the only ones either. However, their significant contribution to the field of college choice scholarship continues to be one of the most highly regarded, recognized, and cited works within the discipline. Often regarded as a pivotal framework in the field of college choice research, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) looked further than previous scholarship on the college choice process and explored the ways in which student background influences the ultimate decision to pursue higher education, or the ultimate college choice.

Even though the model is 30+ years of age, it continues to influence higher education researchers by serving as their theoretical framework of choice. To this day, the Three-Phase Model of College Choice (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987) has become one of the most widely referenced theories in the field of college choice scholarship. While I foresee Hossler and

Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice continuing to serve as a primary model of college choice for future research, I would strongly consider utilizing the work of other scholars as a potential framework for future research. A criticism of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice is the fact that it is a structured theoretical framework, which tends to limit its application. The selection and application of a theoretical framework through the lens of critical race theory as a theoretical framework of choice would guide, as oppose to restrict, the research inquiry. A first generation college student herself, I recommend utilizing Yosso's (2005) work on community cultural wealth as a theoretical framework of choice for future research.

Researcher Reflection

As I reflect on the findings of this qualitative research study, I am first and foremost pleasantly surprised with the amount of data I collected. The 14 research study participants I interviewed for this qualitative research study took time away from their busy lives to spend about 45 minutes with me to share their own experiences and perceptions. Through vivid stories and detailed personal accounts, these first generation college students trusted me, a researcher who they only recently met, through the revelation of their own self-discoveries and through the recollection of personal situations, even ones that were potentially sensitive. I was in awe with the depth and breadth of information shared. Additionally, I was amazed with their trust and willingness to share about their own stories and personal experience navigating the college search and selection process. I am confident that the rapport built with the research pool played a significant factor in their confidence in our relationship and my trustworthiness.

At the conclusion of the interviews, I spent a significant amount of time reviewing and revisiting the results of the qualitative research study. I was most surprised to recall that so many

of the research study participants shared their intense desire and earnest willingness to pursue careers in the professional fields, such as law and medicine. This research study participant population was comprised of a handful of ambitious doctors, some wishful attorneys, and a few aspiring engineers. For this population of first generation college students, they not only had big dreams of being the first in their family to go to college, but they also desired to take their dreams to the next level. I was surprised when so many of the research study participants shared their plans to pursue higher education a step further in their pursuit of a professional career, willingly acknowledging even more higher education was required past a baccalaureate degree. I was surprised to discover that – no matter the circumstances – this group was determined to find their way and navigate their own paths to success in their pursuit of higher education.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explain how first generation college students perceive the ways in which socioeconomic status influenced their ultimate college choice. Data collected through semi-structured, 45-minute, individual interviews with 14 first generation college students at a large, state public institution, The University of Alabama, revealed vivid stories and detailed personal accounts. These vivid stories and detailed personal accounts explained how the research study participants navigated the college search and selection process through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice (predisposition, search, and choice). The research study participants shared commonalities, including age, student type (traditional first time freshman), and student classification (first generation college students), but each of their college search and selection process stories was different. Some of the research study participants were always confident they would attend their "dream school", while others took longer to navigate the college search and selection process

taking longer to decide on their ultimate college choice. However, one shared experience remains a constant that will continue to keep these 14 research study participants and first generation college students connected forever – the ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama.

This qualitative research study only represents a small sample population of first generation college students at a single higher education institution, The University of Alabama, in the United States. The sample population was racially and ethnically diverse, as well as diverse in terms of gender and sex. Additionally, the sample population was comprised of both in-state (5) and out-of-state (9) students. While the population size may be small, it helps to support the dire need for increased knowledge and a better understanding of the ways in which first generation college students navigate the college search and selection process. With an increased knowledge of and a better understanding for the ways in which first generation college students navigate the college search and selection process, social scientists, policy makers, and educators like me can work to improve academic success of this specialized student population.

This population of first generation college students experienced hardships and faced obstacles throughout life deterring them from ever pursuing higher education. Whether they worked a part-time job throughout their high school careers or visited college campuses alone, these research study participants were dedicated to achieving their ultimate goal – pursuing higher education with the awarding of a baccalaureate degree at the end of four years. Instead of allowing the hardships and obstacles deter them from their dreams, they preserved and accomplished a goal no one in their family ever had accomplished. For these 14 research study participants, they have laid the groundwork and paved the way for own future families one day. By gaining access to higher education, these research study participants are helping to

demonstrate that higher education can fulfill its primary objective and purpose of providing education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all.

First generation college students face their own set of unique challenges when pursuing higher education. By utilizing the findings of this qualitative research study, researchers like myself are able to hear the stories of first generation college students and then tell the stories in order to further decrease the disparity and continue removing barriers hindering access to higher education. But the work is never done. If colleges and universities across the country want to continue to fulfill their primary objective of providing higher education that is both equally accessible and affordable for all, higher education researchers and practitioners must dedicate their time, energy, and resources to understanding how socioeconomic status influences college choice of first generation college students.

Data collected through this research study can and should be utilized to inform current practices and shape future higher education research with the intent of providing support, opportunities, resources, and programming for this student population they might not otherwise receive. In order to ensure that the unique and everchanging needs of first generation college students are met, higher education researchers and practitioners need to continue listening to the stories of these students. For the 14 first generation college students who participated in my research study, their story needed to be told and is worth retelling time and time again.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

1. Could you describe for me why you decided to go to college?
2. You have recently completed your first year of study at The University of Alabama. Could you describe your experience for me under the lens of a traditional first generation college student that just completed your first year of study at The University of Alabama?
3. Prior to attending The University of Alabama as a traditional first generation college student, what knowledge did you have about colleges and universities in the United States?
 - a. How did you learn about colleges and universities in The United States?
4. What, if any, role did your parent(s)/guardian(s) play in your decision to pursue an American higher education?
 - a. Could you talk about the ways your parent(s)/guardian(s) were involved in your exploration and understanding of American colleges and universities?
5. Did your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend college?
 - a. What institution?
 - b. Have you visited the institution?
 - c. How familiar are you with the institution?
 - d. What is your parent(s)/guardian(s)' current occupation?
6. When in your high school career did you begin navigating the college search process?
 - a. Who were your main resources for information on the college search process?

- b. What institutions did you research?
 - c. Why did you research those particular institutions?
- 7. Could you talk about the ways in which your parent(s)/guardian(s) were involved in your college search process?
- 8. When did you begin applying to institutions?
 - a. What institutions did you apply to?
 - b. Why did you choose to apply to those particular institutions?
 - c. How was your parent(s)/guardian(s) influential in where you applied to?
- 9. When you submitted your application for admission to those institutions, did you apply for financial assistance?
 - a. Did you apply for financial aid?
 - i. How was your parent(s)/guardian(s) involved in that process?
 - b. Did you apply for scholarships?
 - i. How was your parent(s)/guardian(s) involved in that process?
- 10. How do you feel your access to financial resources impacted your decision to apply to those institutions?
- 11. Describe for me your own perceptions regarding your experience from acceptance to an institution to your ultimate college choice?
 - a. Who – and to what extent – was influential in your ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama?
 - b. What factor(s) were most important to you in your ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama?

- c. What factor(s) were most important to your parent(s)/guardian(s) in your ultimate college choice to attend The University of Alabama?

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval

June 27, 2019

Ms. Megan Welborn
Department of Academic Outreach
College of Continuing Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870388

Re: IRB # EX-19-CM-120 "The Role of Socioeconomic Status in College Choice: A Qualitative Exploration of First Generation College Students"

Dear Ms. Welborn:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your protocol has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46.104(d)(2) as outlined below:

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

The approval for your application will lapse on June 26, 2020. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the annual report to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

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