Influences on Middle Income, First-Generation Prospective College Students: Perspectives of College-Bound High School Seniors

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INFLUENCES ON MIDDLE-INCOME, FIRST-GENERATION PROSPECTIVE COLLEGE STUDENTS: PERSPECTIVES OF COLLEGE-BOUND HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

BY

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Ed.D. in the Education Leadership, Management, and Policy Program
Seton Hall University

2010
APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest thanks to my mentor, Dr. Rebecca Cox, for her guidance, compassion, earnestness, and humor throughout this arduous process. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Christopher Tienken and Dr. Joseph Martinelli, for their contributions and support.

Bettering myself and others through education was instilled in me as a primary value. I received this principle from my parents, Timothy and Patricia Dillon, both of whom are life-long educators, even in retirement. Thank you.

I would like to thank my sister, Katherine Dillon-Moore, and her family, Chris, Sean, and Madalyn, for their endless support and comfort.

I would like to express my appreciation to my friends, Dr. William Suriano, Dr. Andrea Daunarummo, Sister Patricia Tavis, Ms. Andrea Donio, and Mrs. Kelly Lake, for their continual support and awesome cheerleading abilities.

Finally, there are people whom I cannot acknowledge by name, but whom I would also like to thank. I would not be at this point in my career without the support of the administration of the “Maple Park” school district, its teachers, and its guidance counselors. My best wishes are extended to the students who participated in this study; may they find their college careers as rewarding as I have mine.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which prospective first-generation students from middle-income families make decisions about attending college. I sought to discover the following: (1) what influenced students’ decisions, and how the students felt about these influences; (2) how students interpreted the importance of going to college; (3) how students defined and executed a college search; (4) what problems the students anticipated having once they enrolled in college; and (5) how students interpreted the role of finances in their plans for attending college. Between mid-November and mid-December of 2009, I interviewed 14 high school seniors from a predominantly middle-income school district in New Jersey. Although the students’ situations, and their college preparations, varied from one student to another, there were several points regarding the college decision-making process on which the students agreed. The students viewed information they received from the colleges as redundant and confusing. For various reasons, students were not completely satisfied with their guidance counselors and teachers as sources of information about college. The students expressed feelings of being isolated from parents and friends, revealed that none of them had any substantial savings for college, and viewed college as a place that would provide them with job training for careers that would give them better lives with respect to quality time with their families.
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Chapter I

Introduction

David is a college freshman. He graduated from a suburban high school, prepared, or so he thought, for a four-year college. He did well in high school; his grades were honor roll and he was on the soccer team. He had a job at the mall, and he volunteered at the animal shelter. His parents, well-established and in the middle class, are a mechanic and a secretary. They have always wanted him to become a lawyer. He has enrolled in a small, private college not too far from home, about an hour’s ride to the south, so he can visit with them and his girlfriend, who is still in high school, every weekend.

College life is very different from his home life. He does not have to get up at the crack of dawn to get to class, his parents do not nag him every day, like they used to, to do his work or get good grades. He does not have to worry about his soccer practice interfering with work. There is no soccer practice, and his employers at the mall said they would be happy to see him back in December for the Christmas rush.

Even with all of those pressures off, David is not doing well in his classes. He struggles with the work and worries about his midterms. His professors, he thinks, are ok, but he is not used to the large lecture hall, the strange times of his classes, and the online assignments.

The dorm is something else entirely. He does not get along with his roommate and loathes sharing a bathroom with all of the other guys on the floor. So, on this late
Friday afternoon, just like last Friday afternoon, he is packing his dirty laundry so that his mom can do it for him this weekend.

After yelling at him for not being home on a weeknight at ten o’clock, and not accepting his explanation that his class did not end until that time, his parents decide that maybe the four-year college is too expensive for David to be wasting his time and their money. There are, after all, there are other ways to become a lawyer. The last time he went home, his parents told him that he could always come back, take some time off, work at the mall again, and maybe take some classes at the community college. Some of his friends from high school have already chosen to do this. David decides to consider it an option, but is not too thrilled about it.

This is not what David expected out of college. He reaches back into his memory to recall what exactly he did expect when he “made it” here. When did he decide that he wanted to be a lawyer? Or was that always his parents’ wish? Didn’t his friends mention something about this college or the program that he enrolled in? Or was it his teacher or guidance counselor?

Statement of the Problem

I developed the scenario I described in the previous section from several sources. I consolidated some of the experiences that first-generation college students shared in interviews from stories that I read in college newspapers. I based some of this scenario on documented cases in the scholarly research literature. Finally, as I am a teacher whose former students visit her on occasion and share their college experiences with both me and my current students, I based some of the scenario on their stories.
Although my sources have been varied, I have found that the scenario that I constructed is one that might be familiar for many college freshmen who are first-generation college students; children whose parents had never graduated from college.

This scenario is not limited to any one district; it reflects a national trend in college attrition rates. Although college attendance rates are higher than they have been in the past, the percentage of the general population who hold college degrees has remained relatively unchanged (Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Roderick, et al., 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001).

While college graduation rates have remained relatively unchanged, attrition numbers have continued to grow as the students’ backgrounds have changed (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004; Van T. Bui, 2002). Clearly something is amiss. More students from various academic, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds are attending colleges in record numbers. Yet, it does not appear that they are making it through with a degree. The largest population of students at any randomly selected college in the United States is comprised of middle-income students (Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004). More frequently, those students are first-generation college students (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2004; Van T. Bui, 2002).

Most researchers have published quantitative studies on college preparation and attrition with samples taken from the college-going population, especially those students
who are from low-income, urban, minority families and are in the first generation to
attend college. My focus in this study was to explore the college preparation and
searches of potential first-generation students who are from middle-income families and
who live in the suburbs, a population at risk for college attrition that is understudied yet
significantly more likely to be college attendees (Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Ishitani,
2003; Pascarella et al. 2004).

For education professionals, developing an understanding of how these students
make choices about going to college while they are in the decision-making process can
assist educators in identifying and implementing effective ways to improve college access
and chances of retention for first-generation college students (Choy et al. 2000; Ishitani,
2003). At the research level, this study will contribute to the knowledge about college
attendance and college choice among middle-income, first-generation college students by
exploring their methods of decision-making and the influences they take into account
when they make college choice and attendance decisions.

Statement of the Purpose

First-generation students, regardless of race, income, or socioeconomic status,
are more likely to become college dropouts than their peers with college-educated parents
(Bergerson, 2007; Choy et al., 2000; Glenn, 2008; Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez
et al., 2009; Min, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004). Much of the current
research revolves around the persistence, or lack thereof, of these students at the college
level (Bergerson, 2007; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005;
Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004; Van T.
Bui, 2002), but very little research was aimed at surveying high school students as they move through the college decision-making process.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how prospective first-generation college students from middle-income families make decisions about preparing for and selecting a college.

**Research Questions**

Once they have decided to attend college, high school students who are prospective college students have to make many decisions. What courses should they take in high school? What activities should they be involved in? Should they spend their time volunteering or playing a sport, or should they attempt to do both? Should they take the SAT or the ACT? Without guidance from their parents, many prospective first-generation college students rely upon their friends, teachers, and guidance counselors. To what degree do they do this, and how helpful or detrimental are these people in answering their questions and providing actual guidance for them?

Because there are so many factors involved in the process of going to college, I started with one overarching question: What influences prospective first-generation college students' decisions to attend college, and to what extent do these students feel these influences are as important in their decision-making process? Specifically, the students discuss the impact that they felt their parents, friends, educators, and college-generated information had on their decisions to attend college, their college search process, and the types of colleges that they investigate.
Noting how large this question was, and seemingly complex to answer, I developed several subsidiary research questions to assist in answering this encompassing question. When I conducted the literature review and started to understand more of the scope of the problem, I developed more specific questions that I felt would help me better answer the overarching question.

One of the concepts brought to my attention throughout the literature review was how students perceived the importance of college. Many researchers suggested that first-generation college students viewed the purpose of college as being primarily vocational; that is, the only point in going to college was to train for a job (Bergerson, 2007; Oldfield, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001; Van T. Bui, 2002). Therefore, I thought the following question would assist me in answering the primary question:

a. How does a student interpret the importance of going to college; that is, why is going to college important to the student?

Some of the research suggested that students needed to conduct college searches to determine a college that would be a good fit for them and their academic and social needs (Bergerson, 2007; Choy et al., 2000; Freeman, 1997; Grimard & Maddaus, 2002; Herzog, 2005; McDonough, 2004; Roderick et al., 2008; Van T. Bui, 2002). Since I wanted to find out how students selected the schools that they were going to attend, I added two more research questions:

b. How does the student define an “effective college search”? 
c. How well does the student feel that he or she is able to conduct the self-defined “effective college search”?

Many of the reports that I found in which first-generation college students discussed the problems that they encountered while enrolled in college were from college newspapers, not from the scholarly research. In other words, various researchers used quantitative studies to assess college dropout rates, but there was little in the way of qualitative research describing the reasons that a student might drop out of college. This led me to evaluate college newspapers in addition to what little qualitative research I could obtain. In the college newspapers, first-generation college students described the problems that they encountered. I wanted to hear from the high school students who were planning to go to college whether they had anticipated any problems in going to college. Therefore, I developed the next research question:

d. What types of problems does the student anticipate encountering while he or she is in college?

Finally, finance plays a large role in determining a student’s decision to attend college, as well as which college he or she is able to attend. As I will discuss in Chapter II, some of the research suggested that middle-income students were especially averse to acquiring debt, and were therefore more likely to drop out of college due to debt acquisition than were high-income or low-income students (Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004). This led to the last research question to assist in exploring the influences on a prospective college student:
e. What role does financing a college education play a role in middle-income students' plans to attend college?

**Significance of the Study**

Regardless of their parents' income, first-generation college students are more reliant upon financial aid than continuing-generation students (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004). The reliance upon financial aid usually is an indicator of an at-risk student (Herzog, 2005; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004; St. John, 1996, as cited by Bergerson, 2007). However, more middle-income students have unmet financial needs than low- or high-income students (Herzog, 2005). Herzog reported that middle-income students were more likely to have unmet needs than their high-income counterparts, whose parents could afford (and had prepared financially for) their children's college education; and their low-income counterparts, whose parents' income qualifies them for financial assistance, grants, and loans (2005). Additionally, Herzog (2005) asserted that middle-income students faced "twice the risk of dropping out, while those from upper- and lower-income classes are unaffected" (p. 901).

Despite the best preparation and/or similar preparation in high school, first-generation college students are more at risk for college dropout than their continuing-generation peers (Choy et al., 2000; Glenn, 2008; Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et. al, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004, Somers et al., 2004). Many K-12 institutions are not prepared to help prospective first-generation college students with questions about college searches (McDonough, 2004). What is not frequently discussed, perhaps because
it is not understood, is what can be done at the K-12 level, as well as and perhaps in conjunction with, what is done at the college level so that there is a smoother transition between the two, and hopefully, a higher rate of graduation at four-year institutions. Hopefully, the information learned from the students in this study will provide a contribution towards that discussion.

**Design of the Study**

Researchers use case studies to explore and understand situations, which is what I wanted to do within this study: I wanted to explore how prospective, first-generation, middle-income college students made decisions about going to college. I used a collective case study design to study this population of students in a predominantly middle-income, suburban school district in New Jersey. In Johnson and Christensen’s (2008) definition of a collective case study, the researcher uses more than one participant within the same study in an attempt to understand the case in detail (p. 408). By doing this, I could obtain a consensus on how the students felt that they were prepared for college and some of the challenges that they faced.

One of the reasons for conducting this study is to help the educators and students of the district. Therefore, I used the district as the case, as it is a social group; the fourteen participants were examples of the occurrence of the designation “prospective first-generation middle-income college student” within the district. This process allowed me to explore multiple students’ perspectives on how the district helped prepare them for college, which was part of the overarching research question.
I also felt that a collective case-study design would be appropriate because it would allow me to explore how many different students felt about going to college and the planning that the process incorporated. I explored how these students connected the dots in order to become familiar with a "college culture", determined a college to attend, received and interpreted information from their parents, friends, and education professionals, and how they thought they would pay for the opportunity to obtain a college degree.

**Method**

As I detail in Chapter III, I conducted semi-structured interviews with prospective, first-generation middle-income students. By using this method, I could provide the students with an opportunity to put their experiences into their own words. I conducted the interviews, wrote and typed my notes, and used thematic analysis to analyze them.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are some limitations to this study. Students had the right to opt out of being digitally voice-recorded. Unfortunately, the majority of them chose this option, making my note-taking more generalized. To combat rampant overgeneralization and to collect specific information, I repeated verbatim quotes back to the students to ensure their accuracy. In my notes, I distinguished between generalized note-taking and the verbatim quotes by placing quotation marks around the verbatim quotes.

Sampling posed a problem for me. According to the Institutional Review Board, I had to contact parents first, then the students. Recruiting parents and students directly
would have been impossible for me to do as a lone researcher writing a dissertation. The district is extremely large, and contacting parents of upperclass students in several high schools was an insurmountable and expensive task. There are approximately one thousand students in the graduating class, making for two thousand parents who may or may not live together, and those who did not live together would each have to receive a flyer. Simply put, I do not have the financial resources to send flyers out to two thousand parents.

The district does not keep email addresses of parents, so there was no way to email a version of a flyer to all parents. I could have posted an announcement on the district’s website or on the district’s cable network, but that would have violated the requirement of the district’s administration that the district’s name not be publicized. That posting, available to all people with internet and cable television access, would identify them as the district conducting the research study, which is something that the administration of the district made clear to me that they did not want to happen, and therefore a pseudonym for the district will be used in presenting all information relating to the district.

A much simpler alternative might have been to attend a parent-teacher organization meeting. However, parent attendance is irregular at best at those meetings; further, since I would have to go to multiple high schools, there was a potential that meetings could overlap.

Therefore, I did purposeful sampling using a list of potential student candidates based on recommendations of guidance counselors. I chose to go to guidance counselors
to help me create this list because I believed that they would have a more comprehensive knowledge of the students than a teacher would. A guidance counselor has contact with a student for all four years of her or his high school career, would know about the student's plans, past performance in classes, and issues that may be occurring in the home. Additionally, guidance counselors have more interactions with parents than teachers do and could possibly tell me which parents were more likely to be receptive for this study.

However, this reliance upon guidance counselors posed an unforeseen problem in sampling. Many of the guidance counselors were unfamiliar with the term “first-generation college student”, and, when I explained it to them, immediately indicated children who were from low-income families. However, most of the students in this district were from middle-income families and were potential first-generation college students. Therefore, finding enough students to participate in the study was a bit of a challenge for both the guidance counselors and I. In other words, the guidance counselors knew the students, but were unsure of the parents’ educational statuses, even though the counselors might have had many meetings with the parents.

Additionally, the term “first-generation college student” is problematic for students. I proctored the PSAT at one of the district’s high schools in October of 2009. The demographic section asked the children to identify whether or not they would be the first generation of college students in their families. The students asked me to clarify, then asked me if a vocational college counted, if community college counted, and if nursing schools counted. Simply put, the students were not familiar with the term, and
possibly were unfamiliar with the different levels of higher education, so they needed clarification.

This seems to indicate that, as was the case with the guidance counselors and parents, students and parents did not have regular conversations about higher education. If students do not view their parents as sources of information on going to college, do students make the same generalization about other older people as sources, or people whom their parents may recommend to their children as potential sources for information? This problem, once again, reminded me of the overarching question: What influences the student and to what extent are these influences important?

Race, ethnicity, and gender were not factors in my selection of prospective student participants. As I mentioned, it was already difficult to identify who was a prospective first-generation college student, so I did not want to convey any more discrimination than was necessary. Although research has demonstrated that race and gender both play roles in students' determination to attend college and students' perceptions of college, the selection process, and college retention, my concern in this study was with students who are middle-income families, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender (Alexitch, Kobussen, & Stookey, 2004; Bergerson, 2007; Bloom, 2007; Carter, 2005; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Choy et al., 2000; Freeman, 1997; Horn, 1997; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1998; Oldfield, 2007; Roderick et al., 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001; Smyth & Hannan, 2007; Somers et al., 2006; Van T. Bui, 2002).

Regarding race, the district under study was predominantly White (European-American); therefore, it was more likely that potential candidates would be White. I
wanted to hear students’ voices regardless of what race they are, so I did not want to have a student not participate because of his or her race. Recently, administrators from the district started taking students to a historically Black college fair during the school day. If a student wanted to discuss this activity as part of her or his college-decision making process, she or he was given the opportunity to do so.

Additionally, the township that feeds the district under study has a below-average rate of college attainment for females, as compared to the rest of the State of New Jersey (Open Data Systems, 2010). This percentage reflects the women over the age of twenty-five and potentially affects young women’s college decision-making, as they lack role models in the form of aunts, cousins, and older sisters who may not have college degrees. Again, if a student wanted to discuss the input she received from older women who did not have a college education, women whom she may have viewed as role models, she was encouraged to do this, as this might have influenced her decision-making process.

I discussed college-going plans with students, regardless of status as regular education or special education status. Obviously, educational status as mainstreamed special education versus extreme educational handicap has some influence, as severely developmentally and learning disabled students are not college-bound or have so many needs that their experiences are not reflective of a general, college-going population. However, the special education administration of the district has instituted college-planning and transitional classes for special education students, mostly geared to those who are in mainstreamed classes and receive minimal special education support.
of the students who participated in this study reflected the minimal education support population, and did get educational assistance in the form of private tutors as well as special education staff that the township provided.

Some of the research indicated that high school students whose parents were college graduates had better grade point averages, took more challenging classes, and initiated more contact with their teachers than potential first-generation college students (Choy et al., 2000, Glenn, 2008, Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004, Somers et al., 2004). I was not able to identify students who were potential continuing-generation college students in order to form a contrast group to the potential first-generation college students that I interviewed. If I were able to do this, I might have been able to make more conclusive statements about the first-generation college students’ academic achievements, as an example, as compared to those in the district who are prospective continuing-generation college students.

However, this distinction was not possible because no education professional identified these groups as either potential continuing-generation college student or potential first-generation college student at the high school level. As I mentioned previously, the students had difficulty with the term as well; it is not a far cry to think that parents are unfamiliar with the term, too. Therefore, it is valuable to begin a discussion on who these students are, why they are at risk for college attrition, and explore what they are doing to prepare for college so that parents and educators can help them graduate from college.
Definition of Terms

*First-generation college students* are those who are the first generation in their families to continue education at the college level, meaning that their parents do not hold college degrees (Bergerson, 2007; Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; McDonough, 2004; Oldfield, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008; Somers et al., 2004; Van T. Bui, 2002). *Prospective first-generation college students* are those students who are still in high school but are currently making their college plans. I refer to the comparison group of students, children of college-educated parents, as *continuing-generation college students* (Bergerson, 2007; Choy et al., 2000; Glenn, 2008; Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Min, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004).

There is no mention of education in the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of income. I define *middle-income families* as those who do not receive governmental help; that is, they do not receive help from the government in the form of a free lunch program while the student is enrolled in K-12 public schools. Students who are enrolled in private schools are not a part of this study. *Low-income families* would qualify for such a program (free or reduced lunch). There are not many students in the school district under study who the U.S. Census Bureau would classify as coming from a *high-income family*, as most of the children in that category attend private schools. Middle-income children of the district may interact with some high-income children, as they might share a neighborhood. Therefore, for potential interview candidate recruitment, only the distinction between middle- and low-income is pertinent.
I use the terms college and university interchangeably for a four-year institution, but I refer to a two-year institution as a community college. The choice to attend college is the decision to attend a college or university, and would be answered with either a yes or a no. The purpose of college is how a prospective student views the reason for attending a college or university. College choice refers to the school or types of schools the student selects for his search; whereas college search refers to the process of looking for colleges and evaluating college programs.

I define college culture as the overall understanding of the academic, social, and financial environment of higher education and the student’s place within it. This definition evolves out of Bourdieu’s concepts of economic (monetary value), social (the value of personal connections), and cultural (a person’s status in a culture and knowledge about that culture) capital (Bourdieu, 1977; as cited by Bergerson, 2007). Generally speaking, the more money a student has (economic capital), the more likely that he is exposed to those who have higher degrees of education (social capital), demonstrating the benefits and advantages to the culture (cultural capital) of those with an advanced degree (Bergerson, 2007). Cultural capital enables the educational system to become a “comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2) as the student would have “certain knowledge, skills, and other advantages,” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 2) such as social connections and experiences that make the educational system relevant to him or her (Carter, 2005). Thus, this threefold association makes the student’s connections helpful to him or her as he or she acquires information about going to college.
Chapter II  

Review of the Literature  

Despite multiple attempts by colleges and universities to maintain student enrollment, attrition numbers continue to grow (Martinez et. al, 2009; Pascarella et. al, 2004; Rosenbaum, 2001). While it is true that more students are attending college than have in the past, the percentage of college graduates with bachelor’s degrees remains relatively unchanged (Martinez et. al, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Rosenbaum, 2001). This discrepancy leads to the question of what prospective students expect out of their college experience. For this reason, it is worthwhile to ask prospective, first-generation college students, the majority of whom hail from middle-income families, their ideas about the purpose(s) of college. By hearing what students say about how they make decisions about going to college and what they expect from the experience, educators, parents, and students themselves may begin to anticipate problems before they happen, not as they are happening, or as students may find themselves overwhelmed with other issues.

In this chapter, I discuss previous research on college retention in relation to the background characteristics of first-generation and middle-income students. I begin with an overview of previous studies, a discussion of how this study contributes to that current literature, and include a discussion of the types of literature chosen for this particular study. From there, I include a discussion of family support for first-generation students, the college search process, academic preparation from high school, and middle-income
challenges. I conclude with support available to first-generation, middle-income college students at the college level.

**Overview of Previous Literature and How this Study Fits into the Literature**

To reiterate the points I identified in the Purpose and Problem sections in Chapter I, most researchers have conducted quantitative research on this subject. The students who participated in these studies were predominantly current college students. This state of the research, along with other issues that will be discussed further in this literature review, pose special problems in understanding college attrition rates of first-generation, middle-income students.

First, most of the published studies are derived from online surveys, distributed electronically to current university students. The sampling lists are generated from the student data collection procedures of individual colleges, which are potentially different for each college. A survey does not provide a forum for a student to explain why he or she would consider leaving the college. The student would simply indicate which one of the statements he or she is most likely to agree or disagree with, or feel strongly or weakly about. Once the student has not reenrolled, his piece of data is gone. Depending upon the size of the sample and the parameters of confidentiality or anonymity, it may be impossible for the researchers to detect which one of the participants disappeared. There is no exit survey, no way of tracking this student to find out if he or she transferred to another college, ran out of money, or simply decided that college life was just not for him or her.
Secondly, researchers may never know why that student was at that particular college to begin with, and therefore not know why the student has chosen to leave. A survey of incoming freshmen may identify the populations of students who attend, but again, are unable to provide forums for students to express what they might anticipate that their college experiences might be like, their academic preparation, and their view of the purpose of attending a college. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, sample sizes could be so large that it would be impossible to detect which student has left, and again, most surveys are anonymous.

One of the ways in which I hoped to address this issue was by providing the participants a forum to express their concerns and experiences in an interview setting. My focus in this dissertation was to describe how and why students make their choices to attend a college. By its nature, an interview, as will be detailed in Chapter III, provides such a forum. Prospective students were interviewed as they were making their decisions to attend, not about their decisions to continue attending a particular college.

Because of the difficulties listed above, researchers do not track down college dropouts and ask why these students are no longer at the college. However, researchers can ask prospective students why they want to go in the first place; this population of aspiring students is a potential at-risk population for college dropout. Simply put, if researchers and educators can understand why and how students make decisions, they can understand more about the decision itself.

There are researchers who have conducted studies that examined prospective college students’ decisions, but again, most of these studies were quantitative in nature,
and researchers have administered these surveys in questionable ways. For example, one Canadian research team (Alexitch et al., 2004) surveyed students’ perceptions of college, the sample consisting of a few classes of students who planned to attend college. They issued a survey to the students during the school day in Western Canada. When I examined the method and distribution of the survey, I wondered how accurate the students’ responses were: The researchers stated that students were timed for twenty minutes during class while taking the survey, and the students had researchers, guidance counselors, and teachers in the room with them while they took the survey. Furthermore, the students’ friends who were not going to college were told to read silently while the participants took the survey. This action immediately segregated the room into those who were doing something to appease administrators and those who were not, or those who were smart enough and/or financially stable enough to attend college and those who were not (Alexitch et al., 2004).

Further, most of the research presented on first-generation students does little to account for those students who are from middle-income families. As I will discuss further in this chapter, much of researchers’ focuses in this field has been directed at low-income students from urban areas, with a few (Grimard & Maddaus, 2002) describing the experiences of low-income students from rural areas.

Researchers who overlook the population of middle-income students are ignoring a majority of the college student population; that large population is comprised of first-generation students. Most students who attend college are in the upper- and middle-income brackets; many colleges, therefore, assume that their parents have college
educations. The percentage of the college population in the low-income group is
approximately 12%; middle-income students comprise approximately 60% to 70% of a
student body (Herzog, 2005). The percentage of first-generation students in a freshman
class at a randomly selected college is anywhere between 20% and 30% of the student
population (Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009). If college administrators assume that
all of the low-income freshmen are first-generation students and provide assistance only
to them, they accommodate only approximately one-third of a population that is at risk
for attrition.

The contrast between funding for middle-income students and low-income
students is sharp as well. Because of the income their parents earn, middle-income
students are less likely to receive scholarships and grants than low-income students.
Frequently, students who are in middle-income families are not part of the group that
colleges deem worthy of having a true financial need, and as a result, they are more
reliant upon employment and loans than low-income students are, both being indicators
of attrition behavior (Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Somers et al., 2004). Due to the
combination of the potential lack of financial preparation and lack of funding and
scholarships provided to students of middle-income backgrounds, Somers et al. (2004)
described “a real aversion to debt on the part of F-gen [first-generation college] students
and their parents...avoiding accumulated debt load even at the lowest level” (pp.
428-429) for the growing number of first-generation students.

Herzog (2005) found that debt as little as $2,500 was an indicator of non-
reenrollment for first-generation students, and specifically found that middle-income
students tended to be underfunded as compared to both high and low-income students. Middle-income parents were less likely to prepare for their child’s college education, and subsequently save for it, as compared to high-income parents.

Aside from generally ignoring the suburbs, there are few published studies that represent students from the Mid-Atlantic states; when they do, the general focus is upon urban areas such as New York City (Bloom, 2004) or Atlanta (Freeman, 1997). Geographically, many of the researchers have looked at California (McDonough, 2004), Maine (Grimard & Maddaus, 2002), the Midwest (Martinez et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2008), Ireland (Smyth & Hannan, 2007), and Canada (Alexitch et al., 2004).

For these reasons, I had decided to explore the experiences of middle-income students in a mid-Atlantic state, New Jersey, who are making decisions to attend college in the face of a few disadvantages. The first disadvantage is that the economy is currently in a recession, and prospective college students have to make a decision to spend money on an education, something that was not required for their parents’ success, in a time of general and widespread economic hardship. Secondly, these students are making that decision with the knowledge that their parents’ success in the middle-income bracket may disqualify them for grants, scholarships, and other funding. Thirdly, their parents are less likely to have saved enough financially to secure a place in academia, especially at a private, four-year institution, than other students in the same income bracket who are prospective continuing-generation students.
Qualitative Studies and Context

Qualitative studies are designed to present a context for which the research is to take place. The study of middle-income students in their decision-making processes warrants an understanding of the societal context and the cultural context of the importance of a college education. The absence of this understanding posed a problem for me when attempting to understand and interpret the perspectives revealed by the students’ responses.

To that end, I have included a variety of literature for this review. I have based this review upon scholarly, peer-reviewed literature. To grasp the context of the scholarly literature and those researchers’ implications and findings, and to understand the context in which the students whom the researcher will interview operate, I have incorporated vignettes from current first-generation, middle-income students as reported by college and university newspapers, an excerpt from a popular film, and an interview with a current first-generation college student.

The popular media have not ignored middle-income students from suburbia. Films and television programs, though potentially influential, are not investigatory. These forms of entertainment help perpetuate the idea that middle-income students attend colleges and universities, but at their core, they are fictional accounts which, in general, portray exaggerated struggles and conflicts that have some basis in reality; such as, college search, college choice, and on-campus life (Somers et al., 2006). I briefly discuss and present these in this literature review because of their greater portrayals that may have shaped how the participants in this study may view college life (the college party,
the sorority house, the professors, what do students think college life is like, etc.). Some of the students who did participate in this study did discuss films and television shows, such as MTV's "Sorority Life," as having an impact on how they viewed activities on campus.

References to media, televised, printed, and webbed, are also important because of their potential impact on college choice. In my own case, my parents strongly encouraged me to apply to Florida State University as an undergraduate but I did not because of the Bundy murders. In spite of the fact that Ted Bundy had committed the crimes when I was only a year old, the media repeatedly broadcasted the execution of this serial killer and references to his crimes when I was going through the college selection process. The media's allusions to the location of the murders, Florida State University, were on televised news reports, complete with a feature story of his execution in the local newspaper, distributed to the students weekly in American government class. Frankly, the whole experience made me afraid to attend Florida State. Though it may seem quite irrational now, I did not feel that my fear was irrational at the time.

It is perhaps because of these types of perceptions that I heard on NBC News while I wrote this chapter in September of 2009, a spokesperson from Yale describe the murder of Annie Le, a university student whom a male coworker murdered and then stuffed in a wall, was "something that could have happened anywhere - not a university crime, but a workplace crime" (NBC News, The Today Show, broadcast September 18, 2009). Many students would possibly decide not to consider going there if all they hear about it are reports of a death in the science laboratory.
In print and on the web, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time Magazine*, to name a few, all publish information on middle-income students; however, their research is not peer-reviewed, nor is it scholarly. Reading and researching journalists' information can help researchers understand the context of the society that they aim to describe, and because there is paucity within the research community of both a methodological and population standpoint, journalists' publications become important to read. Perhaps their insight and reporting, even though it is done with the aim of making a profit, can provide a jumping point for researchers to evaluate a phenomenon, or, in this case, to describe a decision-making process that may lead to the problems that students encounter which is limned in more scholarly research.

**First-Generation Students: Breaking a Family Tradition through a New Transition**

Transition years are difficult at nearly every level in education, be it a four-year-old entering pre-Kindergarten or an eighth-grade graduate who is starting high school. The one advantage that many parents have in helping their children is that most of them, and all of the parents of the students interviewed for this dissertation, have experienced a K-12 education, and can help the student with these transitional years. They have done the K-12 system.

However, the transition to college from high school poses more challenges: The students are not children but adults, financing becomes an issue, courses are not prescribed by guidance counselors, classes end late or are held irregularly or online, the student may have to hold a job as well as attend college, and the student may live away
from home and consequently have to adjust to a different living situation as well as the
different demands that are placed on him academically and socially.

There are many factors that may predict a student’s likelihood of attending
college. Two of the factors that form the basis of this prediction are socioeconomic status
and parents’ level of educational attainment (Glenn, 2008; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997;
Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et. al, 2009; Pascarella et. al, 2004). In general, the more parents
know about going to college, the more they can help their child become prepared for the
college experience. That is, if parents know what to expect from college because they are
familiar with its academic expectations and social environment, they are more likely to be
proactive about their child’s education, or lack thereof (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000;
Grimard & Maddaus, 2002; Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003, Horn, 1997; Martinez et. al,
2009; Roderick et. al, 2008; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et. al,
2004; Smyth & Hannan, 2007).

First-generation college students do not have parental experience with college as
an advantage. They lack the same support structure that continuing-generation students
have. Their parents may try to be supportive, but many do not understand the struggles
that their children encounter simply because of a lack of familiarity with the college
system (Choy et al., 2000; Martinez et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2004). Their support can
be counterproductive, as Leanna Blevins, an associate director at the New College
Institute in Virginia (New College Institute, 2009), explained in a feature from the New
York Times:

At home, your parents are trying to be supportive
and say, ‘Well, if you’re not happy, if it’s not
right for you, come back home. It’s okay.’ And they think they’re doing the right thing. But they don’t know that maybe what the student needs is to hear them say, ‘Stick it out just one semester. You can do it’ (Blevins, as quoted by Leonhardt 2005, p. 94).

Blevins, a first-generation college student who wrote her dissertation on rural first-generation students in Virginia (New College Institute, 2009), described in a feature article that at times she felt as if she were “an outsider in her own hometown” and that her family, though supportive, thought that she was “educated too much” (Leonhardt 2005, p. 94). For first-generation students like Blevins, the struggle was not simply just doing well at college, but helping her parents, as a result, the parents of the students who attend the New College Institute are helped to become familiar with the college system and accompanying culture.

Parents’ view of college and parents’ attitude towards the college “culture” may lead to communication problems that develop once the student enrolls in college (Rosenbaum, 2001). Many students who are currently attending Princeton University reported similar problems (Shamma, 2009). One male student discussed the communications problems that he had with his parents: “Though very intelligent, my parents have a very difficult time understanding the academic framework for a lot of the courses I’m taking. I feel like I’m not able to communicate with them because they don’t seem to have the same sort of educated liberal arts background that I’ve been getting” (Shamma, 2009, para. 7).

Another student, a female Asian-American student, also enrolled at Princeton University, explained that she had a difficult time explaining her grades, choice of major,
and classes to her parents (Shamma, 2009). This student expanded upon the communication breakdown that she felt she had between herself and her parents, and noted that other students did not have this type of problem; she observed her floor-mates receiving regular calls from their parents and expressed her frustration over the lack of support that she was experiencing (Shamma, 2009).

A former student of mine, who is currently a senior at Rutgers University, expressed his frustration as a first-generation, middle-income, transfer student. He explained, “Rutgers told me to expect my GPA to go down, but I didn’t expect it to go down like that. And then I’m home and I tell my mom that I’m studying, and she’s like, ‘Right’. And I explained what the college said, and she’s just like, ‘ok, try, whatever, we’re here’. She just doesn’t get it.” (J. Stives, personal communication, July 18, 2009).

Another problem that first-generation students report in relation to family support is the manifestation of pressure resulting from the concept of the family “hero”. In an article about first-generation college students, one freshman at the University of Wisconsin reported, “I’m proud, but I also feel like I am under some pressure because I feel like my family has high expectations for me. My whole family looks up to me because I’m the only one who has been given the opportunity to go on” (Puccio, 2008, para. 8). Similarly, a recent graduate from the University of Nevada in Reno explained that she had her brothers to look up to as role models, but because she was the first female in the family to graduate from high school and college, she became a role model for her younger female cousins (Fryman, 2008).
Some students may feel that, in general, their families are supportive of them and their individual goals, but concurrently are antagonistic towards the college culture or unclear about its expectations. This may be resultant of parents’ attempts and failures in the university setting, and although they may wish for the best, these parents fear that their first-generation children will not be successful either. Rosenbaum (2001) explained the apparent disparity in support as a change of mindset; that is, people who were initially antagonistic towards the university have to accept it, and its culture, if they want succeeding generations to remain in the middle class. According to Rosenbaum (2001), many parents hold the view that their children cannot stay in the middle-class income bracket because jobs that do not require a college education do not pay well enough for their children to remain there. The American economy has changed in such a way that the jobs that parents were able to get when they graduated from high school would not provide their children with the same economic stability to remain in the middle class now.

Piorkowski (1983, as cited by Somers et al., 2004) identified this phenomenon as survivor guilt and argued that this guilt created a barrier to academic success. To clarify, a junior at Oregon State University expressed uncertainty resulting from conflicting emotions; she felt like the family hero because she went to college, but also felt that her family thought “I won’t stay and finish because they didn’t” (Nickerson, 2007, para. 13). I mentioned another example previously: Blevins felt that her family was supportive, but also thought that she was getting above her raising (Leonhardt, 2005). Her brother, a college dropout, returned to college in his early thirties, as he realized that many people
in his neighborhood had college degrees and made more money as well as had more free
time to spend with their families because of their academic credentials (Leonhardt, 2005).

Many parents are not aware of the college choice process, which I describe in
detail later in this chapter, nor are they aware of the different options for majors. They encourage their children to choose majors that they know are “money makers”, such as medicine or law (Carter, 2005; Fryman, 2008). Many first-generation students feel compelled to enroll in majors in which they have no interest or, possibly, for which they have no aptitude (Somers et al., 2004). As explained by Fryman (2008), one student “had to convince her dad to accept that she wanted to major in anthropology and become a teacher because he initially didn’t like the idea” (para. 12). This student is fortunate that she was able to convince her father that her decision was appropriate, because one consequence of parents not knowing about different options for majors is that it can lead to lower grade point averages as well as conflicts at home (Fryman, 2008; Schwartz, 2008). Simply put, when the student is not aware of a reliable source for acquiring information, and instead acquires it from a source that has no insight into the situation (in this case the parent who is not college educated) the information is likely to be patently flawed.

Help from the Public K-12 System

To become familiar with the college system, students, parents, and educators should be aware of how a K-12 education may prepare a student for postsecondary education and its accompanying culture. As Roderick et al. (2008) reported, the “single most consistent predictor of whether [high school] students took steps towards
enrollment...was teachers reported schools had a strong college climate” (p. 5).

Similarly, Smyth and Hannan (2007) asserted that the school environment could be more important than a student’s family background.

Many researchers and K-12 educators believe that students should start academic preparations for college as soon as they start Kindergarten, or at the latest, eighth grade, when Algebra I and pre-Algebra courses are scheduled (Choy et al., 2000, Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008; Smyth and Hannan, 2007), because higher-level math comprehension is related to college persistence (Herzog, 2005). Adelman’s assertion that the “level of math comprehension attained in high school is the single most important preparatory factor for student success at the post-secondary level” (1999, as cited by Herzog, 2005, p. 916) was verified in Herzog’s analysis of college persistence in first-generation students (2005), and confirmed in Pascarella et al.’s (2004) analysis of the cognitive developmental benefits received by first-generation students.

Traditionally, students, parents, and educators have drawn attention to college preparation more intensely at the high school level than the elementary levels (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Ishitani, 2003; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008; Smyth & Hannan, 2007; Van T. Bui, 2003). Horn (1997) outlined five successful steps to college acceptance and enrollment and termed it “the college pipeline.” The first step Horn identified was the student’s own aspiration, in tenth grade, to obtain a college degree (1997). Building upon that concept, Roderick et al.’s evaluation of Chicago Public School cohorts found that many students who in tenth grade
aspired to be college attendees did not know how to participate in an effective college search; further, many did not know how to define or recognize the characteristics of a college that would be a good match for them (Roderick et al., 2008).

The College Search and Match Game

As the student progresses through high school, he or she has to work with counselors, teachers, and his or her parents in order to select courses that will provide him or her preparation for his or her future (Alexich et al., 2004; Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Roderick et al., 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001; Smyth & Hannan, 2007). As junior year progresses, the student should take standardized tests and conduct an efficient and effective search for a college or university (Choy et al., 2000; Horn, 1997; Roderick et al., 2008).

In the fall of senior year, the application process begins, and the student may have to be interviewed and/or take placement tests. Students typically apply to more than one school, and if they are accepted to more than one, they must determine which school they should enroll in, and then actually enroll (Horn, 1997; Roderick et al., 2008). Roderick et al. (2008) tracked high school students through part of the pipeline. Their findings were that, of those students who, in the fall of their senior year, aspired to go to a four-year college, only forty-one percent actually enrolled in one when they graduated from high school (p. 3).

Once the enrollment decision is made, students and their parents must determine how to pay the tuition and, if necessary, navigate the financial aid system. New responsibilities are placed upon the student; he must schedule his own classes as opposed
to having someone do this for him, acclimate to a new social life, and if he is living on campus, learn to cooperate with new living partners; i.e., roommates, suite-mates, and floor-mates.

The preparation for college and the transition process can be overwhelming for the students, parents, and educators involved. It can be exceedingly difficult for first-generation students. In an article about first-generation college students, one frustrated Texas State University freshman explained, “If you come from a family [that did not attend college], then you don't know that you are supposed to be taking the SAT and that you're suppose[d] to be applying for scholarships. You don't know the deadlines; you don't know the paper work” (Schwartz, 2008, para. 5).

Throughout the process, the student has to evaluate what constitutes information that is “good” for him or her and how to become familiar with the processes and identify the key people who are involved with these processes. As mentioned earlier, the teachers’ perceptions of the school’s culture as being college-bound served as an indicator for student enrollment in college (Roderick et al., 2008). However, there may be significant obstacles for educators in providing this type of environment for students.

**Undermined Guidance**

McDonough’s presentation to the American Council on Education (2004) outlined some of the problems that professionals in public schools encounter as they attempt to adequately prepare students for college. There is no one person who is in charge of seeing that a student is accepted into a school, although administrators, parents, students, and fellow educators assume that college acceptance and planning for it are the
responsibilities solely of the guidance counselor (McDonough, 2004). She asserted that ability tracking and scheduling is more of a priority for the counselor than evaluating the actual need of the student (McDonough, 2004). However, McDonough (2004) claimed that many guidance counselors are not appropriately prepared for counseling students to get to college: Many counselors have too many students to get to know individuals personally, and they have other responsibilities to high school students as well; such as, family, drug, and social acceptance counseling—all of which are important, especially in a post-Columbine world.

Rosenbaum’s research (2001) on the workforce and the college-for-all mentality corresponds with McDonough’s presentation. His work questioned these professionals’ potential to counsel students successfully for their future, and argued that, instead of providing concrete information about students’ futures, guidance counselors were more likely to provide vague ego-boosting (2001). With a college-for-all mentality, guidance counselors do not have to destroy college dreams for a student whose academic performance is lackluster; the counselor can simply encourage this lackluster student to attend a community college (2001). The open admissions policies of the community colleges, he asserted, do not reward students who perform well in high school; therefore, there is no incentive to work hard to get to college, making a guidance counselor’s job of discouraging a student from going to college moot (Rosenbaum, 2001). However, this claim substantiates McDonough’s statement that the counselors’ focus is helping the student navigate the troubled world of adolescence (2004). There is other research that
suggests that guidance counselors’ impact on student college choice is negligible (Hossler et al., 1998).

Furthermore, many challenges that guidance counselors encounter result from systemic ills, such as too many students assigned to them, not enough time to meet students individually, and although it may not appear systemic, powerlessness in the form of parents or administrators who override counselors’ decisions (Rosenbaum, 2001). Counselors learn from experience that their authority and input is inconsequential (Rosenbaum, 2001).

**Academic Preparation for the Promising Potential College Scholar**

Regardless of who has the final say about a student’s schedule, academic preparation in high school does play an integral part in college preparation for prospective first-generation students. However, while first-generation students are in high school, they generally have lower SAT scores, lower high school grade point averages, are less likely to interact with their teachers, and take less challenging courses than their prospective continuing-generation counterparts (Herzog, 2005, Riehl, 1994, as cited by Ishitani, 2003; Somers et al., 2004; Van T. Bui, 2002).

This academic trend generally continues in college (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2004). Academically, first-generation students also reported that they felt they worked harder as compared to their peers who were not first generation, and yet, according to enrollment, first-generation students had significantly lower college grade point averages and were more inclined to drop out of college after their freshman year as compared to their peers who were not first
generation (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004). However, first-generation students reported that they had more significant positive effects from classroom experiences and courses attempted than their continuing-education peers (Pascarella et al., 2004).

These findings coordinate with the question of college purpose; that is, students’ view of the college experience. “I wish I had known the real purpose of college before I started,” explained one former first-generation student (Oldfield, 2007, p. 4). Oldfield asserted that many students, especially those from middle- and low-income families, expect that “college’s only purpose was job training” (2007, p. 4) and are often surprised to discover that the college believes its mission is for people to live “richer lives” (Oldfield 2007, p. 5). The student in Bergerson’s (2007) case study echoed this sentiment. This student thought that “the pressure to be involved on campus was contrary to what she understood was the purpose of college, as those in her circle (her non-college educated parents and friends) focused on academics as a way to succeed in school and society” (Bergerson 2007, p. 113).

Placement and Purpose

Bergerson’s case study (2007) provides some explanation for the link between academic performance, finances, and attrition. The student in Bergerson’s study explained that she worked because she felt that she had to work, and that simply took time away from her academics and the social life of the college (Bergerson, 2007). This led her to perform less well in classes, led to her feeling like the college was just a place
she lived and took classes, and eventually, contributed to the student's not reenrolling for a sophomore year (Bergerson, 2007).

The student's explanation in Bergerson's study was consistent with results from quantitative studies. Results of Pascarella et al.'s (2004) statistical analyses from first-generation college students in the mid-1990's showed that, as compared to continuing-generation college students, first-generation students were significantly less likely to attend selective colleges. In addition, they attempted fewer credit hours, had lower grades through the third year of college, and had lower levels of extracurricular involvement at their colleges (2004). Martinez et al. (2009) and Somers et al. (2004) reported that first-generation students were more likely to hold full-time jobs, rather than part-time jobs, which was an indicator for attrition. First-generation students also relied upon financial aid more than their continuing-generation peers, which was also an indicator for attrition (Herzog, 2005; Martinez et al, 2009, Somers et al., 2004).

Debt Acquisition and Avoidance

Contrary to popular belief, middle-class status does not necessarily equal college-educated. There is no definition equating education with social class (US Census Bureau, 2009). Researchers typically avoid studying middle-income students, who comprise two-thirds of first-generation students and the majority of the student population at large. Unfortunately, this is not new to these students; after all, their teachers and guidance counselors had probably already assumed that their connections with other students in the middle-income bracket are enough to enable them to conduct an effective college search and become prepared for the challenges on the university level.
(Rosenbaum, 2001). However, it is not; their attrition rates are significantly higher than low-income and high-income students (Ishitani, 2003; Herzog, 2005).

Financing a college education is a concern for most students, but especially for first-generation students. Navigating the system of financial aid can prove difficult and confusing to parents (Herzog, 2005; Martinez et al., 2009; Somers et al., 1996). Colleges offer financial aid, there is governmental aid, and there are loans that students can apply for at banks.

However, first-generation students are more likely to take on full-time jobs in addition to a full course load because they are more averse to incurring debt than continuing-education students (Choy et al., 2000; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004). The prospect of incurring debt, even as low as $2,500, potentially could dissuade a middle-income, first-generation student from reenrolling after his or her freshman year (Herzog, 2005).

There is a little help in New Jersey for potential college students, regardless of income. The State Tuition Assistance Reward Scholarship program, nicknamed STARS, has aimed toward changing this dynamic by rewarding to the top twenty percent of high school students in each graduating class with free tuition to community colleges, regardless of family income, so that middle-income families, who usually do not qualify for financial aid, would receive the same consideration as low-income families (State of New Jersey Governor’s Office Archives, 2004). Governor McGreevey enacted this program in 2004 and estimated that over 9,000 students would benefit from this program in its initial year (State of New Jersey Governor’s Office Archives, 2004).
As part of, and in addition to, this program, many community colleges also waive placement testing for students who score above the county average on the math and reading portions of the SAT (NJ STARS, nd). Students who maintain a high grade point average can earn scholarship credits towards participating state colleges and universities so that they may complete their four-year degrees (NJ STARS, nd). However, the state has recently cut back its support of this program for the lower end; students need to be in the top fifteen percent, instead of the top twenty percent, of their graduating high school classes to receive this benefit (NJ STARS, nd). As of the writing of this chapter, the new governor, Chris Christie, may choose to eliminate this program entirely, as he is implementing rampant cutbacks throughout education in the state.

Most of the federal funds available to students, provided by the government in such programs as TRiO, GEAR UP, and Upward Bound, are available only to low-income students (Grimard & Maddaus 2002). The student who was the first female in her family to graduate from college reported that she needed the same support provided to low-income students. This student's parents lacked high school diplomas, were immigrants, did not speak English, and despite the odds against their success, were financially stable in the middle-income bracket (Fryman, 2008). Because she was not "considered low-income or part of the TRiO Scholarship program" she was denied the support that the university had to offer (Fryman, 2008, para 4). This support was denied to her simply on the basis of income; her parents, in the middle class and not college-educated, made too much money for officials at the college to consider her worthy of helping.
Middle-Income Persistence

However, “even students from high-income families don’t have an advantage when it comes to college persistence” (Somers et al., 2004, p. 428). This is exemplified in a script excerpt from a film, Back to School, starring Rodney Dangerfield:

Jason Melon: I'm droppin' out.


Jason Melon: I know, but I’m not making it here. I don’t fit in, you know? I got one friend... Derek. The girls don't like me, the fraternities don't want me. The diving coach won't even talk to me.

Thornton Melon: Look at it this way...at least you're getting an education.

Jason Melon: Dad, last semester I got nothing but "Cs."

Thornton Melon: A, B, C...you're in the top three. What are you worrying about?

Jason Melon: I just think I'd be a lot better off...gettin' a job or something. You never went to college. Look how great you're doin'.

Thornton Melon: Jason, I said it before and I'll say it again. I don't care how rich and successful a man is. Without an education, he's nothing. I mean, stay in school. Study harder. You can be whatever you want to be. You want to be a loser, be a loser. You want to be a winner, be a winner. Jason, it's up to you. You can do it. Remember you’re a melon!

Jason Melon: Dad, that's easy for you to say. You don't have to do any of it. (Dangerfield, Fields, & Snee, 1986)

This dialogue exemplifies many of the challenges that first-generation college students face. Jason Melon, Thornton Melon’s son, is a first-generation college student. He finds that he is not fitting in socially (no friends, girlfriends, fraternities, athletics), not doing well academically (straight Cs), and sees a successful role model (his father) as
someone who has a lot of money but no college education (Dangerfield et al., 1986). The incentive that his father provides is self-deprecating; according to his own advice, without a college education, the father is nothing (Dangerfield et al., 1986). The main difference between the fictional character of Jason Melon and the subjects of most research on first-generation students is income.

Most research on the subject of first-generation students is devoted to understanding low-income, first-generation college students (Bergerson, 2007; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Carter, 2005; Grimard & Maddaus, 2002; Horn, 1997; McDonough, 2004; Roderick et. al., 2008; Rosenbaum 2001). The government and colleges have studied and reacted to that specific population. For example, the president of Eastern Washington University, Rudolfo Aravala, has attempted to make his college friendlier to first-generation college students by making more information available to high schools in the Eastern Washington region (Axel, 2009). Most of the information his college provides is about Pell Grants, Federal Work Study, and Washington State funding, but he also has conducted “outreaches through the Financial Aid and Scholarship Office such as Gear Up programs in Northeast Washington, Eastern Advantage, and Washington Achievers” (Axel, 2009, para. 4). But the target here was not middle-income students, it was low-income students.

Similarly, there are other initiatives for low-income students on the other side of the country. The president of the University of Virginia, John T. Casteen III, started an initiative in 2005 to attract more low-income students; namely, that “the university will
charge no tuition and require no loans for students whose parents make less than twice
the poverty level, or about $37,700 a year for a family of four” (Leonhardt, 2005, p. 93).

Aside from potential funding problems that middle-income students may
encounter, there are other social aspects that they may not see. Middle-income students
may not see the dire consequences of not receiving a college education, as compared to
their low-income counterparts. In the research that featured low-income students, many
low-income students noted the consequences of not receiving an education and discussed
their motivations for going to college. Prudence Carter (2005) documented this in her
book, Keepin’ it real: school success beyond black and white. She quotes many low-
income students as saying, “I don’t want to be on welfare. I don’t want to have a lot of
kids...like my mother...’cause she didn’t have no education, nothing. I don’t want to be
struggling” (p. 115), “[my mother] got laid off from a couple of jobs. She didn’t have the
special things that the job needed, like educational qualifications, college degrees that the
jobs required”(p. 91), “I don’t want to raise my child here...I can move out of here...put
them in an environment so that they can grow up and have chances to do things...” (p.
116). “The reason she did not consider any of her family members to be role models was
because of their frequent visits to the ‘street pharmacy’” (p. 143), and “I won’t allow
myself to work that much...I don’t like too much labor...I’d rather make decisions, solve
financial problems” (p. 91).

Conversely, many middle-income students may not be exposed to these types of
struggles. Middle-income students have people who do not have college degrees as their
models of success. Mom and Dad are able to afford a place in a nice neighborhood, have job security, and make a nice living without the expense and effort of going to college.

What would motivate these students to attend college, then, if they potentially believe that they can be successful and remain in the middle-income bracket without a college degree? As mentioned previously, some researchers asked middle-income students what they thought was the purpose of getting a college education (Alexitch et al., 2004; Bergerson, 2007; Choy et al., 2000; Oldfield, 2007). Do middle-income students hold similar views as low-income students for going to college regardless of the different economic circumstances?

Taking Middle-Income, First-Generation College Students into Account in College

There is limited research on first-generation college students, but it is a developing field of interest for many researchers (Bergerson, 2007; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Grimard & Maddaus, 2002; Horn, 1997; Martinez et al., 2009; Oldfield, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008; Smyth & Hannan, 2007; McDonough, 2004; Somers et al., 2004). Noting that the student population has changed and diversified, many colleges are starting to read this research and count who in their freshman class is a first-generation college student. However, the federal government does not require this count. Instead, the federal government encourages colleges to collect data on race and ethnicity, and “beginning in the 2010-11 academic year, colleges will be required to collect and report racial and ethnic data to the U.S. Department of Education according to a specified format or risk losing eligibility for federal student loans” (Glenn, 2008). In other words, the federal government provides financial motivation to colleges that collect information
on race and ethnicity, but does not provide any motivation for collecting data that might affect whether or not a student might be successful in college.

Noting that many of their first-generation students have problems adjusting to college life, some colleges have started to gather information on them. For example, Princeton University administrators recently formed the Princeton University Preparatory Program (PUPP) that assists low-income students at the college. The university program assumes that students who are low-income are also first-generation students, which is not always the case. According to the founder of the program, while they are at the university, students use PUPP as a "surrogate family" because their own families do not understand the dynamics of college (Shamma, 2009, para. 26). In describing an observation made by one of the students interviewed for this article, Shamma stated that "one of the greatest disadvantages he faced once he arrived on campus last fall was the undergraduate advising system, which left him unsure of where to seek academic and social advice aside from information that trickled down to him from upperclassmen" (Shamma, 2009, para. 23). But, however admirable this program is, the implication again is that the students who are eligible to participate must be from low-income backgrounds.

Another example can be found in the Midwest. The University of Wisconsin has been monitoring first-generation students as a population since 2005, and has noted that, since that time, first-generation students regularly comprised twenty percent of its freshman class (Puccio, 2008, para. 1). In the fall of 2008, there were 1,170 students (Puccio, 2008, para. 2) who potentially could have problems transitioning to their
freshman year of college. This number does not include those students who were transfer students from the community colleges and who also may encounter similar problems.

The Institutional Research Office at Texas State University has identified the need to account for the transfer students, as well as incoming freshmen, who meet the definition of first-generation college student. Overall, Texas State University has a higher percentage of students who are first-generation students than the University of Wisconsin. “According to the Institutional Research Office, 41 percent of first-time freshmen at Texas State and 49 percent of transfers were first-generation students in fall 2007” (Schwartz, 2008). Their website does not list the total number of freshmen students or transfer students, but it does provide the total number of students (including graduate) at 27,485 and a retention rate of 76% for its full-time students (Texas State University, nd). Again, the rate for attrition is 24%; the average student at this college would be from the middle-income group and a first-generation student; given that the percentage of low-income students at this college was 8% (Texas State University, nd). Therefore, assuming that all of the low-income students were also first-generation students, 33% of Texas State University freshmen were first-generation students from middle-income backgrounds. As mentioned previously, Herzog (2005) indicated that middle-income students had a higher propensity for attrition after their freshman year than their high-income or low-income classmates. Going with his indication, the students who dropped out of college were most likely middle-income, first-generation college students.
Martinez et al.'s 2009 study of first-generation college students required cooperation from the unidentified university’s enrollment and registrar’s offices to monitor students who were not first-generation and the enrollment (and non-reenrollment) of first-generation students, as well as to provide the email addresses of these students so that they could distribute and collect surveys online as well as track students throughout their career at the college. Therefore, although the institution is not identified, it should be noted that this college is keeping track of the first-generation students that enroll and maintain enrollment. Similarly, Pascarella et al.'s study used surveys for 1992, 1993, 1994, and 1995 to track enrollment of first-generation students from eighteen randomly selected colleges that were viewed as representative samples of the national collegiate picture, thus indicating that many colleges do account for, and track, these students.

However, K-12 educators do not identify or track these students as they move through the pipeline of public education. Because of this, prospective first-generation college students may not receive adequate support or preparation for going to college. First-generation college students realize, as the reports in the college newspapers demonstrate, that they need assistance in applying for colleges, programs within the colleges, and adjusting to college life, and subsequently, many of them stop attending college. The case is not the same for continuing-generation college students, who most likely get support from their parents and their extended social networks. If educators want to be proactive about having a more diversified and educated population, it would
seem logical to suggest that they identify the students who might need this help in making the transition from high school to college.
Chapter III

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how prospective first-generation college students from middle-income families make decisions to search for and apply to college. To accomplish this, I interviewed fourteen high school seniors who, at the time of the study, had college aspirations and if they attend, will be in the first generation from their families to attend college. I conducted these interviews with the students from mid-November to mid-December of 2009. I selected the Maple Park School District for the site of this study because its students are predominantly middle-income (Open Data Systems, 2010).

The majority of previous research on college attendance of first-generation students has been quantitative in nature. Most studies, even the longitudinal studies such as the one conducted by Martinez et al. (2009), have been survey-based and conducted at the college level. These studies have focused upon the problems of attrition at the university level, and have yielded information on types of students that are at risk for attrition at the college level. Because of the myriad factors involved in this decision-making process, these studies did not give a voice to how prospective first-generation college students anticipate the college experience.

I designed this study to gather qualitative information about how a specific population makes decisions about attending college as they are in the midst of the decision-making process. The students in this study discussed how they were making decisions about continuing their education at a college while it was fresh in their minds.
students; much of the research on this topic has asked college students to recollect their college-planning processes while they are faced with the challenges of a new academic and social environment.

Through the interviews with the students, I aimed to answer the following research questions:

Overarching research question: What influences students’ decisions to attend college, and to what extent do students feel these influences are as important in their decision-making processes? Specifically, the students will discuss the impact that they feel parents, friends, educators, and college-generated information have in their decisions to attend college, their college search processes, and the types of colleges that they investigate.

a. How does a student interpret the importance of going to college; that is, why is going to college important to the student?

b. How does the student define an “effective college search”?

c. How well does he or she feel he or she is able to conduct the self-defined “effective college search”?

d. What types of problems does the student anticipate encountering while he or she is in college?

e. What role does financing a college education play a role in middle-income students’ plans to attend college?
Site: Maple Park in Size and Scope

Maple Park is a large, suburban township in New Jersey. In the last U.S. Census count, in the year 2000, the population was just under 88,000 residents (Open Data Systems, 2010). Of those residents, approximately 20,200, or 23%, were school-aged children, an above average proportion for the population (Open Data Systems, 2010). Since that time, several housing developments have been added to the township.

The township is mostly suburban; it has several parks, housing developments, and strip malls. Maple Park borders a city as well as farmland; as a result, it is possible in a single classroom to have a student who milks a cow on his family’s farm every day and another student who lives in an urban setting and has never been on a farm or seen livestock in person.

Sixty-eight percent of Maple Park families are considered to be middle-class, based upon income as measured from the U.S. Census (Open Data Systems, 2010). This number, however, does not necessarily indicate that the parents are college-educated. According to the Census, 28% of Maple Park women over the age of 25 held a college degree of any type, and 31% of Maple Park men over the age of 25 had a college degree (Open Data Systems, 2010). The combined state average for men and women with college degrees was 35% (Open Data Systems, 2010). Maple Park is below the average for both men and women.

The numbers gained from the Census Bureau are a bit misleading. The unit of measure for the economic class is family, whereas the unit of measure for education is the individual. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that students in this study have parents who
are in their late twenties or early thirties; therefore, the percentage of parents in this school district who have not attended college could be higher than the percentage revealed by the census.

There are a few reasons that I chose the Maple Park School District. Pragmatically, the Maple Park School District is a large school district in New Jersey, and one that has a population of predominantly middle-income families. The Department of Education for the State of New Jersey’s workers created a classification system that enables them to categorize school districts in order to prioritize how the state needs to fund them. They predicate this classification system on the numbers that the statisticians at the U.S. Census Bureau provide. On an eight-tiered continuum, poorer districts receive a label of A; wealthier districts receive a label of J (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). Maple Park School District is classified as FG; state workers described this category as predominantly middle-income in terms of its residents’ educational attainment, income, and property value.

Maple Park is a very large township and has several high schools. Therefore, I had a greater chance of finding potential interview candidates who are enrolled in the same programs with the same curriculums and who do not know each other in this large district than I would have using a smaller township with fewer high schools (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2004).

There is also an advantage to me in regard to the large size of the district. I am a teacher in the district; I teach an average of 140 students per year. The sizes of the upper-classes of students are approximately 400 students each, or nearly 800 students.
Therefore, the likelihood that I would interview a student that currently is in one of my
classes was 16%, and precautions were taken to avoid a potential conflict. Because I used
purposeful sampling, it worked out that all of the students who participated in this study
were seniors, and, as I do not teach seniors, there was no conflict or expectation that the
students' grades would be affected because of their participation in this study.

**Maple Park’s Academic Offerings**

The guidance counselors of Maple Park are able to accommodate students’
interests in preparing for a place in higher education in a variety of ways. The middle
school programs at Maple Park are untracked, but as students enter high school, the
programs in each subject area available to them are tracked by ability levels in the
underclassman years and more tailored to each student’s needs in his or her
upperclassman years. As they planned to enter high school, students in the current senior
class (graduating class of 2010) could have chosen either a non-college preparatory track
or a college preparatory track. Guidance counselors helped the students choose their
classes on the basis of the students’ performances on the Grade Eight Placement
Assessment (GEPA) and in their courses at the middle school. Students who enrolled in
the non-college preparatory track as freshmen are looking simply to obtain a high school
diploma; students who enroll in the college preparatory track are preparing for higher
education in a variety of ways.

One way for a student to prepare for college is to take classes that the
administrators have specifically designated as being college preparatory. For example, the
supervisors of English, Special Education, and the Gifted and Talented Program would
have the following courses considered as part of their college preparatory program for
senior year: Honors English, Advanced Placement English, English 12 A, and English 12
B. Advanced Placement English is a college class; the students must take the Advanced
Placement (AP) exam in May to receive college credit for the course. An Honors class
denotes that the class has a greater workload than the A and B classes; therefore, the
students receive a higher weight for their grade point averages.

There are ways for students to prepare for college if they are not enrolled in
classes that are specifically designated to be college preparatory. If the student has a
special education program and plans on attending the community college, administrators
consider that special education program as being college preparatory, even though
educators in the past may not have thought of special education as college prep. This is
because the supervisor for special education created a transition program for college-
bound special education students. These supervisors would consider Remedial English to
be college preparatory if the student is taking another English class; therefore, it is
possible to have students who are enrolled in both Remedial English and English 12 A in
their senior years.

It is also possible that a student could take an Advanced Placement course in one
subject area and a remedial course in another area. Many students who fail the
mathematics portion of the HSPA enroll in the remedial math course in their senior year.
This does not prohibit them from enrolling in other courses, such as Advanced Placement
History.
After their sophomore years, many students decide to enroll in the county’s vocational program. If this is a path the student chooses, he or she attends the home school for half of the day and the vocational school for the other half of the day. While at the home school, the student generally enrolls in college preparatory-tracked classes as I described above.

The vocational school offers several vocational programs. Students may enroll in classes in a variety of areas such as, performing arts, graphic arts, culinary arts, cosmetology, and the trades (plumbing, electricity, mechanical). Again, the students may take mixed classes at the traditional high school if they are enrolled in the vocational program; that is, classes that the district considers college preparatory as well as classes that the district does not.

To find an indicator of how many students are taking college preparatory classes and how many students are not taking college preparatory classes, I looked at the numbers of students enrolled in math classes at one of the high schools. I decided to do this because math attainment is one of the indicators of student performance at the college level (Herzog, 2005). I found that the teachers in the math department considered Math 10 to be its non-college preparatory class for sophomores. As of September 2009, 30 sophomores had registered for this class out of approximately 400 students. The math department considers the course Math Topics to be non-college preparatory for juniors and seniors. As of September 2009, 129 juniors and seniors, combined, had registered for this class out of approximately 800 students. I obtained these figures by looking at the teachers’ schedules, posted on a wall of an administrator’s office.
As a senior, a student may also choose to leave the building to work for credit in the Volunteer Internship Program (VIP). Many students who enter this program want experience in careers such as teaching, law, engineering, accounting, and social work. The program's coordinator places students at worksites throughout the county so that these students can learn the demands of the career as well as earn credit.

Finally, some of the students opt to take college classes in their senior years. If a student chooses this option, she or he attends the home high school for half the day and then reports to the community college as her or his schedule requires. Students enrolled in this program take two college classes a semester and graduate with 12 college credits. The students who take this program have to pass the community college's entrance exam in their junior years. They are enrolled in courses in the areas of psychology, sociology, law enforcement, fire science, and business.

**Participant Recruitment**

I contacted guidance counselors in several high schools to help me identify parents so that I could contact students who met the following criteria:

1. were interested in going to college
2. have parents who have not graduated from college
3. are considered middle-income (not eligible for the federal free or reduced lunch program)
4. were enrolled in college-preparatory track
5. were juniors or seniors
In mid-October of 2009, I presented an “infomercial” at a professional
development meeting of guidance counselors from the Maple Park School District.
Coincidentally, the topic of this meeting concerned college preparation for special
populations of students. Subsequent to this meeting, and once approval had been granted
from IRB, I contacted the guidance counselors again for suggestions of students who
would qualify for this study.

As I mentioned previously, the majority of students who attend the Maple Park
School District are from middle-income backgrounds. I had planned on avoiding
accidentally interviewing low-income students by not including any students who
qualified for the free and reduced lunch program. I did not plan on encountering any
students of high-income backgrounds, because there are few students who attend the
public schools in this district who meet the criteria necessary to be considered high-
income. As expected, all of the students who participated in this study were from middle-
income families.

The guidance counselors provided me with a list of 15 students who were
potential candidates. I then contacted the parents of potential interview candidates by
calling them and sending letters home. Once the parents had consented to let me
interview the students and the students consented to participate in the study, the students
and I set up appointments for the interviews.

Of the 15 students who consented to participate in the study, only 14 actually
participated. The last interviewee had to go home sick on the day we had planned, and
because of an upcoming test and other obligations, it was impossible to reschedule, even
during the school day. She did not register for lunch or a study hall, as she felt that her

time was better spent taking academic classes..

Participants

Of the 14 students who participated in this study, five of them were White males
(Mark, Roman, Joe, Brian, and Larry). Of the nine girls who participated, three were
Black (Bridget, Nina, and Vanessa), one was Asian (Margot), one was half-White and
half-Hispanic (Stephanie), and the other four were White (Amber, Karen, Lisa, and
Patricia). Four of the girls were daughters of immigrants: Stephanie’s mother had
returned to the Dominican Republic, Bridget’s parents are Haitian, Margot’s parents are
Vietnamese, and Patricia’s parents are from Moldova. All but Stephanie spoke a
language in addition to English at home, and Bridget and Patricia are immigrants
themselves.

All of the students were enrolled in a college-track preparatory program at their
high schools. Additionally, Bridget, Brian, and Larry were taking courses at the
vocational school. Two of the students, Amber and Larry, have learning disabilities. The
designation of “learning disabled” does not preclude a student from enrolling in advanced
classes. Amber, Karen, Lisa, Patricia, Margot, Mark, and Nina, have taken Advanced
Placement courses.

Through an evaluation of the literature, it occurred to me that the family
structure could be important; specifically, whether the parents were divorced or still
together might have an effect on why going to college was important. Through

\[1\] I have used pseudonyms to protect their identities.
discussions relating to this, the students told me whether their parents were married or divorced. Five of the students come from households of divorced parents: Roman, Vanessa, Stephanie, Lisa, and Margot.

The chart on the next three pages provides an overview of the students who were involved in this study. Following the chart, I have included a more detailed mini-biography of each student.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Language other than English</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Future Major</th>
<th>Future College plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>Married, Mark is youngest of 4</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>4 year college with commute, community college if necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman</td>
<td>Divorced, Only Roman &amp; Mom</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>4 year college with commute, community college if necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>Married, Only Child</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Thought community college was 4 year college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Divorced, Only Child</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Computer Software/Hardware</td>
<td>DeVry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Language other than English</td>
<td>Ethnicity/Race</td>
<td>Future Major</td>
<td>Future College plans</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>Divorced, Only Child, Lives with Aunt, Uncle, &amp; Cousin</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Half-Dominican, Half-White</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Unsure, but definitely four-year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>Married, Oldest of three children</td>
<td>Yes: Creole, French</td>
<td>Black, Haitian</td>
<td>Music Therapy or performance</td>
<td>Considering Rider/ Westminster Choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Married, Only Child</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Chef</td>
<td>Community college, then C.I.A. or Johnson &amp; Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Married, Only Child</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Electrical Engineering</td>
<td>Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>Married, youngest of two</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Something in Math or Biology</td>
<td>Undecided: loves Temple U., considering Rutgers or community college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>Married, youngest of two</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Education, possibly special ed.</td>
<td>Considering Penn State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Married, youngest of three</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Community College, then Rider</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mark

Mark is a White male whose father is a self-employed mechanic and whose mother is a teacher’s aide. He planned on becoming a civil engineer, but this was a relatively new development; he had always wanted to be an architect until one of his teachers told him this year that there were not many available jobs in architecture. He has a job at a grocery store, and has helped his father out over the summer in the garage - work he enjoyed, but has decided not to pursue it because of his father’s work schedule.

Mark is the youngest of four children; he has two older brothers and a sister. One of his brothers has graduated from the community college; Mark did not detail what he was doing now. His sister wants to be a speech therapist. She graduated from Stockton College, but needs a master’s degree to have a career in the field, so is now enrolled in graduate school at Rider University. Mark’s other brother is going to Widener
University, a private school that was “costing the family,” in Mark’s opinion, “a lot of money.” To make financial matters worse, Mark’s brother changed majors and now has to take at least another semester of college.

**Roman**

Roman, also a White male, is originally from Georgia. He and his mother moved to this area after she and Roman’s father were divorced. Roman’s mother is, as Roman describes, a very smart woman who had very limited opportunities, a situation that he never wants to see himself in. The day before our interview, she had received a notice of termination from her job as an administrative assistant.

Roman’s father was a pilot, a “career service man in two branches of service: Army and Air Force.” Roman says that his father has made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with Roman, and even “wrote it in the divorce settlement that he is to pay nothing once I graduate from high school.” Given his potential financial predicament, Roman had considered contacting his father to discuss scholarships for family of military personnel, but then considered that path to be a hurtful waste of time.

Roman says that he has always considered a career in engineering, especially aeronautical engineering, but has taken some business classes this year and has become involved in DECA - two experiences that are making him reconsider his college pursuits.

Roman does a lot of volunteer work for his church and coaches a youth basketball program. He is considering going to a local college so that he can maintain his involvement in these activities.

**Joe**
Joe, another White male, has been working in an auto parts store for a few years and gave me his business card. Joe had planned on becoming an electrician, like his father, but thought that he could have a more comfortable life by becoming an electrical engineer. He had planned on going to the community college for all four years, and was surprised when I told him that he could not get a four-year degree there.

Joe had not originally planned on going to college, but he had not planned a career in retail, either. He did not go to vocational school for electrician work, and when his mother told him he had to go to college next year at the beginning of his senior year, he scrambled to figure out what he wanted to do. Although all of Joe’s classes have been college preparatory, he did not take the “right courses” for engineering in the math department. He loves physics and chemistry, and sees himself as being successful in college in an engineering program, building upon his success in those two courses.

Vanessa

Vanessa is a Black female who, after what she describes as “a thorough college search,” has been accepted to the college of her choice, DeVry University. She has already passed the placement exam, and is excited about going there in July of 2010. She has taken all of the computer science classes and computer application classes available at the high school, and now wants to do more formal work on computers, both the hardware as well as the software. She views DeVry as a place that could provide a very direct focus for her goal, and even allow her to graduate early so that she can beat others to the job market.
Vanessa’s parents are divorced, but both strongly encourage her to go to college. She is not interested in either of their jobs. Her father is a construction worker at Princeton University, and Vanessa thinks that her father views the students who go there as people who have opportunities. Her mother is a hearings officer for the county and has to go from prison to prison to do her job, an environment Vanessa does not want to be involved in.

Stephanie

Stephanie is half-White and half-Hispanic. She wants to go to college so that she can become a psychologist and so that she can get away from home. She does not want to bother with the community college, a place where she perceives people who have all the same social problems that they had in high school repeat their dramas on a different campus.

Stephanie’s parents are divorced, and she lives with neither of them; she lives with her father’s sister’s family (her aunt, uncle, and cousin, Anna). Her father lives down the street with her grandmother and works as a truck driver, landscaper, and whatever other jobs come his way. Her mother lives in the Dominican Republic with her family and has a job, Stephanie thinks, as a secretary.

Stephanie does not know anybody, other than her teachers, who are college-educated. She is not sure of what her aunt and uncle do, but does know that they are always working. For all intents and purposes, her cousin Anna is her sibling; Anna is only a year younger than Stephanie, and the two plan everything together. Stephanie
wants to be a psychologist, and Anna wants to be a history teacher. They envision
themselves attending the same college together.

**Bridget**

Bridget is a Black female who is a Haitian immigrant. In addition to speaking
English, Bridget speaks Creole and a little bit of French. She attends the regular high
school for half a day, then goes to the vocational school, the School of the Performing
Arts, where she is enrolled in vocal music performance courses.

Bridget is the oldest of three children, but she thinks that her parents view her as
more immature than the others, who are significantly younger than she. In Haiti, her
mother worked as a preschool teacher, a job that does not require a college degree. Her
father had been preparing for a career as a lawyer, but never had the opportunity to go to
college. Now, her parents both work for the Maple Park School District in the
maintenance department, and her father brings home additional income by moonlighting
part time in another maintenance job.

She describes herself as spontaneous, willing to try new things, someone who
likes to challenge herself, and someone who wants to help others. She thinks that the best
fit for her potential, and a match for her personality, is a career in music, possibly in
music therapy. She is considering going to Rider University because Rider has an
affiliation with Westminster Choir College. Through that affiliation, she might be able to
double major in music and psychology. However, she enjoys performing and considers
that better opportunities are to be had at colleges in New York City.
Brian

Brian is a White male who is attending the vocational school in the morning for a career in the culinary arts. He feels that he has been given a lot of responsibility in kitchen management, an area in which he excels, and would like to learn more at the college level. He plans on starting out at the community college, then transferring to either the Culinary Institute of America or Johnson and Wales University.

Brian and his parents (whose jobs were not discussed), did not anticipate that he would ever have to go to college. He has had a few disagreements with his parents about going to college because they do not view a career in culinary arts as one that requires a college degree; that is, if someone wants to work in a restaurant, or as a cook, that person should just go get a job. Brian sees the difference between “a job” and “a career” in the field as defined by his vocational teachers: A job is one from which he can be fired, and rehired somewhere else, starting over again at the bottom rung, whereas a career would result from the college preparation that would enable him to manage a kitchen, or several kitchens, provide opportunities to work in corporate restaurants, and provide better opportunities and salaries if he is ever fired and has to find another position. His parents were afraid that he would fail at college, so their money would be wasted on an investment in something that he could have had a job in to begin with.

Larry

Larry is another White male who is also enrolled at the vocational school, and he is training to become an electrician. Both Larry and his parents also did not anticipate his ever going to college. However, Larry has health issues (which were undisclosed) and,
after his parents discovered that he would be removed from their health insurance
coverage if he did not stay in school, they encouraged him to go to the community
college.

Other than that, Larry does not feel that his parents have been very supportive or
encouraging about his going on to the college, but he says he knows it would be better for
him to go to college than not go. He is enrolled in remedial English this year because he
did not pass the HSPA last year. Last year, Larry’s vocational teachers and guidance
counselor told him about a program at the community college; there is an internship that
has an association with a local gas and electric provider. Larry views this as his
opportunity: He could get the associate’s degree from the community college, keep the
health care, and, through the internship program, get the job with the local electric
provider.

Nina

Nina is a Black female whose mother and older sister both attended Rutgers
University, but never graduated. Nina wanted to be the first person in her family to
graduate with a four-year degree. Nina is encouraging her mother to return to college
with her, and looks upon the opportunity to go to college as a chance to get a career that
“helps people”. Her mother wanted to be a nurse, but is now a receptionist for a local
corporation. Nina does not think her mother is happy there, and believes that she could
serve as an inspiration for her mother.

Nina’s aunt graduated from Rutgers, and was a founding member of a sorority
there. Nina also has an uncle who was an engineer who did some work for NASA some
years ago. Her grandmother praises these members of the family, and Nina feels as if she is the one person in her immediate family who has the chance to gain this type of recognition for her parents.

Nina’s father is a tradesman; he works in heating, venting, and air conditioning repair (HVAC). Nina feels that he was supportive of both of his daughters’ desires to get a college degree, but is frustrated with paying bills for Nina’s older sister, Vicky had to drop out for medical reasons, and yet the bills kept rolling in.

Nina has decided to find a career that “helps people”, but does not know where that career begins. She has determined to enter the community college undeclared, and investigate math and biology majors while she is there.

Amber

Amber is a White female. She does not mention what her parents do, although she does say that they are very supportive of her desire to go to college. Amber has a learning disability, and has had tutors since the seventh grade. She has the drive and willpower to succeed, and has been very successful in her high school career: She was enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, Independent Studies, and a Government and Law Experience class. She wishes to help other students who have learning disabilities. She wants to become an elementary teacher and is considering a minor in special education.

Amber’s older brother just graduated from Pennsylvania State University in May of 2009, and after watching his graduation ceremony, she is considering going to that university. He has done a lot to help her fill out her college applications, but the most
help has come from her cousin, who is a guidance counselor in a neighboring district. Her cousin’s parents have gone on college tours with Amber. Her aunt and uncle also have been working with her parents to ensure that her college career will be financed.

Karen

Karen is a White female who wanted to go to college so that she can “be somebody”. She is the youngest of three children. Karen’s older brother dropped out of high school just before graduation because of a drug problem, and her family does not talk to him anymore. Her sister dropped out of high school in ninth grade, because, according to Karen, “She’s just too cool for school.”

Her sister and brother-in-law live with Karen and her parents. Karen’s sister and mother are both school bus drivers. Her brother-in-law has “an iron worker job with great benefits and pay, but he hates it,” says Karen. Her father, a former building superintendent, lost his job last year due to a work-related injury; the family is counting on the settlement money from a lawsuit to help pay for Karen’s college education.

Karen is contributing money to her education as well. She has a job at a dollar store and reported that her supervisor said that the managers were considering her for a management position. She wants to major in business, something in which she excels at high school in honors accounting and marketing classes. She views her opportunity for a management position at work as a possible benefit for gaining experience as well as earning some money to complete a degree. She is wary, though, of working all of the hours necessary to work in a management position and going to college at the same time.
One of her coworkers is doing that now, and according to Karen, the coworker struggles at work and does her homework on breaks.

**Lisa**

Lisa, like Karen, also wants to be a business major. Lisa is a White female who lives with her mother, who is a secretary. Her father was mentioned, but only marginally, regarding his support for Lisa's college aspirations.

Lisa’s mother is very excited about her daughter’s going to college, and told Lisa to “just apply for everything”, but is afraid of being alone if Lisa lives at college, which is really what Lisa wants to do. Adding to her mother’s fear of loneliness, Lisa took a trip to Italy this past summer, which sparked an interest in International Business as a potential major with accounting as a minor.

Lisa gained confidence from this trip in two respects. She feels more confident that she would be successful living away from home, and she had the opportunity to put her Italian classes into practice. So, she was considering a possible study abroad.

**Patricia**

Patricia is an immigrant from Moldova. Her family moved here when she was ten and her brother was four. They go back to visit their relatives every summer, but Patricia is happier living here, in the United States.

Upon arriving in this country and enrolling in the Maple Park School District, Patricia was evaluated by the teachers at one of Maple Park’s elementary schools, and she was placed in the fifth grade instead of the fourth. According to Patricia, the curriculum at her school in Moldova was more advanced than that of Maple Park. Patricia, however,
is now upset that she was pushed a grade ahead. She just found out about the benefits of the advanced placement courses, and wished she had the opportunity to take more.

Patricia’s father does not speak much English. He works in construction. Her mother, who speaks English better than her father, is a homemaker. Several of the extended family members live in their home. Patricia would like to become a doctor, and she is considering specializing in pediatrics. She would like to go to a college that offers her the best internship experiences. Right now, she is looking at colleges in Washington, D.C. and Pittsburgh, both cities in which she has family.

Patricia wants to get a college degree to demonstrate to her family in Moldova that a female could be successful in this country and to fulfill the promise of a better life that her parents moved here for. A female cousin just graduated from Georgetown, and Patricia perceives herself as following in this cousin’s footsteps. Patricia’s mother has helped her prepare for college to the point where her father has told her to “Back off. Patricia’s going to college, not you!”

Margot

Margot, like Patricia, is also the daughter of immigrants and also wants to become a doctor. Her parents are Vietnamese and they have been divorced for some time.

Margot did not mention what her father does for a living, but she did mention that he knows she is going to college. Margot describes her mother as a “typical Vietnamese woman who works in a nail salon.”
Margot lives with her mother and brother and, sometimes, his child. Margot’s brother dropped out of high school because he fathered this child. Margot wants to go to college to demonstrate that she can be successful, even if she is a girl.

Margot views college as an opportunity to get away from it all. She is unsure of which medical field to pursue, but most likely would try to become a dermatologist or ophthalmologist. She has taken Advanced Placement Chemistry and views her success in this class as strongly preparatory for a career in medicine, but really has not done anything else to prepare herself for college.

**Design**

The design for this dissertation was that of a collective case study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). A case study was appropriate for this research because I attempted to “understand a situation in great depth” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 157) - in this case, how middle-income, potential first-generation college students make decisions about attending college. The collective case study is a design that enables the researchers to “gain greater insight into a research topic by concurrently studying multiple cases in one overall research study” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 408). I interviewed these 14 students in an attempt to describe their feelings, actions, and thoughts about a particular situation in the context of the college search process.

**Data Collection**

I conducted semistructured, individual interviews. The semistructured interview is one that has a set of predetermined questions, but allows for adaptation as is necessary, thereby allowing the student to explain his or her experience in his or her own words and
ask questions of me throughout the process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). More importantly, a semistructured interview is flexible enough so that I could adapt my questions to fit the student's situation. The common characteristic that the students shared was that they aspired to go to college and would be the first generation of their families to do so. Their economic situations, family structures, and educational abilities and goals were very different. Therefore, in order to gain the most consistent information about how prospective first-generation college students make decisions, I felt that a semistructured interview was the best approach to use. I had considered focus groups, but because of the potentially personal data that the students might share regarding finances, I thought that it would be better to meet the students individually.

The semistructured interview format features a prescribed set of questions, but also provides opportunities for other questions to emerge from the dialogue of the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Although the semistructured interview can be conducted either with focus groups or individuals, for this study, I utilized individual interviews because they provided an opportunity for students to describe how they interpret their choices in their own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), “reconstruct perceptions of events and experiences”, “inform a wide range of research questions” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 316), and “explore a few general topics to help uncover the participants’ views but otherwise respects how the participant frames and structures the responses” (Marshall
& Rossman, 2006, p. 101). As I discuss in Chapters IV and V, many of the students did share their decision-making processes at length.

Because each student’s experience is personal and complex, it is important that the students have time to describe their situations and decision-making processes as individuals. As mentioned above, the students should be able to frame and structure their own responses, not rely upon others to do that for them (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). A group interview would have permitted me to potentially gather a wide range of information on their experiences in a single interview, but the dynamics of the group of students and how they interact with each other is not a factor in this study (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Although hearing the experiences of other students in a focus group format may be beneficial, many students would probably not be willing, or may possibly be embarrassed, to discuss the financial issues and their financial situations in front of a peer group. This type of fear could potentially inhibit the type of data as well as diminish the students’ personal experiences with the transition from high school to college (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Also, a focus group would change the aim of the research, in that I would have to shift my focus from actively listening to the individual and determining how the participant sees himself and his situation to how the situation is seen by a group of similar students (Drury, Francis, & Chapman, 2007; Rizq, 2008).

According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), a semistructured interview is “scheduled in advance at a designated time and location outside of everyday events” (p. 315). To that end, my plan was to interview all of the students in the library of the school
that they attend after the conclusion of the school day. The location was one in which the
student should be familiar, but one which he or she is not usually in each day. The
interviews were planned for after the school day, so as not to interfere with students’
studies.

The timing for an individual, semistructured interview is usually between 30
minutes and several hours (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interviews in this
study were, on average, 40 minutes long. However, the scheduling of the interviews
proved to be problematic because many of the students had jobs, had to go to vocational
school, or had other responsibilities after school that interfered with the original plan.
Therefore, I met the students during their study hall periods, during their lunches, or after
school, as their schedules permitted. The libraries in the different high schools were at
various times occupied by clubs, classes, or meetings, and so I interviewed students in the
library when it was free, or in available classrooms, conference rooms, and the office of
the English department in one of the high schools. I made efforts to accommodate each
student and ensure that he or she was comfortable during the interview.

The information gained from an interview would obviously be important to me,
but it might also be beneficial to the participant, in that it would provide an opportunity
for the participant to tell his or her story and make sense of it all (Murray, 2003). In this
case, providing students with an opportunity to discuss their college decision-making
process while still in their school may create an avenue for students to develop questions
of their own which may help guide their individual college searches. Although
qualitative research is not therapy, or in this case not a replacement for college or career
counseling, there could be a benefit in participation for the students, in that they may be empowered by being better informed on the college-selection process (Rizq, 2008). As a part of this process, I tried to project, as Marshall and Rossman (2004) suggested, an "attitude that the participant’s views are valuable and useful" (p. 101) - not only to me, as the researcher, but also to the individual students as they attempted to connect the dots in their college decision-making processes. As an example of a student's attempt to learn more about this process, a student continued to ask me questions after the formal conclusion of the interview, so I stayed with her for an hour and a half and we discussed what she should expect from the college experience.

As noted by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), many research participants are wary of being tape recorded. Maple Park, as a district, typically does not conduct research anywhere in the schools, and I feared that many of the students would not participate if they had to be recorded. On the consent form, I provided an opportunity for the students to check off their selection to be recorded, but not many of them did, even after I asked them to. Therefore, I took detailed notes on the students' responses, and then read my notes back to the students, asking them if what I had recorded by hand was accurate, and if they had anything to add or change. Wherever possible, I took direct quotes from the students as well, and indicated these in my notes with quotation marks.

I developed the interview questions from the research questions and created open-ended questions that I thought would provide an opportunity for students to discuss their experiences. I developed some of the interview questions directly from the literature I had reviewed for this dissertation. For example, Kenneth Oldfield (2007) listed six
things that he wished that he had known as he entered college as a first-generation student. Among his wishes was that he had known the “real purpose of college when he started” (p. 4), and then described the discrepancy between the college’s view of making students enjoy life with the first-generation students’ view of college as “job training” (Oldfield, 2007, p. 4). This sentiment was echoed in Bergerson’s (2007) interview with a first-generation student who subsequently dropped out of the college for which Bergerson works. Therefore, one of the questions I asked the students was, “Why is going to college important to you?”

When a student did not understand an interview question or had difficulty in responding to an interview question, I reworded it or asked an additional question, and made a notation in my notes. Many students had difficulty answering question #11, “How has your family helped you plan for the transition from high school to college?” The reason they had difficulty was simply because they did not understand the word “transition”, so to clarify for them, I asked “How did your family help you get ready for college?”

Additionally, many of the students had difficulty with interview question #19 (What could be better about planning for college? What things really frustrate you about trying to plan for the future?). The students had a difficult time being reflective about their own experiences, but found it easier to make recommendations for other students. The question seemed to overwhelm them, and it may be that, to pinpoint one precise thing that really frustrated them, out of the many possible things that were problematic about the college-planning process, was a challenge. If the student looked overwhelmed
when trying to respond to that question, I asked an additional question: “What recommendations could you make for other students who are planning for college?” The students were better able to respond to this question because, instead of explaining why they were hitting walls and maybe not really knowing the reason why, they were able to answer the question more globally. In other words, instead of focusing on what they had done incorrectly or the many factors that hindered them, they discussed what they thought they had done correctly, and what they saw their friends doing both correctly and incorrectly, as well as other factors that contributed to their decision-making processes as a whole.

The students also might have been more apt to answer a question to help others more than themselves, because when I asked the students why they wanted to go to college, many of them discussed philanthropic reasons; namely, they wanted to help people. I explained to the students at the start of the interview and in the letter of solicitation that I wanted to help an at-risk group of students go to, and stay in, college, and also explained to many of them that I believe this research might help students like themselves. In other words, as a researcher, I echoed the goal of many of the participants in this study, maybe contributing to their seemingly easier responses about how to help other first-generation students prepare for college.

Data Analysis

I typed my notes after each interview. I included quotes that the student said verbatim as well as what I had generalized about the context of what the students said, the tone in which they said it, idiosyncrasies present in their responses, other observations
that I made about the students. For example, Bridget kept singing to me during our interview. After each response, she sang, “bow-chica bow bow wow”. I thought that this was due to nerves, and offered her some mini-marshmallows, which she played with and ate during the rest of the interview.

During the interviews, I repeated verbatim quotes back to the students to ensure their accuracy. In my notes, I distinguished between generalized note-taking and the verbatim quotes by placing quotation marks around the verbatim quotes.

After I had typed all of my notes, I read them and identified specific categories and themes present in the students’ responses. I did not predetermine any categories for the students’ responses. At the onset of this project, I did not know whom I would interview, what they would say, and what their academic schedules would be like. I was more concerned with getting a cross-section of the students who attended the Maple Park School District. I did not want to try to jam their responses into fixed categories.

Methodically, I used open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). As Patton (2002) defined it, open coding is the “analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data” (Patton, 2002, p. 490). I let the students’ responses guide the creation of the categories. I created the categories out of the information that I saw as salient to the students’ decision-making processes, the aim of this research. Even though the students had a variety of responses, and some categories did not apply to all students, some of their responses revealed similarities. For example, a very important part of the decision-making process is the input from older siblings. Not all of the students had older siblings, or no siblings at all,
but most of the students did express a wish that they knew someone who was closer to their age than their parents, or their friends’ parents, whom they could talk to about going to college. Therefore, this became part of the data for that category, even though the participant did not have the requisite older sibling. I used this procedure for all of the research questions.

As I mentioned previously, I developed the research questions from the literature I reviewed, and from the research questions I developed interview questions to ask the students. I found several overlaps in the students’ responses to the interview questions, as well as in the adjusted questions that were used to clarify several of the research questions. So when I performed the analysis, I looked at the notes and matched the interview responses back to the research questions, as was appropriate.

I did not analyze the research questions in order. The order I used was a, d, b, c, e, and finally, 1. I felt that the scope of the overarching research question was so comprehensive that I would have to reevaluate most of what I reviewed in the categories for all of the other research questions in order to answer it. So, I decided to initiate the process with the other research questions, and began with questions that I thought would have more specific and more focused answers. I started with research question a: “How does a student interpret the importance of going to college; that is, why is going to college important to the student?” All of the students had a specific answer for this question. Additionally, I began with a particular question because I had made for myself a demographic chart of the students and had included a category in this chart called “student’s reason for going to college”. I decided that this would be the best place to
start. After all, this question is really at the heart of the matter. Why have these middle-income students decided to break from their family tradition, to change what has been successful for their parents?

After studying the completed demographic chart, I noticed that the students either talked about their parents and families or their future careers when asked what their reasons were for going to college. Therefore, to analyze research question a, I initially created two categories: family impact on college importance and future job impact on college importance. After coding the notes for each student as F (for Family) or J (for Job), I then filled in information in each category as was applicable for each student. The third category, likely major choice (Maj), evolved out of consideration of the other two categories; that is, I found that both the students’ families and their future jobs had an influence in determining what the student wanted to pursue as a major in college.

I continued this process with the other research questions. The next research question that I sought to answer was research question d, where the students discussed the problems that they anticipated when they went to college. I figured that, since I now knew why the students wanted to go to college, I should find out whether they anticipated any problems, and if so, what kinds of problems they anticipated when they got there in eight months. That is, I wanted to know if they saw any problems evolving out of their decisions to break their family traditions.

I chose to analyze questions b and c next, the students’ definitions and evaluations of their executions of the college search process, because I wanted to see the specific actions that the students held themselves accountable for in determining their
futures. Since all of them had made the decision to go to college, I wanted to know what they did about it.

Research question e was more complex to analyze than questions a, b, c, and d, because financial considerations had permeated most of the students’ responses. These categories were interrelated and analyzed as such. To demonstrate the interrelatedness of these categories, consider this example: The parents might say to the child, “Don’t worry about the money” (What Parents Have Said). The child would hear the parents say that, but then watch the parents struggle to pay tuition bills for an older sibling, and therefore the child would say that he would want to work during college (What the Student Says), save money while in high school (Money Saved), or possibly attend the community college (Community College Decisions). The Total Effect on College Choice might be that a student who originally planned to go away to college and not work is now planning to commute and work part time.

Finally, I analyzed the different facets of the overarching research question: What influences students’ decisions to attend college, and to what extent do these students feel these influences are important in their decision-making processes? It was easier to answer the first half of the question, what the influences were, and then present an evaluation of how the students felt that these influences were important.

I looked at the other codes and categories created for the other research questions and created three large categories: family influences, high school influences, and friends and college-generated material influences. I took it one step at a time; that is, I analyzed these categories independently of each other. I divided these three large themes into
several subsidiary themes. What makes the analysis of this research question different from the others is that I had to reevaluate the data, as well as the other research questions, and then record the students’ value judgments about the subject. I will detail in the upcoming paragraphs how I performed this for the first influence, the students’ families, but I coded and analyzed the second and third influences on the students’ decision-making processes in the same way.

For example, for the large theme of “family influences” I recorded instances where the students discussed how they perceived their parents’ support of the students’ college plans, verbal encouragement from the parents, and resources their parents provided and actions their parents performed that the students felt were encouraging towards their college endeavors. I coded these S (for supportive), VE (for verbal encouragement), and A (for action). The second category in this influence was Parent Negative Reinforcement. In this category, I placed instances that the students described as problems that they saw with their parents’ lives, coded Par Prob., which factored in as a motivation for them to break tradition and go to college. The third category was Sibling Effect. In this category, I placed responses that the students who had siblings made regarding their siblings in regard to their college plans.

The last category in this section is the Student’s Perception of their Family as an Influence on their college choice and choice to go to college. I placed responses that the students made about their families as a whole, or generalized responses about their extended families in this category.
Limitations of the Study

Although I asked the students to describe how they make choices, there was not ample time to follow the students through their high school graduations and gather responses to the consequences of their decisions. However, there is ample research about the struggles of first-generation students while they are in college. Because most of the current research is about the effects of students’ decisions in high school, this study should be helpful in that it aims to describe the processes of information-gathering and decision-making as the processes are occurring, not as the student encounters difficulty while attending college.

I was limited in gathering information from the students in that I did not, and in most cases could not, use a recorder during the interview. As I discussed previously, I did do my best to write verbatim what the students had said, and did take notes on the students’ attitudes, tone of voice, pace of speech, etc., when they talked to me. Most of the students had never been interviewed for anything before. Amber, Roman, and Lisa explained to me that they were happy to do the interview as they had impending instant-decision interviews with a local four-year university; they felt that the interview with me was good practice for the interview with the admissions counselor.

I was happy to provide the students with an opportunity to discuss their college-planning experiences, but I was concerned with some of the problems that they were encountering, a lot of which appeared to stem from miscommunication and misinformation. As someone who is trained and who practices advocating for the best interests of children, it is a challenge to not take action on problems that they encounter.
However, I must recognize that students need to develop the skill of advocating for themselves.

Because the interviews were approximately 40 minutes long and I could not conduct follow up interviews, I will not have an opportunity to see how the students’ responses given in November and December of 2009 actually come to fruition (or not) at graduation or enrollment at college in September.

Researcher Role

Initially, as the researcher, I saw my role as just gathering information from the students in order to write this dissertation, and maybe helping out some students in the form of answering some questions about college.

However, as I went through the process, I was able to do more than that. The process of purposeful sampling for this study made the district’s professionals aware of the large population of prospective first-generation, middle-income college students. For instance, as I stated earlier, I had to explain to guidance counselors what the term “first-generation” meant, and even after I did, many of them considered students who were low-income to be the only potential first-generation college students in the building. Having the counselors identify who actually fit the criteria for my sample possibly compelled them to reconsider how well they knew their students, and possibly reevaluate how they do college-planning with them.

The guidance counselors, for the most part, seemed very happy to have research conducted and to have a researcher talk to their students about the college-planning process. As many of the students and many of the counselors explained, there are many
students per counselor. I feel that maybe the counselors might have looked at my
presence as an opportunity to have students discuss college questions, which many of
them asked me, and, indeed, I did answer.
CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the college decision-making processes of prospective first-generation, middle-income college students. I used individual, semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data from 14 high school seniors who fit this description. The interviews focused on the factors that contributed to students’ college decisions, the reasons why college was important to the students, how students conducted a college search and how they viewed the quality of such a search, what students anticipated from college life, and what impact financing a college education had upon their higher educational plans.

As I noted in the data analysis section in Chapter III, the categories of data analysis evolved out of the students’ responses. In turn, from these categories, major themes evolved; these themes cut across many of the research questions. Therefore, I present the data in this chapter according to theme. The major themes of this section concern influences of family and friends, students’ perceptions of the help received from the high school, how they planned to pay for college, and students’ views on the college search and transition. Each theme has a brief overview of the findings, followed by a more detailed description of those findings. The chart demonstrates how these themes were interconnected.
Interconnected Themes

Family Influences

The 14 students represented a variety of home environments and circumstances within the middle-income designation. There were overlaps in the students’ responses. Those overlaps were not based upon the parents’ marital status, country of origin, or family structure. Instead, the students’ responses were similar, and primarily based on their designation as prospective first-generation, middle-income student as opposed to other potential categories, such as “race” or “child of divorced parents”.

This section is the largest of the five. A student’s family plays a vital role in the student’s decision to pursue a college degree, and most of the students discussed how their future college educations were important to them and also to their families. In
discussions about their families, the students revealed that there were both positive and negative motivators that sparked their interest in going to college. Many times, I asked the students why going to college was important to them, and received instead an explanation of why going to college was important to their families.

In addition to the immediate family, I found that siblings, female role models, and the extended family had an impact on the students’ decisions to attend college. The chart below demonstrates the interaction of all of the factors involved in the decision-making processes as they relate to the family.

Family Influences Interactions

Verbal Support from Parents

For 12 of the students, the verbal encouragement that their parents provided was one of the most important things that the students felt that their parents could do. It is
also, in my opinion, one of the easiest things for a parent to do - to simply and sincerely wish the child success. Although annoyed at times by their parents' involvement; i.e. Vanessa's complaint, "My mom is always after me for college"; the students were generally appreciative that their parents were in any way involved.

All 12 of these students explained this, and this was very obvious to them. Karen said her parents both told her, "You can do it." Roman's mother told him, "We'll make it work, don't worry." Also, Vanessa's mother and father alternately hassled her about going to college. Her father told her that he "doesn't care as long as I go", and Lisa's mother told her to "Apply for everything".

Parents' Supportive Actions

Twelve students evaluated their parents' actions as being well-intended, but as providing little overall value to the students' college searches or decisions to attend college. The exception was that the students felt as if their parents were doing something supportive, which in itself had value; that is, the students saw that their parents were taking an interest in their plans, and they viewed this as supportive.

These same 12 students described instances where they thought that their parents were trying to be helpful, but for one reason or another, the resultant actions from these intentions were not effective. The ways in which the students thought that their parents tried to be helpful were by getting information for their children from the colleges and by seeking out contacts with college educations who could talk to their children.

The parents usually got information from colleges by taking the mail that came as a result of students' SAT registration. However, four of the students (Joe, Roman, Brian,
and Karen) did not realize that their taking of the SAT was the reason that they would receive college-generated mail. Roman and Karen had just taken the test and had not received any information yet. Roman blamed his mother: “I think that my mom’s been holding out on that. I’m not sure.”

Joe, Patricia, Lisa, Stephanie, Nina, and Amber were continually receiving advertisements from college recruiters. These students thought that these ads were a waste of time, which I discuss later in this chapter. However, with the exception of Stephanie, all of the students believed their parents thought the information was pertinent. Like Roman, Joe accused his mother of “stealing my mail...I don’t know what she does with it.” Patricia’s mother used the information from colleges to help narrow down the scope of where to look. Amber’s parents relied upon her aunt and uncle to help Amber, and passed that information on to them. Stephanie thought the information might be important, so she did not throw it out; instead, she placed it in a drawer.

Nine of the students (Bridget, Joe, Lisa, Nina, Amber, Roman, Mark, Margot, and Patricia) viewed consulting with their parents’ contacts, even their friends’ parents who had college educations, as a waste of time. The students also explained that each conversation with a friend or relative with college experience added a new layer of confusion for a variety of reasons: Many of the contacts were older and things had changed, some of the contacts were college dropouts and shared frustrations, and some of the contacts were in fields that were not related to the students’ interest.

Roman described some very confusing advice that he received from three separate sources. He wanted to be an engineer, or maybe major in business. He explained why
his mother's suggested "reliable sources" were not as reliable as they initially appeared.

“I want to go to Princeton. My mom’s friend is an admissions counselor there. She said I should apply as liberal arts.” This recommendation had Roman confused. Why would he major in liberal arts if he wanted to try business or engineering? Would it waste his time to transfer majors? Why liberal arts?

His mother pointed out some other sources of information. Many of the teachers in the building were friends of hers, so Roman decided to put them to the test: “I look up a lot of stuff online....I don’t want to call it a test....but I’ll ask if they know the answer to a question. If it seems like they don’t know, I never ask again.”

Another source of information would be from Roman’s girlfriend’s parents. Kelli (pseudonym) wanted to be a nurse and her parents were college graduates. He described his chat with them, “Kelli’s parents talk to me sometimes. Kelli’s not dumb...but kinda clueless...It’s like her mom and me trying to help her out.” So, Roman might be helping Kelli’s parents get her ready for college, but he was not really reaping any personal reward in the form of valuable information from them.

Six of the students who participated in this study had the same problem that was described in the literature regarding low-income children and their lack of access to contacts who had experience with higher education. Stephanie said that she did not know of anyone who had a college degree other than the teaching staff in the building, and claimed that her guardians did not know anyone either, so they encouraged her to participate in this study simply because she would have someone of whom she could ask questions about college. Karen did not know many people who went to college, other
than her coworker at the Dollar Store. Joe, Larry, and Brian told me that they just started finding out who went to college this year. Bridget had switched her group of friends, and, at the time she was interviewed, did not know who in her new group of friends’ parents have college educations.

Even at that, I think it is fair to speculate that not many high school students would want to hang out with their friends’ parents or ask them questions about careers. They probably do not view their friends’ parents as sources of information; the students more likely view these potential sources as “Mrs. Smith’s Chauffeur Service”, “Little League Coach Jones”, or “Eddie’s Dad”.

Additionally, the majority of students in Maple Park, though middle-income, potentially have parents who do not have college degrees. It is possible that the 14 students in this study did not have friends who were prospective continuing-generation students because continuing-generation students are a minority in this district.

**Problems Concerning the Parents**

All of the students stated that a problem they had with their parents concerned the fact that their parents did not understand what the students were going through in the college-planning process, even though the parents had been encouraging the students to go to college.

All of the students explained that they felt that their parents did not fully understand what was going on. For example, although Karen reported that her parents were supportive and would say encouraging things, as mentioned previously, they would not say anything else to her about her college plans. Instead, they would frequently walk
away. “Rather than just say stuff that I know they don’t know anything about, they just say general stuff like, ‘Yeah, that’s really good, You can do it, We’ll be so proud;’ then they just go and watch TV,” “They just change the subject all of the time,” and “They support me, I guess, but they don’t say, ‘don’t go;’ they want me to go.”

Bridget thought her parents were encouraging verbally, but not in action. She related that her parents told her that it cost money to go on a college tour, and when she contradicted them, they told her she did not know what she was talking about. She also approached them to discuss college planning in general. She said they were always too busy or too tired. Sundays were the only days available to them, and sometimes her father worked extra hours on Sundays, so even that day was not a consistent option for family discussion time. However, she did acknowledge that her parents paid to get her tutored for the SAT. In her case, it appeared that her parents were looking for available routes for helping their daughter be successful in preparing for college, but their efforts were not helping in her search process, nor did they even seem interested in doing so, even though Bridget had expressed to them her need for this assistance.

Larry, who did not feel that his parents were particularly supportive of his desire to attend college, explained that both he and his parents had never anticipated that Larry would ever attend college. However, he expressed the same feelings of alienation as the other students: “My mom...doesn’t care. She said, go, don’t go, whatever. But I know it’s better to go than not to go....[my dad] didn’t go. They don’t really get it, I think.” Larry thought that his real motivation to go to college was to get in a better place in his career as an electrician for a local energy provider when he was ready to work. He felt
that his parents played a part in encouraging him to go to college by telling him of their recent discovery that he would no longer be eligible for their health insurance if he did not stay in school.

Amber felt that her parents were very supportive of her desire to go to college. She never mentioned her parents’ occupations, and when I asked her in what way they were supportive of her, she gave this reason: Her parents had become supportive of her after her brother graduated from Penn State and became successful. Amber did not go to her parents to ask for help with applications; she went to her brother. She did not get any support other than verbal encouragement from her parents; they referred her to her aunt, uncle, and cousin for college counseling, tours, and filling out financial aid forms.

The process of alienation was not one-sided; 6 of the students explained that they felt that they would be alienated from their parents once they went to college. Roman, Lisa, Bridget, Karen, Amber, and Nina reflected that their parents had expressed a fear of having their child leave home, and of the changes to the family dynamic that their potential absence would bring. This was true for students whose parents were divorced as well as for students whose parents were still married. Both Roman and Lisa came from divorced families, both lived with their mothers, and both mothers had not remarried. The two of them reported that their mothers told them that they would be lonely. Roman and his mother had been together ever since his parents’ divorce; Roman said that his mother would most likely move in with an aunt or a friend so that she could pay the bills and not be so lonely. Lisa explained that her mom encouraged her to stay at home because without Lisa, her mother would be lonely.
Children of still-married parents did not feel that loneliness would be the result of the change in their family dynamic. However, they did acknowledge that their absence would result in a change in the family dynamic in that it would disrupt their normal living routine.

Four of the girls who lived in households with married parents specifically mentioned this. Amber and Bridget wanted to live away from home, whereas Karen and Nina wanted to live at home. Amber’s brother had just graduated from college, and he was now living in the home as Amber prepared to depart for college. She felt that because he had the chance to live away, she should have this opportunity as well. She rationalized that her parents were already used to one less child being in the home. Bridget is the oldest of three, and said that her parents thought that she was immature, and reflected that her parents would worry too much about her if she lived far away. She wanted to move out of the home to challenge herself and to prove to her parents that she could be independent, and that they really had no cause for worry.

Unlike Amber and Bridget, Karen and Nina wanted to live at home. Karen spent a lot of time with her family, and did not want to leave something that she felt she and her family were all comfortable with; she imagined that her schedule at college would be the same as it was in high school. Nina’s mother had dropped out of college, as did her sister for a time. They both worried that Nina may have the same fate; even Nina had that fear, especially since she planned to start college with the designation of Undecided. They did not want her to go away to school like they did, and Nina was considering two options to avoid the problems they had: (a) starting at the community college, or (b) attending an
all-girls' school in North Carolina so she would not get distracted by boys and the subsequent drama.

**Considerations for Leaving Home and Living on Campus**

The other students also explained why their households provided either a safe haven or a study hazard for their continued education. Three of the girls viewed their homes as antagonistic to a good study environment, and therefore wanted to leave home. These three girls also viewed the community college very negatively.

The remaining 11 students did not hold such negative views about the community college, but also they did not state that they considered their homes to be good study environments. For these 11 students, the decision to attend a local college or live at college further away from home was more dependent upon their own emotional and financial considerations rather than academic considerations.

There are some examples of how the students attempted to cope with this issue. Roman did not want to necessarily leave his mother, but felt comforted by the suggestion that she might live with a relative. Karen simply decided to go to the community college so she could keep what she viewed as a successful family dynamic going. Nina is determined to finish college, and seems superstitious about repeating her mother’s and sister’s mistakes, so she was going to try things differently than they did. Lisa said that she would be “robbed” if she did not get the chance to live on campus. However, she also did not want to necessarily make her mother feel lonely. She came up with a compromise, motivated by financial consideration:
“I want to live on campus. I want the real experience.... A year of driving and food will come out to be about half the price of living there on campus. So what would be the point of living at home? I would love to live there....I will probably live at home for the first two years, to see if I like it, then go live on campus.”

As noted above, Lisa explained one of the reasons why she would want to move away from her mother, even though she realized that her mother would be lonely. She did not view her home as being a place where she could not study. However, three of the girls who participated did view their homes as places that were hostile to study environments: Patricia, Margot, and Stephanie. Each of these girls viewed their conditions at home as unchangeable and a threat to their college educations. Patricia’s family was large and frequently noisy, as her younger brother was an active middle school student. Also, Margot’s older brother and niece were at her house frequently, and the baby distracted Margot from studying. Stephanie’s friends and relatives visited often, and she had to answer to her aunt, uncle, grandmother, and sometimes, her father.

Staying at home and attending the community college was not an option for these three girls. They were opposed to going there because they believed that the community college would be a waste of their money and time. Patricia, who qualifies for the STARS program1, would not have to pay tuition at the community college. Yet, she felt that the community college would be detrimental to her career. She and Margot wanted to become doctors, and both viewed the community college as a threat to their acceptance

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1 State Tuition Assistance Reward Scholarship program (STARS) rewards high-achieving students at all New Jersey high schools. The reward is that students have the opportunity to attend community college tuition-free. If they maintain a certain grade point average at the community college, they may continue at one of the state’s public colleges for free or for a reduced tuition rate (http://www.njstars.net/, accessed February 12, 2010).
into medical school. Stephanie wants to be a psychologist, and thought that the community college would similarly waste her time because she wanted to go to college, and she believed that the other students who attended a community college were going because they really were not prepared for a four-year college.

Although these girls wanted to move away from home, they did not express a desire to go clear across the country to Hawaii, California, Florida, or even midway to Illinois. They did not want to live too far away, and defined “close enough but far enough” as being a college that is a maximum of five hours away from Maple Park. They felt that this distance would be close enough that they could return home if an emergency should happen to either them or to their families. They considered colleges in New Jersey (outside of the county), Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Washington DC, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Patricia especially liked some colleges in Pittsburgh, as she had extended family who lived in the suburbs. This city could provide her with an opportunity to do a medical internship and be close to relatives in case of emergency.

Bridget, Lisa, and Amber thought that they could do better outside of their homes because they would have an opportunity to demonstrate their independence to both themselves and their families. They each thought that this might improve their relationships with their families, as Amber said, “I love my parents, but.....I need to move.” Lisa’s situation was explained previously. Bridget knew that she would make mistakes in gaining her independence, but saw these mistakes as opportunities to better herself - as part of the learning experience. While Margot, Patricia, and Stephanie viewed their homes as places that were not conducive to peaceful studying, Bridget, Lisa,
and Amber did not necessarily view the study environment as an issue. Bridget, Lisa, and Amber preferred to live away from home, but felt they could manage living at home and attending college if they had to.

Bridget, Lisa, and Amber defined “far enough but close enough” differently from Patricia, Margot, and Stephanie. They defined it as an hour to two away from Maple Park. The exception to this is Amber’s consideration of Penn State; this was a recent development, based on her brother’s May graduation. Other than that, Amber, Lisa, and Bridget identified colleges in New York City, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and throughout New Jersey. Lisa reflected that if she could go a short distance away from her mother, she could still meet her mother for dinner once a month. and Bridget mentioned that her parents could visit her from time to time.

The other six students chose to stay closer to home. Vanessa was going to DeVry, which is within commuting distance from Maple Park. Joe, Larry, Nina, Brian, and Karen were definitely going to the community college; there is no on-campus living there. Karen explained that she chose to stay at home because she was not good at making new friends and did not want to try; she just wanted to graduate from college without worrying about roommates, parties, and other distractions. These 6 students planned on working while enrolled in college, in order to help their families with the bills, and would like to stay local to do so.

Roman and Mark plan to attend the community college only if they cannot get into a four-year college. They both wanted to become engineers, and both wanted to attend local universities so that they could commute. If these two local colleges did not
accept Mark and Roman, they planned to start their engineering programs at the community college. Mark wanted to try to save his parents some money. He thought that they were working too much now - trying to put his three older siblings through college - and he did not want to ruin them financially.

**Perceived Parent Job Quality**

All of the students said that their parents “worked constantly”. This was true regardless of whether the students lived with both parents, and of whether the students discussed their parents’ jobs specifically. Some of the parents worked two jobs to maintain a middle-income lifestyle, like Bridget’s father who picked up extra hours doing maintenance work. Mark’s father, a mechanic who owns his own garage, worked “sixty hours a week, ten hours a day, six days a week.” After Karen’s father lost his job due to a work-related accident, Karen’s sister and brother-in-law moved into the house to help Karen’s parents maintain a middle-income life.

In all of the cases, the students envisioned themselves having a better quality of life, but living within the same income bracket. None of the students expressed an expectation that they would move into the high-income bracket. None of the students reported that they expected to have multiple homes, sports cars, exotic vacations, etc. Most of the students stated that they wanted career satisfaction as well as job security. These two qualities would provide them with a better quality of life than their parents had.

These students did not envision themselves making more money than their parents: They thought that they would earn approximately the same amount of money as
their parents. They would just have more time, and therefore, more opportunity to enjoy
their money than their parents did. For instance, Joe explained that he did not need to
“make that much money,” just enough to keep his future wife and kids comfortable and
enjoy his life. Those things were more important than “the big bucks and the big stress.”
Roman explained that his mother “made great money” for a woman who did not have a
college degree, but the day before the interview, Roman’s mother had received a notice of
termination. He said he knew that with a college degree, he would always be more
employable than she is, and not have to worry as much about his job prospects, even if
those jobs were not in what he had a degree in.

Although these students are in the middle-income group now, they had not always
been so, especially in the economic climate of the last few years. They have seen their
parents gain and lose jobs, start contracting businesses, and then have those businesses
drop off. The interviews for this study were conducted during late November and early
December of 2009 - times when managers at retail stores generally do hiring for the
holiday rush, but many of the students experienced frustration in trying to get part-time
jobs themselves. Nina had applied for five retail and food service jobs and had not heard
anything from these prospective employers for two weeks. Larry shared similar
frustrations about the lack of job opportunities for high school students.

Therefore, their frustrations with the lack of available jobs, as well as their
observations of their parents’ experiences with it, had an impact on the students’
decisions to pursue a college education. For example, Mark explained that President
Obama had encouraged that money be invested in infrastructure, so Mark believed that he
should get a career that would follow Obama’s suggestion. He felt that a career as a civil engineer would be readily available when he graduated from college and, at the same time, prevent him from working the 60 hours a week that his father worked as a mechanic. Mark chose this career specifically on the basis of job availability after college, even though he liked being a mechanic and was good at it. He worked with his father every summer in the garage, and saw his father working hard, all of those hours, and he did not want to have the same life.

Vanessa, who wanted to work in computer science, used a different tactic: She decided to go to DeVry University because of its accelerated program that would have her “graduate in February” while her peers graduated in May, which would give her an edge in the job market. She felt that with a job in computer science, she would always be gainfully employed and, unless she chose to, would not have to fix computers in prisons, the environment in which her mother worked. Brian and Larry, who planned to attend the community college for culinary arts and electrical engineering, respectively, both explained that even though they felt that their parents were not especially supportive of their desires to go to college, each boy knew that he would be more employable and more secure in a job with an Associate’s degree, compared to people in their fields with more years of experience.

Seven of the students thought that their parents were unhappy in their careers because they had jobs which did not bring any personal satisfaction, and speculated that a more philanthropic job might be the route to obtain this missing component. Nina thought her mother was unhappy working as a receptionist. Amber put it succinctly: “I
always wanted to teach. To be a teacher, you have to go to college.” This was also true for the other students: They believed that the only way to obtain a philanthropic career was through a college education. Margot and Patricia wanted to become doctors, Stephanie wanted to become a psychologist, Mark was a future civil engineer, and Amber wanted to teach and might pursue special education. Nina was not as sure of what she wanted to do, but definitely wanted to help people. Bridget wanted to be a music therapist; she explained, “It’s not cheesy to want to help people,” and felt that her singing made people feel better, which gave her a sense of satisfaction.

The Female Perspective

As I described in Chapter III, Maple Park has a below-average proportion of women over the age of 25 who have college degrees, as compared to the rest of the State of New Jersey. This was of particular interest to me, especially while interviewing the 9 female students. Each female student had a mother who was, in some way, unhappy with her job. This appeared to be the primary motivation for these girls to obtain a college education. For example, Margot said that her mother was “a typical Vietnamese woman who works in a nail shop,” Karen’s mother and older sister were bus drivers, Lisa’s mother did secretarial work, Patricia’s mother was a homemaker, Bridget’s mother was a custodian, and Vanessa’s mother was a hearings officer who had a “good job that paid good with good benefits”, but had to travel from jail to jail to do her job - something that Vanessa was not interested in doing.

Nina provided the best example of this. When I asked Nina why she wanted to go to college, she replied that she wanted to get a “job that helps people.” She wanted to
major in either mathematics or biology, and was unsure of how those jobs would directly lead to her helping people, but she was sure that something would come up. Her mother attended a university to become a nurse, but dropped out of college and never returned. Nina’s mother now worked for a large corporation as a receptionist. Nina was considering this work as a summer job, but reflected that this would not be something that she wanted to do on a permanent basis. Her mother did not seem happy there, and Nina explained, “She went for nursing....She wanted to help people, now she’s answering the phone. That doesn’t help anyone.”

The Sibling Effect

Eight of the students who participated in this study had siblings. Five of them were the youngest in their families: Mark, Karen, Nina, Margot, and Amber. Three of the students were the oldest in their families: Patricia, Stephanie, and Bridget. The sibling effect on the students’ decisions to attend college, and which type of college to attend, was directly related to birth order: The students who were the youngest in their families wanted to avoid the mistakes that the older siblings had made; whereas, the students who were the oldest siblings in their families wanted to be good role models for their younger siblings.

The younger siblings learned from their big brothers and sisters, regardless of whether their older siblings had gone to college. They relied more upon their older siblings than they relied upon their parents as role models and cheerleaders. These 5 students reported that they received motivation and support from their older siblings, and explained that they had gone to their older siblings for advice about going to college,
even if the older siblings had not attended, or had even been close to attending
themselves. For example, Karen explained that her brother and sister had both dropped
out of high school. Her brother had problems with drugs and dropped out in the last
semester of his senior year, and her sister was “just too cool for school” and dropped out
of two different high schools. However, Karen said that she did not think that she could
go on to college if it were not for her sister’s encouragement: “My sister is my biggest
cheerleader.”

Amber, Nina, and Mark had older siblings who went to college. Amber relied
upon her older brother to help her with college applications. Nina’s sister had dropped
out of college for awhile, but later returned. Nina did not think that her sister would ever
finish with college, but saw her sister’s failure to graduate as a catalyst for her to be the
first one in her family to obtain a college degree.

Mark had learned from his three older siblings that he should save his parents’
money. One of his older brothers, Carmine (pseudonym), switched majors at a private
college. Carmine now had some credits that were not worth anything in his new major
and had to spend extra time, and therefore money, to obtain the required credits in his
new major. From Carmine’s experience, Mark learned that he should enter college with a
definite major in mind. Mark’s older sister, Melissa, had a degree in speech therapy from
Stockton State College. However, speech therapists need Master’s degrees to practice, so
she was now attending Rider University to get that degree, which was something that his
parents were happy to pay for. Mark, the only child in the home right now, learned that
college is expensive, but necessary, and wanted to try to stay at home to save money for them.

The students who were the older siblings in their families related a different experience. They all wanted to be good role models for their younger siblings. Bridget and Patricia are significantly older than their siblings, and believe that even though their siblings did not understand the transition process now, they would eventually learn from Bridget’s and Patricia’s experiences.

Because she did not live with her parents, Stephanie considered Anna (pseudonym), her younger cousin by a year, to be her sister. They have lived together and have shared a room for the last six years. Stephanie did her college planning with the aim of including Anna, and they planned on attending the same university and sharing a dorm room. Stephanie shared with Anna all of the information that she gained, and relied upon Anna for support and encouragement.

Although Patricia, Bridget, and Stephanie saw themselves as being role models for their younger siblings, they expressed the feeling that college planning was a bit frustrating because they lacked someone who was close to them in age who was going to college already. Roman, Joe, Brian, Larry, Lisa, and Vanessa were only children, and most of them expressed a similar frustration. In other words, they had no older siblings from whom to ask advice. Also, as I discuss later, they did not find their friends to be satisfactory sources of information, and they were not likely to ask their friends’ older siblings for advice either.
Impact of Extended Family

For those students who had them, and were on speaking terms with them, cousins, aunts, and uncles were sources of information. This was true of 7 of the students: Amber, Patricia, Nina, Bridget, Margot, Lisa, and Vanessa. The relatives were able to help with some of the college planning process, as seen earlier in the discussion of Amber’s case. Patricia was fortunate that her older female cousin had just graduated from Georgetown, and she felt that her relatives compared her desire to go to college with her cousin’s attainment. She viewed her cousin as a source of inspiration, and had even considered going to Georgetown because of her cousin.

Patricia, Bridget, and Margot had relatives in Moldova, Haiti, and Vietnam, respectively. They looked upon their opportunities to go to college as a fulfillment of the American dream that their parents had moved to this country for, as well as an opportunity to demonstrate success to their foreign relatives. Patricia and Margot both expressed the feeling that their status as females had specific importance for their relatives. Margot said, “even though I’m a girl, I can do it.”

Sometimes the motivation was quite different. Nina explained that her aunt and uncle had graduated from college; her uncle had worked a contract for NASA which was an especial pride for her grandmother. She related that her grandmother displayed the certificate that NASA had given her uncle, and discussed her aunt’s career, but did not have much to say about her mother and father. Nina felt that this demonstrated an obvious difference between her mother and her aunt, and viewed her own opportunity to go to college as a way to earn pride from her grandmother for her mother.
Lisa's grandmother was also influential to her, but in a different way. She felt that Lisa's going to college was especially important for her grandmother, who had died last summer. She felt that getting a college degree was her grandmother's dream for her, and she needed to complete it.

Vanessa demonstrated that, in addition to parents' work experiences, an extended relative's work experience could also have an effect upon the college choice. She relied upon her uncle for support in going to college, though she did not report whether he had actually attended college or had gone to a trade school. She felt that his input was valuable because he was doing computer work, which was what she wanted to do.

However, the other students did not discuss their relatives as having an influence in their college decision or choice. This, again, might be because these relatives did not exist, were not on speaking terms with the students or their families, or simply had no influence. For example, both Stephanie (who considers her aunt and uncle to be her parents) and Karen told me that they did not know of anyone who had a college degree other than the teaching staff at the high school. If they had an extended family member to mention, that person would not hold a degree, so would not be a potential source of information (like Amber's cousin who was a guidance counselor) or inspiration (like Patricia's cousin who had just graduated from Georgetown) for those girls. The fact remains that 7 students did not discuss their extended families. It may simply be that among all the things to consider for planning for college, those members of the family did not play an active role.
Friends as a Source of Help

Why do prospective first-generation college students not rely upon their friends for help in college planning? The answer to that question is simple and unequivocal: When it comes to college planning, friends are by and large unhelpful.

As I discussed in the literature review, many researchers assumed that first-generation, middle-income college students have more cultural capital than their counterpart low-income peers because they were potentially more likely to have friends who would be continuing-generation students. Bergerson (2007) and Herzog (2005) made specific references to this, and it may well be the case for most middle-income students. However, the students who participated in this study did not obtain any information about going to college from their friends, and as I touched upon earlier in this chapter, nor from their friends' parents.

As the reader will recall from the previous chapter, for people over the age of 25, in the year 2000 Maple Park was in the average range for men with college degrees, but in the below-average range for women with college degrees, as compared to the state of New Jersey. The majority of students in this district would have parents who are not college educated. Of the 14 students interviewed, only three - Mark, Roman, and Joe - mentioned that they had friends who had parents with college degrees. Two students stated definitively that they did not know of anyone who had a college degree other than the teaching staff of the high school. This is not to say that the other eight students did not have friends with parents with college degrees, but if they did, they did not identify
them. This leads me back to my earlier conclusion— that the students did not identify their friends’ parents as sources of information for college.

As I discuss in the section entitled Different Paths to College Success, the fact that the students felt that their friends were not helpful to them in this process did not cause much of a problem for them. The students acknowledged that their friends were also in the process of planning for college, but the friends had different paths: different majors, different locations, or different abilities to pay for a college education. Twelve students had friends who had planned to go to college; Larry and Karen were the exceptions in this case. There was a general consensus among the 12 students that the topic of college was something that they discussed only occasionally. Yet, they all knew what their friends planned to major in and had a vague idea to which colleges their friends were applying. Again, because their friends had different plans, the students did not view their friends as sources of information.

The next subheading involves a discussion of issues with the participants’ friends that irritated, frustrated, and confused the participants in their college decision-making processes. Nine of the students identified these types of problems, which is why this discussion is located under Barriers to Success in the College Search Process. The problems that occurred in the students’ friendships with other senior students stemmed from competition to get into colleges, the participants noting that their friends obviously possessed misinformation about colleges and careers. The participants felt that their friends lived in a fantasy world because of the lack of college planning on the friends’ part. Four of the students noted that their friends who wanted to go to college were
younger than they were, and those friends accepted information from the participants, but did not reciprocate. Put simply, the students in this study lacked same-aged peers who were college-planning partners.

**Different Paths to College Success**

The first reason that students saw their friends as unhelpful was the least detrimental to students’ college planning experience. Among the twelve students who had friends who were planning to go to college, none of the friends had the same goals. The students viewed any information that the friend provided as not valuable because it did not apply to the programs, majors, or colleges that the students wanted to attend.

Margot provided a good example of this. Because her mother was working so many hours, Margot had gone on college tours with her friends. However, none of her friends wanted to do what she wanted to do, which was to become a doctor, possibly specializing in dermatology. One of her friends wanted to be a teacher, and Margot had gone on college tours with her. Margot had seen plenty of colleges that had teaching programs, but not premed programs. All of the colleges that she visited with her friend were located in suburban areas, which was, again, what the friend was interested in, so Margot had no basis for comparing city colleges to suburban or rural colleges.

Stephanie was frustrated with her friends because they wanted to go to the community college, which was not what she wanted to do. As I discussed earlier, she thought that the community college was for students who were not yet ready to go to a four-year college. Stephanie’s friends also wanted careers in zoology and pharmacology, which were sciences that she was not interested in.
The other students stated that they did not have any friends who were interested in their programs, either. Nina was undecided upon her program, but had narrowed it down to two different majors. She did not know of anyone who was going to enter college with either major: math or biology.

Mark, Roman, and Brian did know students who were going to go to college and who were interested in the same programs that they were going to major in. However, all of these friends were younger than the boys; therefore, these friends became receptors of information, not providers of information about college. This frustrated Roman, who felt as though he had done a lot of searching and evaluation of colleges and was then passing on his work to another student without having any information reciprocated.

**Barriers to Success in the College Search Process**

For a variety of reasons, the students described their friends’ input into their college aspirations as detrimental. This was especially true of their friends who were also seniors. Patricia explained the competitiveness of the college acceptance process on her friendships. She did not share any information with her friends, nor they with her, because they did not view college as something that they should talk about. “It’s a personal thing. We do it, then when we get acceptance letters, then we talk about it.”

Vanessa, Stephanie, Larry, Brian, Mark, Karen, Bridget, and Lisa were all, for one reason or another, extremely frustrated with their friends. Bridget had a falling out with her peers from the past three years, and she viewed her newer friends as not being valuable sources of information. She explained, “I’m not really relying on them for
Larry explained that some of his friends had never considered going to college, so he felt isolated from them in his recent decision to go to college. He did not have any friends, even from the vocational program in which he was enrolled, who also wanted to go to college. He felt as though his current friends did not understand why going to college was important.

Vanessa was very irritated with her friends. She explained why, twice: “They’re all procrastinating. It’s so annoying. I’m ready to go....I’ve been to DeVry twice already this year. I took the placement test; I did the scholarship information.” Later, when I asked her for recommendations for people who are planning to go to college, she said, “There is too much information out there, and you would get a lot of confusion if you just wait. That’s what my friends did; it’s annoying.”

Karen, who had very little information herself about going to college, was irritated by some of the obvious misinformation that she viewed her friends as having. She explained that some of her friends believed that they could have state jobs even though, from her perspective, state jobs require college degrees: “How do you work for the state without a college degree? Just because he knows someone...that might help. You still need the degree.” She said that her other friends had decided not to go to college because they knew that they would not be accepted. Others were going into a cosmetology program, which Karen approved of for them, but said that fashion and makeup simply were not her things.
Perceptions of the Help Provided by the High School

With some support from their families, and irritation with their friends, many of these students relied upon their high school to provide information about going to college. All of these students had taken courses at the high school that officials at the school had deemed college preparatory. In this section, I discuss how the students viewed how well the school had prepared them for college in academics and socialization. There are six different subheadings in this section: Vocational School Versus Traditional High School, Views on Helpfulness of Guidance Counselors, Views on High School Classes and Academic Preparation, Influence of the Teaching Staff, and Views on Activities and Atmosphere in High School.

For Vocational School versus Traditional High School, my focus is strictly upon 3 of the students. Bridget, Larry, and Brian had taken courses at different vocational schools in the county in music performance, electricity, and culinary arts, respectively. Because their high school experience was different from that of the other 11 students who participated in this study, I discuss Bridget’s, Larry’s, and Brian’s views separately from the others. Their preparation for college was also different from each other. Bridget had been preparing for college her whole life, whereas the boys had only recently made the decision to attend college. Therefore, this section begins with a discussion of Bridget’s experiences, and then I will discuss the boys’ experiences.

The other 11 students attended a traditional high school in the Maple Park School District. Unlike Bridget, Larry, and Brian, none of these students received on-the-job training or experiences with their future careers. The administration of Maple Park does
offer these activities to students in the form of a half-year internship program. The only student who had registered for the half-year internship was Mark, but at the time I interviewed him, his internship program had not yet begun. Additionally, Mark was becoming frustrated with the coordinator of the program; Mark explained that he had to find his own location to do an internship with an engineering firm.

The students also have the option of taking college-level courses during their junior and senior years. This can be accomplished at the high school by enrolling in an advanced placement course, which 9 of the students did. The students could have also chosen to earn credits at the community college during the school day. None of the students had chosen this option because the program is offered only for certain programs, such as fire science, none of which any of the students had an interest in.

In the subsection entitled Views on Helpfulness of Guidance Counselors, I discuss the students' beliefs about whether their guidance counselors had helped or hindered them in this process. As I reported in Chapter II, there was a discrepancy between what the students viewed as the role of the guidance counselor in college planning and what the professionals and researchers indicated as the role of the guidance counselor. The discrepancy was this: The students believed that college planning was an activity that was done only during senior year and was comprised only of looking for colleges, whereas the counselors and researchers indicated that their role was more comprehensive; that is, college planning should be done through scheduling and other activities during all four years of high school. Thus, the students' perspective of the guidance counselors was that the counselors did not necessarily have the information that the students needed
about specific colleges, and were therefore not as helpful as they thought the counselors should be.

In the subsection, entitled Views on High School Classes and Academic Preparation, the students discussed the classes in which they were enrolled. The students were enrolled in a variety of classes; 9 of the 11 were enrolled in advanced placement courses. They performed well in these courses, but only 1 of the 9 passed the advanced placement exam. Two of the students were enrolled in remedial and special education classes. One of these students was simultaneously enrolled in an advanced placement history course, and had obtained tutors to help her stay on top of her coursework.

For the 11 students at the traditional high school, there were mixed responses on the attitudes towards the courses. Ten of the students viewed many of the classes that they took outside their potential majors as enjoyable, as well as helpful in college preparation. The 5 students who were enrolled in business courses found these courses to be very helpful because they were seen as very practical. Additionally, some of the business teachers brought back former students (35-year-olds) to talk to the current students about careers in business. However, when the students were asked about their overall academic preparation, 8 of the students indicated problems with the courses as they felt that they had taken the wrong ones, or were prepared to graduate from high school, but not to go on to college.

In the next subheading, Influence of the Teaching Staff, I discuss the students' perceptions of the role teachers are playing in helping them prepare for college. The majority of the students, 10 of the 11 who were enrolled in the traditional high schools,
viewed the teaching staff positively in regard to teaching the courses, but in regard to college information, these students viewed their teachers as providers of generalized information aimed at the entire class. So the teachers were not seen as very reliable sources of information for college. In contrast, the 3 students in the vocational school did view their teachers as helpful in preparing them for college, and the 2 boys noted that their whole purpose for going to college developed from their vocational teachers’ encouragement.

The 10 students who did not plan to attend the community college seemed to have formed better bonds with their teachers at the traditional high school than the four students who planned to attend the community college. One of the reasons for this was that the students who were planning to attend four-year colleges had to ask teachers for letters of recommendation, whereas the prospective community college students did not have to ask for these letters.

In the next subsection, Views on Activities and Atmosphere in High School, I describe responses indicating how the students viewed the extracurricular activities as making contributions to their college preparation and how they viewed the school community as college preparatory. This analysis does not include the academic preparation received from the school. Eight of the 11 students enrolled in the traditional high school, and all 3 of the students enrolled in both the traditional high school and the vocational school, had been involved in a variety of extracurricular activities throughout their high school careers. None of the students, however, identified these activities as providing them with opportunities to prepare for college, nor did they view the
professionals who advised or coached those activities as sources of information for college. This was true of any activity, including those, like DECA, that had direct ties to college organizations.

However, five of the students anticipated that they would become involved, in some respect, with the social organizations available at prospective colleges. Additionally, one student hoped to stay local so he could continue his volunteer activity at his church. None of the students anticipated playing a sport in college, nor did they consider ROTC. To be fair, not many of the students played a sport in high school (only four did), and there is no ROTC program in the high school, although there are frequent visits from members of all branches of the military.

Vocational School Versus Traditional High School

I asked a guidance counselor about the students’ schedules for those who attend the vocational high school in regard to the course level that they take at the traditional school. She indicated that the course level a student may take at the high school does not change, only the number of courses a student would take at the traditional high school changes. As seniors, most vocational students take four courses at the traditional high school: English, Health/Gym, Science or History (depending upon what they took in their junior year), and Math. As I explained in Chapter III, the school district has levels for its different courses. It is possible for a student to be enrolled in both vocational classes and advanced placement courses, like Bridget, whose schedule featured Advanced Placement History.
With that in mind, I begin with Bridget because her experience with college planning was markedly different from that of Brian and Larry. Unlike the boys, who did not start planning for college until they were in high school, Bridget had always wanted to go to college. She has always loved to sing. The challenge for her has been how to meld those two desires into a major, and eventually a career, that would give her self-satisfaction. She had attended the vocational school for both junior and senior years, and felt that both the traditional high school and the vocational school have been helpful for her in preparing for college and a career in vocal performance.

Bridget, in addition to taking music performance at the vocational school, told me that the courses she was enrolled in at the traditional high school that specifically helped her prepare for college were Advanced Placement History, Psychology, Sociology, and SAT Prep. She felt that the teachers in both schools have encouraged her and have prepared her for academic success as well as performance success.

Larry and Brian, however, have different views of the vocational school. If they had remained solely at the traditional high school, neither of them would be considering college at this point. They both credited the teachers of the vocational school for encouraging them to continue their educations. Larry said that no one at the traditional high school had ever approached him about going to college – not even his guidance counselor. He said that other people in the building had been nice to him, but did not expect him to be successful at college. He credited the vocational school with letting him know about an agreement that the community college had with a local energy provider to provide an internship opportunity. Larry felt that this would be a good goal for him.
Brian had a slightly more positive view of the traditional high school than Larry did. In regard to the classes at the traditional high school, Brian said, "they have cooking classes here, but they're for home." Those classes would not help Brian, he thought, because he felt that they taught him only how to cook at home, while he wanted to run a kitchen in a restaurant or other facility. He gained value from the traditional high school via volunteerism, such as helping the athletic trainer and working in the guidance office. He had the most positive things to say about the experience in the guidance office: His guidance counselor, the head of the department, helped him with everything; the secretaries were "the best - like my third, fourth, and fifth moms; they're great." Brian was the only student involved in this study to credit the support staff as being important to his success.

Despite the positive experiences at the high school, Brian felt that the vocational school and its teachers were considerably more helpful than the traditional high school was. "Chef Edwards is the best...I feel like he's preparing me for the community college." The teachers at the vocational school also organized a trip to the Culinary Institute of America, a trip that he really learned a great deal from, and felt that he would not have attended if it were not for his experiences at the vocational school. Because of this field trip, Brian was able to craft his own plan for four years of college: the community college for two years, then to either the CIA or Johnson and Wales for the remaining two.

However, I should note that both of these boys planned to attend college specifically for occupational reasons; whereas, Bridget's reason for attending college was
not as vocationally specific as the boys'. Bridget would like to become a music therapist, but might change her mind and strictly do music performance. She felt as if she was prepared for both careers. The boys, on the other hand, felt they were not prepared for a career in anything other than what the vocational schools had prepared them for.

Views on Helpfulness of Guidance Counselors

Most of the students found their guidance counselors to be helpful in general, but not necessarily helpful with planning for college. The students described various problems with the college-planning process in regard to their guidance counselors.

It is important to note that the students’ definitions of college planning varied greatly from the guidance counselors’ definitions of college planning. Many of the students did not begin any actual planning until their junior years in high school, or in most cases for these participants, not until their senior years. When I asked the students about recommendations for other students who wanted to go to college, they all said they would recommend that students start planning earlier, maybe in sophomore year, primarily because there was too much information about college and not many good sources to help them understand this information.

The students involved with this study viewed the college-planning process as one that was specific to their college plans; that is, they expected that their guidance counselors would help them get their applications done, fill out their financial aid forms, suggest specific colleges for them to investigate, know relevant and pertinent information about the colleges that they were considering, and know which colleges had what majors for them. Many of the students did not conduct college searches themselves because they
thought that the guidance counselors would either recommend colleges for them (thereby doing a college search for them) or that they would naturally transition from high school to college as they had from middle school to high school.

When I chatted with some of the guidance counselors, I was told about some of their problems in helping children plan for college, but their conversations related more to scheduling, students’ home situations, and problems that the students were experiencing in general. Generally, the counselors viewed scheduling as their contribution to the students’ college-planning process, something which none of the students credited the counselors for. The professionals tried to look at the child as a whole, which was not always easy to do: Many of the counselors told me, in separate conversations, that they had too many students to get to know them well as individuals, and one counselor explained that he had over 200 students. Karen acknowledged this as a problem, too; she explained that her counselor was helpful, but not helpful enough. Karen said that her counselor simply had too many students to be a help to her and did not blame the counselor for this problem.

There were other problems with counselors as well. Amber’s guidance counselor last year had retired. She was trying to develop a relationship with the new counselor, but felt that it was difficult because the new counselor was trying to find her own way in the high school. Amber felt that she was lucky because her cousin was a guidance counselor in a neighboring school district; she therefore did most of her college planning with the cousin instead of with her new counselor.
Roman explained that he had problems in his freshman year, and that he and his mother had argued with his guidance counselor. He felt that the guidance counselor held a grudge against him since that time and refused to help him. He, therefore, sought college and scheduling information from his girlfriend’s guidance counselor and approached his own counselor as if he had already conducted his own research.

Mark and Bridget believed that their counselors did not know much about the college-planning process at all. When, in senior year, Bridget asked for financial aid information, her guidance counselor provided the same booklet to her that he provided last year. Also, he did not explain it at either time. Mark’s confusion related to the application process: Did he apply online or via the postal service? Nobody seemed to know. Further, the requirement was different for each college. Mark asked his counselor for information, who asked another counselor this question in front of him. When the other counselor did not know the answer, she told him to go find a different counselor to answer his question or simply ask the secretary.

Joe felt that his guidance counselor was very helpful for him, but as he did not realize that he wanted to go to college until this year, he was a bit frustrated that he had been taking “the wrong courses for engineering.” He took responsibility for his frustration, but still felt as though he should have known which mathematics courses he needed to take to become an engineer. Because Joe had planned on going to the community college, his counselor explained to him how he could remedy the course requirement problem at the college level. He thought this action was, again, very helpful, but was annoyed because it might cost him more money. After that, it was not until I
interviewed him that Joe learned that he could not attend the community college for all four years of school, so he was even more upset that he had to change his game plan.

**Views on High School Classes and Academic Preparation**

Herzog (2005) and Ishitani (2003) stated that first-generation students were less likely to take college-preparatory classes while in high school than continuing-generation students were. This was not the case for the students in this study. The students in the traditional high school who were involved in this study enrolled in a variety of challenging college-preparatory courses: Advanced Placement History, Advanced Placement Literature, Advanced Placement Chemistry, A Level English, Psychology, Sociology, Computer Science, Computer-Aided Drawing, Physics, Chemistry, Honors Accounting, Government and Law-Related Experience, and advanced (year four) foreign language courses in Italian and German.

Unfortunately, most of the students who took the advanced placement courses had not earned the requisite score to qualify them for course exemption at the college level. This applies to Mark, Bridget, Stephanie, Karen, Lisa, Amber, Margot, and Nina; Patricia passed her examination. None of the students knew if the prospective colleges that they were considering accepted those scores.

The perspective that the students provided in regard to a class’s usefulness for preparing them for college was not strictly dependent upon what the students wanted to do in college. In most cases, these classes were very enjoyable for the students. For instance, Patricia, who wanted to be a doctor, had taken, and loved, Advanced Placement Chemistry, but greatly enjoyed her art classes and had considered joining an art club or
society while in college. Mark, who wanted to be a civil engineer, thought that he
received more academic preparation for college from his English classes and Advanced
Placement History than from his math courses. Nina, whose loves are biology and
mathematics, found that she enjoyed ceramics and English classes more than her
mathematics and science classes. Vanessa, a future computer science major, thought that
her English and history classes prepared her for college to the point where she had
achieved a level of competency that did not require any more of those classes, further
solidifying her conviction that DeVry University was the best place for her to be.

The students found the business classes at the high school to be exceptionally
helpful for preparation for "the real world". The future business majors, Lisa and Karen,
especially found this to be true, and said that their teachers were very proactive about
their going to college. Roman and Joe, who did not plan to be business majors, also
enrolled in business courses. Roman felt that those courses were especially helpful
because of their practicality, and was considering a switch to a business major from
engineering.

Even though the students derived many positive experiences from the classes,
some of them explained that the courses that they took were not college preparatory.
Amber, who wants to be a teacher, remarked, "The courses are just good for passing high
school; they're not really college prep." Slightly contradicting her, Nina explained that
she feels prepared to be a teacher, but not really to do anything else. Karen felt that the
classes she took were only as good as the teachers who taught the courses. Some of the
teachers, she complained, were just there to be there, did not care about the students, and were just collecting a paycheck.

**Influence of the Teaching Staff**

The teaching staff, as Karen explained above, had a great impact upon the students’ preparation for college in regard to teaching the courses. In some cases, the students relied solely upon the teachers’ comments about the courses in order to make their future college plans.

For example, Mark and Joe discussed their plans to be architects, and upon receiving advice from their guidance counselors, had enrolled in computer-aided drawing. They said that their Computer-Aided Drawing teachers were excellent. But the similarities in their schedules ended there. Mark’s counselor ensured that Mark had the four years of requisite mathematics courses as well as the science courses needed to pursue architecture; whereas, Joe’s counselor scheduled him for classes that were not as rigorous, especially in math. In the boys’ senior year, the teachers of the computer-aided drawing courses told the boys that they were prepared to be architects, but there was only one college in the state that had an architecture program, NJIT, and that job prospects in architecture were slim. The teachers suggested that more jobs could be had in engineering, which was the closest major to architecture that they had been prepared for, so both boys changed their potential majors to engineering. Unfortunately for Joe, as I discussed previously, he did not take the “right math” classes for engineering.

Other than these examples, the students responded that their teachers did not offer specific, individualized advice, nor did they approach any students to offer individualized
college help. Rather, the teachers provided the entire class with only general college-preparedness instruction. Stephanie explained, “No teachers, really, have said anything to me, directly; in general to the class, yes, but nothing specifically for me, like ‘Stephanie, have you thought about college?’” She explained later that her English teacher brought in former students to talk to the class about their college experiences. This she found helpful, but again, was directed at the entire class.

Lisa and Karen also said that their business teachers had former students come in to the class to talk about careers in business, with some discussion about college life. They both said, however, that the problem with these people as sources of information was that they were old - old meaning 35.

In general, the students felt that only a handful of teachers were interested in them or their future college plans; usually, those were the teachers from whom the students asked letters of recommendation. Nina told me that only her biology teacher seemed interested in what she wanted to do, and so she subsequently asked the biology teacher for a letter of recommendation. This behavior was typical for students who planned on attending four-year colleges.

Students who planned on attending the community college did not need letters of recommendation, and for the most part, they did not specify teachers who were helpful to them. They were more ready to discuss teachers they did not like, and as Vanessa explained, one of her English teachers “ didn’t know what she was talking about.”

The students also explained that senior year teachers were different from the teachers in other grades. The difference was that senior year teachers expected the
students to walk in with a “college plan,” and that they assumed that the students had
done their own college searches over the summer. Mark said that he heard nothing but
“prepare for college” from all of his teachers, but was “completely caught off guard”
when his senior year English teacher asked the class to bring in their college application
essays as their first assignment. Stephanie, likewise, did not realize that she had to
actively go out and look at colleges over the summer between junior and senior years.
When faced with that assignment, she just grabbed a common application form from the
guidance office.

Views on Activities and Atmosphere in High School

Most of the students had, in one form or another, been involved with at least one
extracurricular activity throughout their high school careers. However, they did not feel
that any of the activities in which they participated were helpful in planning for college,
as they felt that they could not be continued at the college level. There were several
examples of this: Vanessa, Stephanie, and Lisa had been involved in the Key Club, but
did not see themselves being involved in service organizations at the college level. Mark
joined DECA, a business organization, but did not see how it would be useful for him at
college in the field of engineering. He overlooked the fact that the competitions he
participated in, and the experiences he gained in that organization, could help with
general preparation for college and the workforce; such as, making speeches, working
with coworkers as a team, and managing a workforce.

Amber related that she was the captain of the cheerleading team this year, and had
taken years of dance, but did not foresee herself doing either of these activities while in
college, as there was too much drama associated with both of these activities. She looked forward to seeing what the college had to offer, and finding her way there. Bridget, Margot, Patricia, and Nina made similar comments, Bridget and Nina offering that they would most likely look into sororities for the volunteer aspect of the organizations.

Vanessa, Larry, Brian, Joe, Karen, and Stephanie did not envision themselves participating in college life that much. They each did participate minimally in the high school’s extracurricular programs, but did not see how any activity at college would benefit them. They viewed these activities as distractions from their goal of graduating from college.

Roman is a volunteer coach for a Little League basketball team at his church and also referees middle-school games. If he has the chance to attend a local university, he would be able to maintain his involvement in these activities. If he did not attend a local university, he would see whether the university had anything similar to what he was doing.

Paying for It All

In this section, I discuss students’ explanations of how they and their families planned to pay for their college educations. None of the students who participated in this study had the need to pay for school tuition before, other than for extra activities such as dance classes or music lessons. Ten of the students relied upon colleges to provide financial aid to them, and four of the students chose to go to the community college, which would be more affordable for their parents.
In the subsection entitled Saving Up, I will discuss the fact that the students in the study had very little or no savings; thus, they need to seek financial aid and/or loans, or to work part time. Of the 14 students who participated, only 2 of them, Bridget and Mark, claimed that they had any long-term savings for college. However, both of these students viewed their savings as inadequate and were struggling to figure out financial aid forms. The other students did not have any money saved specifically for college. Most of them did not know the cost of a college education until they started planning for college. This includes the 5 students who had older siblings enrolled in a college. Basically, all 14 students knew that college was expensive, but did not know how to quantify "expensive", nor did they take into account factors like technology fees and recreation fees.

In the subsection on Working through College, I describe how the students envisioned themselves as having to work while they were enrolled in college. This answers research questions d – What types of problems did the students anticipate while they were in college?, and e – What role will financing play in the students' college plans? Four of the students held jobs at the time that they were participating in the study. Additionally, two of the students had applied for multiple jobs but were not hired, which may be a result of the poor economic climate that existed at the end of 2009. All 6 of these students viewed their current work situations (or lack thereof) as motivations to go to college. The 4 who were employed did not want to remain in those positions forever.

Six of the students felt that if they had to work while they were in college, it would distract them from their real purpose, which was to get a college education, but reflected that they would work if they had to. The other 8 students anticipated that they
would have to work part time while they were in college to help their parents afford the
cost of tuition.

Most of the students (13) did not consider time management as an issue in
attending college and working at the same time. Only 1 student indicated that she was
concerned about the hours she would have to work as a part-time employee, as she saw
another employee at her job working part time for 35 hours a week. Typically,
researchers presented part-time work as a 20-hour work week. However, many nonprofit
companies consider under 35 hours per week as part time, while many for-profit
companies consider anything under 40 hours as part time.

In the next subsection, Not Tapping Maple Park's Scholarships, I discuss the
missed opportunities for scholarships. The guidance counselors of Maple Park have
posted a variety of scholarships on bulletin boards outside of their offices; however, none
of the students seemed aware that these scholarships would be appropriate for them. The
scholarships available to them came from several organizations within the Maple Park
School District as well as the larger community of Maple Park Township, Maple Park's
county, the State of New Jersey, and national organizations.

The final subsection relates to the STARS program. Of the 14 students who
participated in this study, only 4 of them had qualified for the program during their high
school careers. This number dropped down to 1 when the workers for the New Jersey
Department of Education changed the requirement from the top 20% of the class to the
top 15% of the class. Two of the students who had qualified in their junior years were
close to qualifying again in their senior years, and, although not their favorite choice,
would definitely attend the community college if they could go tuition-free. The one who
definitely qualified for the program and the one who was uncertain if she still qualified
for the program would definitely not take advantage of the STARS program; these two
girls wanted to become doctors and viewed the community college as detrimental to
medical school admissions.

Saving Up

The students’ choices of college were in large part affected by their parents’
ability to pay for the entire experience of going to college. The exception to this is how
the student viewed the effectiveness of the community college, which I discuss later. The
factors that played into the students’ choices of college was, not only their parents’ ability
to pay tuition, but also the determination of whether or not they would need a car while
attending college, and if they could afford to live at college; i.e., pay for room and board.
None of the students considered fees such as technology or recreation center fees, nor did
they consider the expense of books and supplies.

Of the 14 students I interviewed, only 2, Mark and Bridget, had any money
specifically saved for college. However, as discussed earlier, Mark had concerns about
his parents’ ability to pay for college. His brothers and sister had devoured much of the
savings set aside for all four children in Mark’s family. Bridget said that she and her
parents had been saving for her college education ever since she was in preschool, but she
did not disclose the amount she had saved. However, she did tell me that she needed
help in figuring out the financial aid forms and that her parents were also struggling to
figure them out.
The others did not have any money saved towards a college education at all. But each of the students did have a plan, mostly involving receiving financial aid from the college, even those students who wanted to attend the community college. When I asked what could be made better about planning for college, Brian, who planned on attending the community college, explained that he wished someone had told him about the expense, that he did not realize that going to college would be so costly, and that his parents frequently worried that he would drop out of college, thereby never seeing a return upon their investment. He said that if he did well on the SAT, he might get a reduced tuition rate from one of the colleges he was looking at, but he was unsure as to how it all worked.

**Working Through College**

Stephanie, Karen, Mark, and Joe were currently working to save some money for their college educations. At the time of the interview, Stephanie was proud to report that she had saved $400 towards her college education. Mark and Joe, who worked at a supermarket and an auto parts store, respectively, had saved some money, but had used their savings mostly for maintenance of their cars, for different reasons: Mark thought that he would be commuting and therefore should keep his car in good working order, while Joe did not realize until this year that he would be going to college, but thought that he could complete all four years at the community college which would not cost him very much.

Karen had a job at the Dollar Store. She would turn 18 in February. She said that the manager at the Dollar Store had told her that she could become an assistant manager
when she turned 18, and that this promotion would raise her salary from $7 to $10 an hour. However, she was a bit wary of doing this. A woman that she worked with was in a managerial position at the Dollar Store and was struggling to do the work while attending the community college full time. Karen observed that, during working hours, the woman was “a zombie”. During breaks, the woman was doing homework for courses at the community college. Karen thought that her coworker was not doing well at the college, and would most likely drop out. She did not want to see herself in that position, but did not know how she would be able to pay for college until her father’s settlement money came in.

For the most part, the students’ work experiences, like Karen’s, served as a stimulus toward getting a college degree. Karen did not see herself having a career at the Dollar Store. She envisioned herself having an office, doing marketing work, and “being a somebody.” Mark’s work friends at the grocery store simply talked about working at the grocery store, even if they attended the community college. Joe, who gave me his business card from the auto parts store, did not see himself working there for the rest of his life, either. It was a small, local company that did not offer him the chance to “move up.”

The other students, especially the ones who were not working now, did not necessarily want to work through college, but would if they had to. Nina said that she would probably start working this summer as a receptionist, the same job as her mother’s, if she could not find any other employment. Roman, Bridget, Margot, Lisa, Patricia, and Amber did not particularly want to work while they were at college because they felt that
jobs would distract them from their purpose, which was to get good grades at college and to graduate.

**Not Tapping Maple Park’s Scholarships**

In each of Maple Park’s high schools, the guidance counselors have posted flyers of scholarship announcements. The students occasionally looked at these, but did not think that any of them applied to their situations. But, to be fair to the students in one of the high schools, it is impossible to see where the scholarship flyers were because a security table blocked the entire bulletin board.

They were also unaware that several of Maple Park’s elementary schools offered scholarships, that the organizations that they had joined, such as Key Club and Student Government, provided scholarships, or that several local organizations, businesses, and religious organizations offered scholarships. Likewise, none of the students would be relying upon a sports scholarship, or consider joining the armed forces to help them pay for college.

**The STARS Program**

Of the 14 students interviewed, only Patricia definitely knew that she qualified for the STARS program. Margot was uncertain about her eligibility, for the same reason that both Mark and Lisa were irritated by the actions of the State of New Jersey. They had both qualified for the program last year, as juniors, but Governor Corzine decreased the percentage of the class qualifying for the program, from the top 20% to the top 15%.

Both Mark and Lisa had left junior year confident that one of their options was to attend college for free, and returned to school in their senior year to discover that the
opportunity had disappeared. Mark was close to the top, and was hoping to knock out some of the competition this year. Lisa, who really does not want to go to the community college, would have if she had qualified for the program again.

Although qualified for the STARS program, neither Patricia nor Margot would take the state up on its offer. Both girls wanted to become doctors, and they saw the compulsory attendance at the community college as destructive to their chances of being accepted as a medical student at a prestigious university.

Views on the College Search and Transition

In this section, I discuss how the students searched for colleges, their perceptions of colleges, their perceptions of the information that they received from colleges, and the beginning of the transition stage from high school to college. There are five subsections in this section: The Lack of a College Search, Views on Community College, Confusion Caused by College Recruitment Practices, Using Online Sources for College Searches, and Students' Recommendations for Future College-Bound Students.

One of the issues I saw repeated in the literature, especially in Roderick et al. (2008), was the importance of conducting an “effective college search”, which is where research questions b and c evolved from: How do the students define and execute a college search? However, half of the students who participated in this study did not have a definition of what a college search was, although they did take actions that were consistent with the researchers' steps
in a college search. Therefore, in the first subheading, I discuss the lack of the college search.

The research that I reviewed did not explain the reasons that students did not perform such a search. However, I feel that a discussion about those students who did not perform a college search and the reasons for their inaction would be pertinent. The lack of a search did not indicate that the students did not want to go to college. To draw this conclusion for this group of students would be extremely inaccurate. These students really wanted to go to college; however, 7 of them did not feel that a college search was necessary. Three of the 4 who had planned on going to the community college did not conduct what they considered to be a college search. Four other students did not get serious about planning for college until this year, and one of these students assumed that college admissions officers would seek her out.

The other 7 students did take actions that they considered to be college searches. All of these students had done some planning before senior year. Additionally, the 3 Black students (Nina, Bridget, and Vanessa) had attended a college fair that was held for Black and Latino students in their junior years.

The students also shared how they perceived a start at the community college, which I discuss under the subheading, Views on Community College. Five of the students were antagonistic about the community college, as they believed that the college was for people who were not ready to go to a “real” college yet. Four of the students would go to the community college if they “had” to, and viewed this college as an option if, for example, they could go for free or if they could not afford college tuition at a four-
year college. Three of the students planned on going to a four-year college, but planned to start at the community college. They cited financial consideration as their primary motivation for attending there. The two boys who were attending vocational school saw community college as a means to an end in their careers and one of these two did not have any plans past an Associate's degree.

Under the subheading, Confusion Caused by College Recruitment Practices, I discuss how the students perceived actions from the colleges to recruit students to be confusing. What was most confusing for these students were the physical mailings that they received from the colleges. Of the 10 students who received physical mailings, all 10 viewed the information as worthless. All 10 complained that these mailings were redundant and incomprehensible. The students felt the same about the e-mails that colleges sent the students. College solicitations in the form of e-mails clogged up their inboxes, were from the same colleges all of the time, and, in the students' opinion, did not provide any real information.

The college fair concept also baffled the students. As already mentioned, the three Black students involved in this study attended the Black and Latino College Fair. Officials at a community college in a different county from Maple Park's held this fair in November during the school day. The White students, the half-Hispanic/half-White student, and Asian student (11 of them) who participated in this study did not attend other college fairs that college administrators at a local, four-year university and the community college offered in Maple Park's county twice a year.
While the half-Hispanic/half-White student was allowed by the high school administration to attend the Black and Latino college fair, the White and Asian students were not. Because of this prohibition, and the lack of the publicity of college fairs for all students, 6 of these 11 students constructed the idea that college fairs were not for them. Another student thought that a college fair could help her, but found out about one of the county’s college fair the week after it happened. Three of these students had planned to go to the community college, and therefore felt that they did not need to attend a fair. One of the 3 did not know what a college fair was, and when I explained it to him, his rationale for not attending was the same (that he did not need to go).

Under the subheading, Using Online Sources for College Searches, I discuss how the students viewed the Internet as a tool in their college searches and decision-making processes. Twelve of the 14 students used the internet to do some type of planning. Larry and Joe did not use the internet to do searches or planning, although Joe did use the internet to register for the SAT and received emails from colleges.

The 12 students found that the most helpful sites were the colleges’ own websites. This was because they could do things like take a virtual tour and find out if the colleges that they were interested in offered their majors.

These 12 students did not use college-search websites, other than what the webmasters at the College Board provided. They did not know that webmasters of SAT test prep agencies, as well as the webmasters of Maple Park, provided free online college-search websites. However, none of the 12 had enrolled in courses at SAT test prep agencies, such as Kaplan or The Princeton Review, so it would be unlikely that they
would look for those types of planning tools unless someone prompted them to do so.

Maple Park’s website is relatively new, and the webmasters had redesigned it during the summer of 2009, so it was also likely that the students were not familiar with the offerings on the district’s web pages.

The last subheading in this section is entitled, Students’ Recommendations for Future College-Bound Students. I found that all of the students had difficulty answering the interview question, “What could be made better about planning for college?”, but had a much easier time answering a question that prompted them to provide recommendations for students who were younger than they were.

All 14 of the students recommended that younger students start planning for college earlier than they had started. As I discussed earlier, many of the students only started what they considered “serious” college searching in their senior year, despite the professionals’ encouragement to prepare for college throughout all four years of high school. Larry, Brian, Lisa, Roman, Mark, Stephanie, Bridget, Joe, and Karen all admitted that the college decision-making process had overwhelmed them in their senior years.

Four of the students felt that college planning was like another course, for which it was difficult to become and stay organized. However, these four students felt that they, like the others, had started planning for college too late. These 4, and an additional 3 students, also felt that the most benefit could be derived from actually visiting a college.

The Lack of a College Search

One of the main reasons that the students did not perform a college search was that they did not start any actual planning for college until this, their senior year. This is
another manifestation of these students' beliefs that the college planning process is only
done in senior year, even though the students may have decided that they wanted to go to
college early in their educational careers. For instance, Lisa has always wanted to go to
college, but had never been on a college campus until this year, when she started to get
serious about it. The same could also be said for Roman and Margot.

Four of the students did not conduct a college search because they had simply
planned to go to the community college. Larry’s current college plans end at the
Associate’s degree. Joe thought that he could obtain a Bachelor’s degree at the
community college, and so did not bother to do further exploration. Similarly, Karen did
not search because she had a plan: community college for two years, then a commutable
four-year college for her junior and senior years. Brian had a plan comparable to
Karen’s; he could attend the community college for two years and then attend the
Culinary Institute of America for the other two.

Stephanie and Margot did not do what they considered to be college searches, but
they did not want to go to the community college either. Margot was unclear as to why
she did not do her own search for colleges. Instead of looking on her own, she simply
went with her friends on college tours. She felt that she did not gain any valuable
information for herself on these tours, and said that she should have looked for places that
actually had her program.

Stephanie’s rationale was different. She thought that colleges would come to her.
She had a couple of reasons supporting this belief; The first reason stemmed from her
experience as a student in Maple Park. Before her transition from middle school to high
school, high school teachers and some students came to the middle school to explain what going to high school would be like. Later, there was an open house at the high school. The transition to college, she expected, would be similar—teachers and students would come to the high school to talk to the seniors. She wondered why that did not happen. The second reason supporting the belief that colleges would come to her was that several colleges had sent her mailings. Therefore, she assumed, the colleges wanted her to go to their schools. But this confused her: If the colleges wanted her to enroll, why didn’t they contact her further?

Views on Community College

While all of the students acknowledged that the community college would be the most financially feasible, that feasibility also meant that other students whom they did not like, or whom they felt were academically unprepared, could also go there. This information split the students’ views on the community college. Margot, Stephanie, Vanessa, Patricia, and Amber loathed the idea of attending the community college; whereas, Mark, Roman, Bridget, and Lisa were willing to attend the college if they had to, but did not really want to go. Karen, Nina, and Brian felt that the community college was a good place to start, but would attend a four-year school eventually; whereas, Larry and Joe saw that their only opportunities were to be had at the community college.

Although neither Margot nor Stephanie did specific college searching, they really did not want to go to the community college, either. When asked about their views on the community college, both became very hostile. Margot said, “Even if they paid me, I
wouldn’t go. No way.” Similarly, Stephanie replied, “I’m not dealing with high school
drama and paying for it.”

Vanessa, who had her college plans set, felt that the community college would be
a waste of her time because it was “full of fools who just want to waste their time.”
Patricia and Amber were a bit more considerate in their criticisms of the community
college. As I discussed earlier, Patricia viewed the community college as a hindrance to
her career as a doctor. Amber thought that she would definitely have to live at home if
she went to the community college, and wanted the same experience of living away from
home that her brother had.

Mark, Roman, Bridget, and Lisa did not particularly want to attend the
community college, but would if they had to. Bridget believed that if she attended the
community college, she would be disappointed in herself and did not see how that college
would benefit her. She said, “In my mental plan, I just don’t see how that school is going
to help me.” Lisa thought that the community college, which she would attend if she
qualified for the STARS program, would serve a different purpose from the four-year
college. She viewed the community college as a place that “is getting you ready for more
college, and I’m ready to go now.”

In contrast to Bridget’s view, Nina, Brian, and Karen viewed the community
college as a good place to begin their college adventures. This view was due to financial
considerations. Nina’s sister had dropped out of a four-year college and her family was
still coping with those bills. She thought that the community college might be helpful in
keeping the family’s expenses down. Brian and Karen were both surprised when they
learned about the cost of college, and their families worried about paying for college and having them drop out of school, thus losing their investment.

Larry and Joe felt that the community college provided a good opportunity for them. As mentioned previously, Larry only wanted an Associate's degree. Joe did not know about the different degrees offered by colleges, so I explained them to him.

Confusion Caused by College Recruitment Practices

The students in this study who had taken the SAT exam, with the exception of Roman and Karen who had taken it more recently, were inundated with physical (U.S. Post Office) mail as well as electronic mailings from colleges. When asked if they found the materials helpful, all of the students issued a resounding, "NO".

The students found that e-mails were both worthless and detrimental. Joe did not know what to do with the e-mails, so he just deleted them. Lisa tried to get off the mailing lists by clicking a link that was enclosed in the email, but was instead sent to the college's website, where she clicked more links, and ended up receiving more e-mails from the colleges which appeared to be attempts at confirming her desire to be off the list. In the end, she decided that it was more irritating to try to get off the list than to just delete the incoming mailings, so that was what she eventually did.

The physical mail was generally discarded without the students' reading them. As I discussed earlier, several of the students felt that their parents stole this mail. Lisa was initially impressed that she was getting so much attention, but once she realized it was the same, redundant, information, she threw it out. Nina and Vanessa treated their mailings
in the same way; they viewed them as helpful at first, and then, as time went on, extremely annoying.

There were two college fairs that were hosted in close proximity to Maple Park. One was held in the spring at the community college, and the other was held in the fall, at a local four-year university. Only Lisa was aware that such events existed. She had heard of the community college event the week after it had occurred.

Maple Park administrators organize a trip for Black and Hispanic students to attend a college fair for traditionally Black colleges in November. Nina, Bridget, Vanessa, and Stephanie were eligible to go, but Stephanie elected not to attend because she was not interested in traditionally Black colleges, which she thought would be the only colleges represented at this fair. They were not; a variety of schools were there. Vanessa did not find the information offered there to be useful, and described the event as having “too many people there” and “noisy”. Both Bridget and Nina found the college representatives to be helpful, the people to be friendly, and received a lot of information that they would not have obtained otherwise.

However, the other students said that they felt cheated that the administration did not offer college fairs for them. Karen said that everything that they had at the school was either for African American students or Hispanics, “I’m not either of those; what about me?” When I asked Margot about attending a college fair, she also implied that she was not qualified to attend a fair. Patricia said simply, “That wasn’t an option.”
Using Online Sources for College Searches

The students who had access to the Internet used it to do college searches, but did not engage the Internet fully. Ten of the students looked only at the college websites or performed searches using the search engines that the webmasters of the College Board provide.

The administrators of the College Board require that students register online or pay a fee for phone registration when students register for the SAT. The students can also take the ACT; however, most college officials in the State of New Jersey recommend the SAT. Because students are most likely on the website that the webmasters of the College Board provide when students register for the SAT, the webmasters of the College Board have primed students to use these search sites for an online college search. Mark relied solely upon the College Board's site to conduct an online search of colleges that had engineering programs in the State of New Jersey.

None of the students were aware of other sites, such as Kaplan or The Princeton Review, both of which have web administrators who offer free services online for college searches. However, none of the students in this study enrolled in an SAT prep class through these two services, so it was unlikely that they would have found these sites without prompting.

The webmasters who work for the Maple Park school district have placed a link to a free college search site on the school district's website. None of the students were aware of the existence of this link. This happens to be for their benefit. I evaluated this site myself by performing a college search for my undergraduate program: English
Education. The only result that came back was the University of Phoenix. I found this strange because there are 4 four-year colleges that offer this program within a 20-minute driving radius of the Maple Park district.

Twelve students found that the most useful information about a college came from the colleges’ websites. This was because these websites provided pictures of the college, outlined programs of study, and listed course catalogues. However, the colleges did not have a unified way of presenting this information to the students - something that Nina identified as a problem for her.

Nina wished that there were a place where everything was organized, and where people could compare the colleges they were interested in without having “information floating all over the place.” The fact is that these types of tools do exist, in the form of books, which admittedly are voluminous and do not contain the photographs or interactive information that the college websites do. None of the students used books to do a college search.

Students’ Recommendations for Future Prospective College Students

Mostly due to the volume of unorganized, scattered, and inconsistent information presented from colleges, all of the students recommended that other first-generation start planning for college early. Patricia, Amber, and Vanessa, who had done so, identified college planning as another course, for which it was essential to be organized. Patricia demonstrated this organization by telling me which colleges she had applied to: Arcadia, Boston U, Carnegie Mellon, Cornell, Georgetown, Harvard, University of Pittsburgh, University of Rochester, and Wesleyan.
Patricia recited these names in alphabetical order, and then explained to me that she toured the schools by geographical location. For example, Carnegie Mellon is located in Pittsburgh, and her trip to visit some extended family in that area provided an opportunity for her to visit this and another university in the area.

Lisa, Joe, Karen, Brian, Larry, Bridget, and Roman all admitted that they did not do any "serious" college planning until their senior years. Roman explained that going to college was always going to happen, but was always a "back-of-the-mind kind of thing".

In Nina’s, Lisa’s and Amber’s opinions, what made a college worth considering and applying to was a visit and a tour. Roman disagreed with them, claiming that he was not a "guided tour kinda guy", and he had never been to a college campus.

Amber insisted that the college tour was vital to her decision-making process. She really wanted to go to Kutztown University, but thought that there was "too much suburb around it", which turned her off to that university. She claimed that she would never have discovered this if she had not taken a college tour. Lisa found that everyone she met at the four-year colleges that she had toured were extremely nice. But when she toured the community college, she found that everyone except the Dean of Business (who offered to show her around) was "just plain rude". Nina claimed that, after visiting Temple University, she felt she had found her "dream school because of the atmosphere...I just felt charged when I went there."
Final Remarks

When I asked Karen what she wished she had known about the college-planning process, she replied that she did not know how lonely it would be not having someone to talk to about the process. She really did not know what to expect. At the conclusion of the interview with Karen, we went to the computer and I demonstrated what my schedule was like as a full-time graduate student; Seton Hall University’s Blackboard system was still operational for past classes at that point, and I was able to show her my schedule as well as some of the tools that the university had on Blackboard; such as, the online portfolio and discussion boards. She had a lot of questions about scheduling, technology, and grades. We were there, after the conclusion of the interview, for nearly an hour and a half.

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the sentiment about the loneliness of the college-planning process emerged several times throughout the interviews with the students. Additionally, this comment was also made by some of the parents who I talked with. For instance, Joe’s mother was happy that I called her because she felt so confused herself, and she felt that her confusion was damaging Joe’s self-esteem. Stephanie’s aunt encouraged her to talk with me so that she could get more information about going to college. Roman was irritated about having started the search late and having more work to do, and then when he did get serious, finding very little in the way of “quality” people to talk to.

As I discuss in the next chapter, some of this isolation is due to a lack of networking, and perhaps adequate social skills, which many researchers and educators
have assumed that middle-income students possess. However, these students were also
difficult for me to identify, because none of the guidance counselors knew whether their
students were prospective first-generation college students or not. They did know that
their low-income students were, and suspected that many of their middle-income students
were, but it was not a question they sought to ask students or parents. No one can help a
population who is in need of assistance when that population is unidentified.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Introduction

College attendance rates have increased in recent years; yet, there has not been a corresponding increase in the percentage of the general population who hold college degrees (Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008). Researchers have indicated that the recent discrepancy between college attendance rates and college graduation rates may be the result of an increase in the numbers of individuals who are entering the colleges (Bergerson, 2007; Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008).

One of the largest populations attending college is first-generation, middle-income students (Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2004). However, there is not much research devoted to this particular population, especially as they are preparing for college. Many researchers have focused on low-income students, not middle-income students, and have performed quantitative studies; most frequently, surveys; while this population is enrolled at college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Carter, 2005; Choy et al., 2004; Grimard & Maddaus, 2002; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Ishitani, 2003; McDonough, 2004; Roderick et al, 2008; Somers et al., 2004; Van T. Bui, 2002).

In an attempt to understand this problem in more depth, my aim in this study was to explore the decision-making processes of prospective first-generation, middle-income
students as they make their plans to attend college. I sought to discover: (1) what influenced students' decisions and how the students felt about these influences, (2) how students interpreted the importance of going to college, (3) how students defined and executed a college search, (4) the problems that the students anticipated once they enrolled in college, and (5) how students interpreted the role of finances in their plans for attending college. From mid-November through mid-December of 2009, I interviewed 14 high school seniors from a predominantly middle-income school district in New Jersey.

Because I focused on high-school students who were making their decisions about going to college instead of college students who were frustrated with their experiences in higher education, I was able to hear high school students explain their experiences while those experiences were occurring.

As I mentioned at the end of Chapter IV, many of the problems that these students experienced evolved from their feelings of isolation. The students expressed feelings of isolation in the following ways: (1) Their parents did not understand what they were experiencing, (2) their friends were making different plans, (3) their teachers did not talk to them specifically, (4) their guidance counselors did not know how to help them, and (5) colleges did not seem to care about them as individuals.

In this chapter, I discuss how the students' responses correspond with the literature, the future directions for research in this field, and recommendations for educators, families, students, and future research.
Family, Friends, and Financing

In this section, I discuss how the students viewed the influences of their families, their friends, and finances on their college-making plans. This discussion provides answers to all of the research questions; additionally, several of the students’ answers overlap in responding to the research questions.

The first research question I sought to find an answer to was what influences the students’ college-making decisions and how the students felt about those influences. Several things influenced these students’ decisions to attend college, but mostly, they wanted to go to college to train for a job that they thought would make them happier than working in the same jobs that their parents held. They also viewed college as a place that would train them for a job that would maintain their place in the middle-income bracket; a response that overlapped with the research question a, which concerned what the students viewed as the purpose of going to college.

After the students had made a solid decision to attend college, many of the students felt isolated from their parents and friends. This also related to research question d, concerning the problems that the students anticipated when they enrolled in college. To execute a college search, many students talked to slightly older siblings and extended family members and relied less upon friends and friends’ parents. This answers research questions b and c: how the students defined a college search, and how they executed the college search. The students also felt isolated from their friends because they were planning to pursue different interests at potentially different colleges.
Each family's financial ability to pay for college played a role in influencing where the child could attend college and whether or not a child would have to work while enrolled in college. These findings overlapped with two research questions: research question d, which asked the students about the anticipated problems a student may face in college; and research question e, which was how the family's financial situation was a factor in the college-decision making process. Also, the students reported that their families had virtually no savings for college and that they were reliant upon the college to provide money for tuition.

The following is a more detailed discussion of these findings. I have italicized the salient points and have provided a discussion of each. I have also included connections to the literature reviewed in Chapter II.

*The students viewed their parents as having jobs that made them unhappy, and the only path to remaining in the same income bracket but enjoying it more was through obtaining a college degree.* This finding differs from the students' responses in Carter's book, *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White* (2005). The low-income students Carter interviewed discussed hardships endured by low-income students; such as, trying to move out of the ghetto, facing continual unemployment, and carefully negotiating their way through dangerous neighborhoods.

The students I interviewed did not discuss hardships such as these. The hardships that they experienced were connected to their parents' losing their jobs (Roman, Karen), their parents working many hours (Bridget, Amber, Mark, Larry, Brian, Nina, Stephanie, Vanessa, Margot, Patricia, and Lisa), and their parents not deriving satisfaction from the
jobs that they held (Karen, Bridget, Lisa, Nina, Margot, and Patricia). They saw their parents working and not reaping the benefits of their work in the form of time spent enjoying their families.

The children in Carter’s book did not have reliable relatives to turn to; some of the children she interviewed described instead that they avoided relatives who made too many visits to the local drug dealer (Carter, 2005). The students I interviewed sought out relatives, if they had them, whom they thought would help them make decisions, particularly Amber. Additionally, most of the students I interviewed derived inspiration from their extended families and worked diligently at their studies to impress their extended families. This was true for Patricia, Nina, Margot, Amber, Bridget, Roman, Lisa, and Stephanie.

Some of the literature that I reviewed did not provide students’ perspectives on their parents’ occupations, nor did it provide a discussion of how siblings and extended family members play a role in students’ college decision-making processes. For example, Bergerson’s (2007) case study of a Hispanic first-generation, working-class student who attended, and subsequently dropped out of, a private liberal arts college, did not present a discussion of how the student viewed her mother’s and stepfather’s jobs. Although the student did mention that her mother and stepfather were supporting nine children on a $25,000 a year salary, the student that Bergerson (2007, p. 105) interviewed perceived that she was middle-income and found comfort in the high school marching unit where there were other students whom she viewed as sharing her socioeconomic background. The student also explained that one of the reasons that she did not feel comfortable at the
college level was that she did not see many students like herself there in respect to her ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

Bloom’s (2007) ethnography, similarly, followed a cohort of high school seniors who hailed from urban high schools and low-income families. The focus of her study was primarily directed toward learning how students could afford to go to college and how they viewed money as playing a role in their college plans. There was no discussion about their parents or their jobs. Freeman’s (1997) study was specifically concerned with getting more Blacks into colleges, and revealed that students perceived that the culture of college was predominantly White.

The other literature that I reviewed was quantitative and did not provide students’ perspectives of their parents or their parents’ occupations. For example, Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) used a national database to study low socioeconomic students’ choices in going to college, Grimard and Maddaus (2002) studied low socioeconomic students from rural areas and the Outward Bound program, and Roderick et al. (2008) studied the college choices of students who were enrolled in Chicago public schools.

*The students and their families believed that the purpose of college is to train for a job.* This belief is consistent with Oldfield’s (2007) and Bergerson’s (2007) examination of first-generation students. The participants viewed the jobs for which the colleges prepare students as being more humanitarian than their parents’ jobs, and would keep their place in the middle-income bracket. With the exception of Larry, Brian, and Vanessa, who are specifically planning to go to college to study in a vocational program from a vocational college, as none of them had received job training in high school in
their prospective fields. This may be a reason why the students felt that they did not derive any college-applicable experiences from the high school.

*The students felt isolated from their parents and friends.* Regarding prospective first-generation college students, parents do not have the experience that the students need to assist them in this process, and this was consistent with the existing literature. However, what I found in this study did not match the literature, in that the friends in this study had chosen different paths from the students. Herzog (2005) had asserted that students gather information from friends, and as I have discussed in Chapter IV, this was simply not true for this group of students.

There was a difference between what I found in the published reports, both in the scholarly journals and in college newspapers, and the results of this study. Many of the students I interviewed were noticing the beginning of the separation from their parents and friends; whereas, the students interviewed in the college newspapers and in the scholarly journals had been dealing with isolation for some time. As examples, Bridget said that she switched to a new group of friends, and Vanessa said that some of her friends irritated her to the point where she no longer spoke to those friends. Lisa and Roman felt pressured and guilty, as they contemplated moving away from their single parents. Like the reports from college students in the scholarly literature (Bergerson, 2007; Bloom, 2007; Choy et al., 2000, Martinez et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2004), as well as the college newspaper reports, the students whom I interviewed told me that they felt that their parents did not understand what was going on.
Rosenbaum (2001) asserted that some parents failed to support their children adequately because they did not accept the college culture. This failure stemmed from antagonistic feelings regarding college and academic life (Rosenbaum, 2001). The students in this study did not feel that their parents were antagonistic about college or college culture. Even Brian’s parents, who were concerned that he would fail, thus wasting their money, did not tell him directly not to go to college. Brian felt that they simply did not understand the benefit of going to college the way he did. His friends, even at the vocational school, did not have the same interests as he did; as a result, he and his friends were starting to drift apart.

Overall, the students in this study reported that they had a defunct support system. They felt that their parents and families were supportive of them because of what their parents said and what their parents attempted to do for the students, but the students did not feel that this support was adequate, and did not know how or why their support system was not adequate. In other words, the students knew that they had a problem with their parents’ and family’s support, but did not know or understand exactly what that problem was, and therefore did not know how to address or repair it.

*Slightly older siblings or extended family members, if they exist, can provide useful information.* This is something that only Horn (1997) discussed in her study of the college pipeline for low-income students. In this study, Horn mentioned that one of the indicators of an at-risk student was the existence of an older sibling who had dropped out of high school. Karen had not one, but two, older siblings who had dropped out of high school. She had learned a lot from their experiences and derived emotional support from
her sister. Margot also had an older brother who had dropped out of high school, and his experience encouraged her to stay in high school and continue on to college.

Other studies, such as Grimard and Maddaus (2002), mentioned that becoming familiar with the college atmosphere was a big challenge for students. They identified that one of the major problems with the Upward Bound program was that students could not get adjusted to the college atmosphere. An easy way for these students to gain familiarity is to find a trusted older person who is currently attending college and spend some time with that person at the college. Many of the students who had older brothers and sisters who were in college relied upon these siblings to do just that, and they found it helpful. Amber had gone so far as to change her college plans to include her brother’s alma mater, and Patricia’s decision to investigate Georgetown University was inspired by the recent graduation of her older, female cousin.

*These students do not identify their friends’ parents as potential sources of information; if they did, they viewed information from friends’ parents as being outdated or generally unhelpful.* The literature, especially Rosenbaum (2001) and Bergerson (2007), suggests that college administrators are most guilty of the assumption that middle-income students use their connections and cultural capital to form bonds with continuing-generation college students. This is perhaps why low-income college students, not first-generation college students, are the target of assistance from the college.

However, this assumption is incorrect as it applies to these 14 students. As I discussed in Chapter IV, it seemed to me that students viewed parents - all parents - as
possessing certain roles. Being a source of college information was not one of those roles. For the most part, the students viewed these potential sources as people who were too old to understand what was going on at the college level today. Also, if the potential sources had attended a college that the student was interested in, but did not enroll in a major that the student wanted, the student viewed this information as inadequate.

As I mentioned previously, many researchers and college administrators assume that middle-income students do not need assistance at the college level because they assume that middle-income students have the necessary cultural capital in the form of connections to people who have college degrees. Instead, most energy expended by researchers and college administrators has been directed toward low-income students, with the assumption that they are concurrently reaching a target audience of first-generation students. However, people who make this assumption are missing the larger audience of middle-income, first-generation college students. The 14 students involved in this study did not identify people who had college degrees as part of their cultural capital, because they viewed the information that these people had as outdated and flawed. So, they might possess what researchers and college administrators view as the requisite cultural capital, but these students did not know it and did not use it.

There are no savings for college; the students are reliant upon the colleges and employment to pay for a college education. As I stated in Chapter II, middle-income college students were averse to acquiring debt, but were less likely to receive funding for need-based scholarships than their low-income counterparts (Herzog, 2005; Martinez et al., 2009; Somers, et al., 1996). Herzog (2005) asserted that middle-income parents were
not as likely as high-income parents to prepare for their child’s college education. Further, because middle-income parents earn salaries well above the poverty line, their children do not qualify for need-based financial assistance (Herzog, 2005).

Sadly, I concur with Herzog’s assertion. The students in this study did not have any mentionable savings dedicated for college tuition. Further, they all relied upon the colleges or banks for loans. Many of the parents told their children not to worry about the money, but depending upon the students’ experiences with the family’s finances, the children did worry and many planned to work while attending college.

The only cost that the students really worried about was college tuition. The students did not take into account the cost of text books, technology fees, lab fees, or recreational facility fees that are frequently part of college financing. The reason for the lack of planning might be that these are things for which the families have not had to individually finance before. Throughout the K-12 public school system, the students have been responsible only for purchasing pens, pencils, notebooks, and calculators. They have never had to pay for a book, the school has provided fee-free computers and internet use, there is no charge for dissecting a frog in biology class, and gym class is free.

Added to this, many researchers have shown that full-time employment while enrolled at college is one of the indicators of college dropout (Choy et al., 2000; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Somers et al., 2004). Many of the students I interviewed did not express a desire to work full time, but did acknowledge that they might have to work to help their parents pay for college tuition. With no savings for tuition and other expenses, it is impossible to say whether these children might feel
obligated to take on more hours of work to help with the family bills, as Karen was considering.

Karen also reported that she had a coworker who was struggling with a full-time course load at the community college, and was also technically working part time. The Dollar Store had given the coworker a 35-hour work week, keeping her out of the normal full-time range of 40 hours a week.

Timing also appears to be an issue for college scheduling. When the students develop a schedule at the college level, they will be told about credit hours and receive suggestions that they take between 12 and 15 credit hours. What the students do not take into account in this schedule is the homework and preparation required for those courses. Each three-credit course requires many more than three hours of a student’s time.

To pay all of the bills, the students may choose to pursue a scholarship as an alternative to looking for a job. However, the students I interviewed were not aware of any specific scholarships for which they would qualify. One of Maple Park's high school guidance departments had posted a list of available scholarships outside of their office, but, as I mentioned earlier, the students should be excused for not looking at this scholarship list because it was completely blocked by a security desk. For students in the other high schools, there are a variety of scholarships within this district for which the students would qualify, and lists are posted where they could easily see them. Among them, the students could receive a scholarship from their respective Maple Park elementary school, the student government, and/or the Key Club. The guidance
counselors also have posted scholarship opportunities from the community, showing that there are scholarships from churches, community organizations, and sports leagues.

**Recommendations for Families and Students**

From the literature I reviewed, I did not see any notices indicating what parents could do in order to help their children make the transition from high school to college, nor did I see any recommendations for children about how to make good college searches, choices, and how to ask their guidance counselors questions.

Researchers do not anticipate that their audience would be comprised of high school students or parents. They write for other researchers, administrators, college admissions officers, teachers, and professors who might use the research to implement policy that would affect high school students and college students. McDonough’s (2004) presentation, for instance, provided recommendations for K-12 school systems and colleges, but did not explain how parents could become more involved in their children’s education during the transition period between high school and college. However, the focus of her presentation was not the parents. The presentation was directed toward the American Council on Education.

Therefore, the recommendations I have included in this chapter for families and prospective college students is based on both the literature that I have researched and the interviews from the 14 students involved with this project.

**Avoid Isolation**

Even though the feeling of isolation permeated the students’ responses, students also shared that they felt encouraged when their parents took an interest in what they
were doing. Simply put, if parents want to see their children be successful in college, they have to take an active and continued interest in their children’s college plans.

The students became frustrated in their planning when this seemingly simple act did not happen. Nina’s mother had told her that she would register Nina for her SAT exam, because the College Board requires a credit card and Nina does not have one. At the time I interviewed her, Nina was upset that her mother still had not registered her for the exam. Bridget explained that her parents were frequently too tired to talk to her. She felt that they had helped her do well in high school, but did not seem interested in getting her to the next step. She felt that if they were interested they would have made the time to help her.

Learn to Network

Students need to learn to use networking skills. These skills include discriminating between who is a resource and who is not, being able to make comparisons and contrasts, asking questions, and advocating for oneself. Typically, educators view schools as settings where children can socialize, but they do not necessarily teach children how to socialize, especially at the secondary level. Therefore, students must acquire these skills on their own; they can do it through jobs, sports, and organizations. The community of Maple Park provides plenty of these opportunities.

The students in the Maple Park District are exposed to peers who are prospective continuing-generation college students. Some of these students could be potential planning partners. None of the careers to which the students aspired were unusual or extremely unique, and yet the students did not find many prospective continuing-
generation college student peers or older, current college students who had similar aspirations.

The students also should realize that if they have friends who have older brothers or sisters who are attending college, these friends and their siblings are valuable sources. The students in this study tended to rule out potential sources if, for example, the source was not enrolled in the same program. Additionally, the students did not draw associations in the similarities in college experiences; Margot's college tours with her friends demonstrated this. Margot went on college tours with her friends, but found the tours to be of little use to her because the colleges she toured did not offer her program; she did not consider that the colleges she saw could form a basis for comparison for colleges that had her program. She could have compared colleges on the basis of location, amenities, dormitories, and campus life offerings.

As I discussed in Chapter IV, many of the students became frustrated with their friends for a variety of reasons. Interests change. Some of the students' friends were not interested in college at all. I am not suggesting that the students change friends; I am suggesting that students use the social skills they do have to form acquaintances with people who might be able to help them. Students practice these skills in classes when they work in groups, in activities such as student government, on the field when they participate in sports, and on the job when and if they work.

Visit a College

For students in Maple Park, location is not a factor in preventing students and their families from visiting colleges or conducting college tours. With the exception of
Roman, the students identified that the best way to know whether or not they wanted to attend a college was to visit the campus. Maple Park is within an hour of four community colleges, four state colleges, ten private colleges, and three Ivy League universities. New Jersey is known for its highways, and none of these colleges are so rural that it is impossible to find them. Further, some of the colleges are accessible by train. As Maple Park has its own train station, a college visit is potentially a train ride away.

**Take Responsibility for Planning**

The students, with the possible exceptions of Patricia and Amber, did not view college-planning as an activity for which they had to devote significant amounts of time and organization. This fact needs to be pointed out to both students and parents of prospective first-generation college students. If they do not know that they need to plan for it, they will not. The problem becomes this: Who has the responsibility of “pointing out” this seemingly obvious fact? Does it rest upon other parents, the government, the public school system, colleges, or banks?

According to McDonough’s presentation (2004), it is typical of educators, parents, and students to assume that the role of the guidance counselor is to conduct all college planning for students. However, guidance counselors view their roles as much broader than this, and in fact, many are not trained to be college counselors (McDonough, 2004). Rosenbaum (2001) also explained that guidance counselors were frequently frustrated in their efforts to counsel children effectively for college because counselors had learned from experience that administrators and/or parents would override counselors’ decisions.
Because no one person is responsible for this aspect of a child’s education, all educators are responsible for helping students prepare for college. This is not to say that students or parents are not responsible; it is simply to say that teachers and administrators should share the role at the school level.

The Department of Education for the State of New Jersey had made similar recommendations to public school administrators under the leadership of Governor Corzine in 2008. The State Department of Education had encouraged school district administrators to take an active role in college preparation for all high school students through several suggestions they presented in The New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee Policy Report (2008), *NJ Steps: Redesigning Education in New Jersey for the 21st Century*.

One of the suggestions presented was an individualized education plan for all students, in order to improve college graduation rates. This plan was an attempt to personalize education for every child in grades K-12. As I mentioned in the literature review (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Ishitani, 2003; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008), many researchers found that college-planning in the form of course tracking begins at eighth grade when students schedule their Algebra I and Pre-Algebra courses. It would make sense, then, that the educators who develop these plans with students and parents identify the appropriate courses needed by a child, as well as point out the seemingly obvious college plan for the family.

In line with this, The Steering Committee for the Redesigned High School provided educators with guidelines and suggestions for this; such as, the “six-year
educational plan” (2008, p. 32). If put into effect, educators, parents, and students would ensure that each student had a plan that would include all four years of high school, “and two additional years of higher education, workforce training, skilled employment, or military service” (The New Jersey High School Redesign Committee, 2008, p. 32).

However, it remains to be seen how, and if, educators will implement any of the suggestions from the Steering Committee for the Redesigned High School. Former Governor Corzine commissioned the research that formed the basis for the six-year plan. The new governor, Governor Christie, does not have a focus on middle-income students; rather, as he mentioned in his inaugural address, Governor Christie’s energy is devoted to creating charter schools for inner-city students (Christie, 2010).

After winning the election, Governor-Elect Christie appeared at a Maple Park high school. I was not able to attend, but I received notes from a teacher, a guidance counselor, and a few of the students. When a senior student asked Christie how he planned to make college more affordable, Christie replied that he planned to lower taxes, which would make college more affordable. He also replied that New Jersey had some great colleges to attend. There was no mention of his plans for the STARS program, lowering tuition at four-year state colleges or community colleges, or how his plan for lowering taxes would help current high school students to afford a college education.

Therefore, as assistance, mandates, and suggestions that the workers of the state government make are continuously in flux, it is imperative that students and families be aware of the need to develop a plan and actively work with professionals at colleges, public schools, and banks to fulfill their goals. These students and parents need to
become actively involved in planning for a college education, no matter who points it out to them.

Additionally, an easy way that the parents of first-generation college students might be able to reach out to other parents is to do some networking themselves. They can do this by becoming active members of the Parent-Teacher Organization at the middle and high schools. In this type of forum, educators, parents of first-generation students, and parents of continuing-generation students could meet and discuss the college-planning process.

**How the Students' Responses Relate to Maple Park**

By knowing about how high school students make decisions in regard to college-planning, administrators and educators can perhaps better understand how the students view the role that current practices and policies take in helping or hindering the students in this process. For administrators, this study provides students' with perspective on the current situation in a typical middle-income school district. After all, education professionals and students are trying to accomplish similar goals. The success of a community hinges upon the success of its community members; one of the paths to that success is a college education.

Therefore, I have included a discussion on the ways in which the students viewed the school community as being one of the factors in their college-planning processes. This specifically answers the overarching research question as well as research questions b and c: what students thought were influences and how important they perceived those influences to be, how students defined college searching and planning, and how well they
thought they performed the college search. Additionally, many students were not aware that the school had resources for helping them find scholarships, which provides an answer, in its absence, to research question e, how students view the role of finances in their college planning.

In regard to the school system then, as an influence, the students believed that college planning began in their senior year, whereas education professionals viewed college planning as a holistic, four-year process. Unlike some of the samples in the research, this sample of the population engaged in college planning, for the most part, had enrolled in advanced placement courses; these courses had an influence on their plans for attending college. Many of the students, though performing well in high school, did not realize that they were an at-risk population for college dropout, because they were not told that they were; that is, no educational professional identified these students as at risk, and at the time that I was trying to obtain a sample of these students, many counselors knew that their low-income population consisted of prospective first-generation college students, but had assumed that their middle-income students were prospective continuing-generation college students.

In other words, educators did not know the term “first-generation college student” as it applied to middle-income students; therefore, they did not apply it to the student population that they served. The educators, instead, as the students explained, chose to help certain populations of students, but not others. This was especially true in the students’ responses in respect to the college fair for Black and Latino students.
As in the previous section, I discuss these findings below; I have italicized the salient points. I have also provided connections to the literature that I reviewed in Chapter II. After this discussion, I will present recommendations for the administration of Maple Park.

There is a discrepancy between what the professionals expect in planning for college and what the students expect in planning for college. As I described in Chapter II, researchers and educators believe that a child’s academic career, including college planning, begins at kindergarten; at the latest, in eighth grade (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; McDonough, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008). The students did not think that they were doing college planning until they were ready to go to college; the professionals believed that they were helping them all along by providing class schedules that met their needs and interests.

To the counselors of Maple Park’s credit, they do offer several seminars for parents and students for college planning, especially during junior and senior years. One of Maple Park’s high school guidance departments had this announcement posted on the district’s website:

Maple Park School Counseling Department Presents
for Juniors and their Parents
Planning for Senior Year and Beyond

WHAT’S YOUR NEXT MOVE?
March 3, 2010
7:30 pm-9:30pm, Auditorium
(Immediately Following the 7pm PTA Meeting)

SOME TOPICS OF DISCUSSION
1. Programs available to seniors
2. Review of graduation requirements
The only issue that I had with this otherwise appropriate outreach to the juniors and their parents is the date; March 3rd fell in the middle of the HSPA exam, which the State Education Department requires all juniors to take in order to graduate from high school.

I attended the program myself. The students who did attend appeared to be tired from the first day of language arts testing. Other than that issue, the guidance counselors did an excellent job in presenting valuable information to the students. They used a PowerPoint presentation to provide general information to the approximately 200 people in attendance. The topics that the counselors included were NCAA Sports, the G.I. Bill, N.J. STARS, Option II (high school credit for educational experiences outside of the school day), and a possible partnership with a local, four-year, private university.

After the general presentation, they had breakout sessions with the guidance counselors in groups of 30. The counselors had 15 seniors there who were in the process of planning for college talk to the breakout groups about the challenges of planning for college. A guidance counselor also explained a frustration that many of her students encountered. It was this: Students planned for college, the officials of the college accepted them, and then the students discovered that their parents could not afford to send them to that college; a sequence of events that generally sent students scrambling to another, more affordable, college. The end result, she explained, was that the students went to the community college.
As good as this program was, I cannot help being critical of the other guidance
departments in the district. Why did they not have similar programs? The other guidance
counselors in the high schools in the Maple Park School District could offer similar
programs as this one, or rotate responsibility of hosting such a program at the high
schools each year.

It is unlikely that parents from the parents from other schools would have
attended this program. The Parent-Teacher Organizations are separate for each school, as
are the guidance departments; neither group operates collectively throughout the district.
In other words, each school community in Maple Park is a community unto itself. For
the breakout sessions, the organizer instructed the parents to go to the session with their
child’s guidance counselor. To whom would a parent from another school in the district
report?

The administrators could make more of an effort to provide forums such as these
for the parents and students of the Maple Park School District. In her presentation,
McDonough (2004) discussed P-16 reform. There are, as I mentioned previously,
recommendations from the state that build on such research.

_The students had enrolled in advanced placement courses and had grade point
averages that were comparable to those of their prospective continuing-generation peers._
The sample in this study is different from the overall demographics represented in the
available literature, in that in this study the students were in high school and the majority
of them had taken advanced placement courses, honors courses, and challenging
mathematics courses (Herzog, 2005; Riehl, 1994, as cited by Ishitani, 2003; Somers et
al., 2004; Van T. Bui, 2002). As the students described, their course offerings featured advanced placement courses in a variety of subject areas as well as courses that they took to enrich their lives.

Additionally, as Patricia, Margot, Mark, and Lisa described their plans for college, they explained that they were eligible in their junior years to be included in the STARS program. This indicates that they were in the top 20% of their class. After the State Department of Education changed the program to select only the top 15% of the class, Patricia still qualified for the program, and Mark and Lisa were close to knocking out their competition. It is also likely that Margot was close. Again, most of the literature that I reviewed in Chapter II had indicated that, generally, first-generation college students had lower high school grade point averages than their continuing-generation peers while both groups were enrolled in high school (Herzog, 2005; Riehl, 1994, as cited by Ishitani, 2003; Somers et al., 2004; Van T. Bui, 2002). The sample of students in this study happened to be performing well academically.

I cannot make a definitive comparison between this sample’s grade point averages and class schedules and the grade point averages and class schedules of their peers who are also prospective first-generation college students, or of their peers who are prospective continuing-generation college students in the Maple Park School District. Again, I interviewed only 14 of a collective graduating class of approximately 1,050 students. The guidance counselors and administration did not identify any of their students as “prospective first-generation college students” or “prospective continuing-generation college students”. It is, therefore, impossible to make an accurate comparison
between the two groups for this district. I can, however, definitively say that the majority of these 14 students were enrolled in advanced and competitive classes and attained high grade point averages in many of their subject areas.

The implications of this finding is that administrators, counselors, and teachers cannot distinguish prospective first-generation students from their prospective continuing-generation peers based upon the students’ academic performance or course load. This is good, in the respect that the first-generation students are being provided with the same opportunities as their continuing-generation counterparts. However, there is no system for identifying students who are part of the at-risk population for college attrition, which makes it almost impossible to prepare these students either to enter college or to graduate from college.

In this respect, first-generation, middle-income college students are similar to students who have special needs; in this case, needing a strong support system from the school. However, with competitive grade point averages and course loads, this need might not manifest itself in the forms typically associated with at-risk students. Therefore, administrators, teachers, and parents need to know more about the population of students they serve. The first-generation student needs a strong college-bound culture and climate of the K-12 school - something which Smyth and Hannan (2007) and Roderick et al. (2008) suggested could overcome the deficiency in family educational background as being an indicator for college dropout.

No professional has identified students who meet the criterion of first-generation in college planning. This is a major problem. It was a challenge, as I mentioned
previously, to identify prospective first-generation middle-income students because none of the education professionals had assigned this category to the students. Many of the educators in the Maple Park school district assumed that the students had the requisite knowledge about going to college from their parents because the parents were middle-income.

This was not the case. As I mentioned in the demographic description of Maple Park in Chapter III, the district is nearly 70% middle-income (Open Data Systems, 2010). Women in Maple Park are in the below-average range for holding college degrees as compared to the rest of the state, and men are in the average range (Open Data Systems, 2010). As I explained in Chapter III, Maple Park’s population is 70% middle-income, and at most, a little over 25% of people in this middle-income population over the age of 25 hold college degrees (Open Data Systems, 2010). Assuming this is true, children of college-educated parents are a minority. Why, then, have educators assumed that they are more likely interacting with the minority population than the majority population?

This assumption warrants further research. Some of the literature reported that prospective continuing-generation students were more likely to interact with their teachers than prospective first-generation students (Choy et al., 2000; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Pascarella et al., 2004; Roderick et al., 2008). Perhaps this is the case because teachers and guidance counselors believed that the students they served were from college-educated families because children of college-educated families are, according to the research, more likely to talk to them.
Students believe the administration has identified only some students as needing assistance, but not others. Many of the students felt that education professionals directed their assistance only toward minority students. This sentiment was demonstrated by the Black and Latino College Fair held in November in 2009. Students who knew what a college fair was, but did not know about the college fairs held at colleges in Maple Park’s county, felt this way because of the publicity that they felt the administration and guidance counselors provided for the Black and Latino College Fair. Administrators at another county’s community college hosted the event, and students who went to the event from the Maple Park School District did so during the school day. The students in this study who did attend the fair did not indicate to me whether or not they had to pay for the event, but did tell me that the administrators of the building provided buses and chaperones for the event.

However, there were two college fairs open to all students in Maple Park’s county. Any of the students could have attended these events, which were free. Additionally, unlike the Black and Latino College Fair which is held outside of Maple Park’s county once a year, the other college fairs were held twice throughout the school year in Maple Park’s county.

There are a few reasons why the students could not have known about the college fairs offered to the students: (1) The guidance departments and colleges did not publicize these fairs adequately (Lisa only found out about the event a week after it occurred); (2) students did not know what a college fair was (like Joe); (3) or, because they heard about the college fairs for Black and Hispanic students, these students constructed the idea that
a college fair was not an event for White or Asian students (like Margot, Patricia, and Karen).

The responsibility for removing misconceptions about the purpose of a college fair and its intended audience must rest with both colleges and high schools. Regardless of the publicity that the guidance department and colleges might have provided for these events, students will not attend if they do not think it applies to them. For example, Joe did not know what a college fair was, and when I explained it to him, said that he did not have to go to one because he was going to get his four-year degree at the community college.

**Recommendations for Maple Park**

The recommendations I provide in this section were derived from the information I received during the interviews that I had with the students, as well as what I had researched in the literature review.

**Identify Prospective First-Generation College Students**

Many guidance counselors and teachers, when I asked, did not know what “first-generation college students” were, which made it a bit challenging to find a sample in this district. When I explained the term to them, many immediately identified low-income students as this population, but did not know of any middle-income students who met this description.

As I explained in Chapter II, the population of first-generation students at a randomly selected college would be approximately 25% of the incoming freshman class;
the majority of this percentage comes from middle-income families, not from low-income families (Herzog, 2005; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009). Both colleges and high schools have identified a need to help only the low-income population.

Rosenbaum (2001) found that educators at the K-12 level attempted to prepare all students for college, and again, educators do this whether or not they feel that the children in their care are "college material", and without regard to the fact that the students may not have "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1977, as cited by Bergerson, 2007), as it applies to the culture of college. To elucidate, the students in this study were unfamiliar with college terms, and were therefore generally unfamiliar and confused by terms educators used; such as, "college fair", "Bachelors degree", "bursar", "open house", "campus life", "credits", and even "admissions". Educators should realize that this population of students, prospective first-generation college students, is not familiar with college culture and the accompanying vocabulary of that culture. Those terms mean little to these students.

If students are unfamiliar with a term, and there is no dictionary to define that term, how do they know that the term applies to them? Educators cannot help students if they cannot identify the students who need help. The students may not be likely to self-identify for help. The general assumption appears to be that educators, both at the high school and at the college level, are speaking the same language as their audience of prospective college students. They are not. The students I interviewed explained that they had a lot of confusion. This confusion could be removed if both the students and the educators started asking questions.
The educators of this district could also solicit help from parents. If an educator wants to know if his student is a continuing-generation or first-generation prospective college student, he could simply ask the parents.

**Build a Community of College-Bound Students**

The 14 students in this study did not recognize that many of the activities that they were involved in at the high school level had direct connections to activities in which they could participate in college. Further, most of the students did not believe that many of the courses had any value in preparing them for college. As the reader will recall, some of the students believed that the courses they were enrolled in at the high school were just good for the purpose of graduating from high school or becoming a teacher.

In the study of Chicago schools, researchers found that the way the teachers viewed the high school culture as college preparatory was especially important in preparing children for college (Roderick et al., 2008). Similarly, Smyth and Hannan (2007) asserted that in some cases, a college-preparatory climate in the school could override the lack of preparation for college at home. Therefore, one recommendation for future research would be to explore educators' perceptions in middle-income school districts of the college-preparatory climate.

Perhaps the students need more concrete and direct links to college to see how their experiences in high school, both in academics and in extracurricular activities, relate to the target of going to college. There are several ways that the educators in this district could go about doing this in regard to both aspects.
As teachers, guidance counselors, child study teams members, students, and parents meet to discuss the students’ plans as the students entered high school, they could have an opportunity to discuss the students’ aspirations and explain how the course of study and the extracurricular activities at the high school would aid the child in college. As I previously discussed in this chapter, the six-year plan for school districts has this as an outline to help improve college attendance rates. Additionally, this action would involve the professional staff’s getting to know the students and the parents better, and potentially building a more tightly-knit school community. The more activities that the staff, parents, and children can do together, especially as it would relate to a common goal, the more the school community could come together. In other words, this action might help both parents and students in networking, as I had suggested earlier.

Another option that district officials may consider in building a stronger college-preparatory climate in the schools would be to expand the option offered in the 12th grade to students in the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades (The New Jersey High School Redesign Committee, 2008, p. 33). As it currently exists, the option offered in the 12th grade allows high school seniors to take college classes at local colleges, at vocational schools, and to gain work experience.

Maple Park administrators offer the senior-option program to their students. The college campus that students can take courses at is the community college. There are four, four-year colleges within commuting distance (less than 20 minutes away) from Maple Park; it would be wise if officials at Maple Park formed partnerships with officials at those colleges as well. Students would be able to take courses at the colleges and
become familiar with the environment of a four-year college, which is markedly different from the community college.

Fortunately, at the writing of this chapter, administrators at Maple Park were in negotiations with local four-year colleges to offer opportunities for college-bound students while they are still in high school (Maple Park Guidance Counselors Presentation to the Junior Class, March 3, 2010. What the officials currently have planned is that students would have to pay college tuition for these courses at the four-year colleges as well as at the community college.

If the students decided to participate in this program with the local, four-year college in their senior year, they would reap several benefits. Not only would they get both high school and college credit, the students might become accustomed to the college environment, learn to network with college students and professors, and have a more realistic expectation of the expenses of a college education.

Another benefit of building a stronger college-bound community is getting to know the student population better. As I mentioned before, many of the guidance counselors did not know whether or not any of their middle-income students were prospective first-generation college students. Many of the students explained that their counselors were nice, but were overworked and not adequately informed about colleges, or simply more concerned with the needs of other students. Some of the students reported that they felt that there were too many students per counselor, which created an obstacle to building constructive relationships between the students and counselors.
The students also felt that their teachers tried to be helpful, but most of the help was very generalized and aimed at the entire class. From my experiences as a teacher in this district, I can attest to this sentiment; it is difficult to form individualized, personal relationships with students when a teacher has large classes. For example, three of the five classes I teach have enrollments of over 30 students per class. It is a challenge to get to know these students and their needs well.

Regardless of whether a student was in a club or on a sports team, they did not feel that the information that they received from the coach or advisor was relevant to college. That is, the students felt that the bond that they formed with that professional was relevant only to that particular situation.

Therefore, to build a stronger community and foster a more college-bound atmosphere, administrators at Maple Park would have to hire more administrators, counselors, and teachers. This might sound counterproductive, but a glance at the School Report Card for one of the district’s high schools bears this out. There are 316.8 students per administrator in that high school, as compared to the state average of 176.8 students per administrator (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2010).

I chose the student/school administrator ratio as a basis for measurement because the professionals who work for the state and provide the report cards measured administrative staff by the number of full-time administrators present in a building; whereas, the student/faculty ratio includes part-time and noncertified staff members. In other words, the State Education Department created a student/faculty ratio that is less accurate than the student/administrator ratio. This is because the student/faculty ratio
includes teachers and guidance counselors, along with educational support services staff members such as teachers’ aides, librarians, school psychologists, school nurses, and social workers. It does not indicate how many children a guidance counselor is responsible for, nor does it indicate how many students are actually in a classroom.

Experiment with Peer Leadership

The administration of the Maple Park School District values “character education”; it has several programs that emphasize the value of good citizenship. One of these programs is the Peer Leadership Program. The aim of this program is to ease the transition from middle school to high school. In their junior year, students who are interested in becoming peer leaders apply for this program. If a panel, composed of current peer leaders, guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators, approve the applying juniors, the juniors are then trained on topics such as building relationships with younger students, acting as role models for these students, and helping younger students navigate the busy, bustling halls of the high school. When these peer leaders become seniors, they meet in teams of two with a group of seven freshmen every Tuesday during health class for the first semester of the school year.

This program has been in effect for over 15 years, and appears to work very well in meeting its goal of preventing student dropout from the high school.

However, this program could provide even more of a benefit. The students I interviewed for this study reported that they needed someone who was close to their age to talk to about going to college. One of the things that Maple Park could do, which would be FREE, is to bring back to the high school alumni who were peer leaders to talk
to their former charges about going to college. The peer leadership group would be ideal for this type of big-brother/big-sister reunion; the administrators and teachers have already approved of these students as models of success. Also, knowing that they would have to go back to the high schools as role models and be involved with the program for more than a year might provide an incentive to peer leaders to perform better in college themselves.

The Students' Evaluation of Information from the Colleges

One of the suggestions that I made in the first chapter was that admissions and student life officials at colleges could use the information derived from this study. These officials, who must cope with the problems of student attrition at the college level, might be well served if they knew of some of the problems and frustrations that students experienced in just getting to college.

Part of the confusion and frustration that the students expressed was due to the information that they received from colleges and their experiences with the colleges themselves. In this section, I have discussed how the students responded to research: question 1, what influences them to attend college, and the value of these influences. I have also provided a discussion on how the students' responses to research questions b and c relate to this topic; those questions were about how students defined and conducted the college search.

With respect to these questions, the students found that the information that they received from colleges was confusing. The most valuable information from the college could be obtained by taking a college tour, which I have already discussed, or by looking
at the college’s website, which I discuss in this section. The students explained that some of the terminology that the colleges used confused them. As before, I have placed the important points in italics and then have provided a discussion.

The students felt that there was too much information from colleges that is too unorganized and not standardized, which makes it very challenging to come to a clear decision about going to college. The students who did not visit a college derived the most benefit from visiting the colleges’ websites because of the interactive aspect of these sites. However, none of this information is standardized; each college’s website is different and focuses on different aspects that the college has to offer.

Further, the students felt that colleges sent mailings indiscriminately to them. This was also something that confused them. These letters made it seem as though the colleges wanted them to attend. Yet, the students never received followup letters with information personalized for them. Instead, they received redundant information, which immediately found its way into the trash or into their parents’ hands. Either way, the information did not physically remain with the students for long.

The students are unfamiliar with the college-bound vocabulary. The students felt that colleges sent advertisements to students with language that the students did not readily comprehend, if at all. This is poorly executed marketing. The point of advertising is to get someone to buy a product. To do this, an advertiser has to know about the demographic audience to whom he is trying to sell. If colleges do not put their advertisements into language the target audience understands, that audience will not
understand the purpose for buying it, know its features, or how to use it, nor would they be able to determine whether that particular product is right for them or not.

For instance, Roderick et al. (2008) identified the need for students to determine what schools were good matches for them; if students do not know how to read and understand the information presented to them, they cannot accurately evaluate whether the schools that they have chosen are good matches or not. Further, not many of the students I interviewed were familiar with the terms “match school” and “reach school”, two of the terms that the guidance counselors defined at the meeting in early March 2010.

However, many of the students compared searching for college to shopping. When they go food shopping, all of the products are different. However, the nutrition information and the list of ingredients are standardized. The students might not understand the individual ingredients, but in general, they are able to understand most of the information and make a decision as to whether or not the product is appropriate for them, as well as compare it to other products.

There is no such labeling for colleges on the college websites, in college advertisements, at college fairs, or on campus tours. However, there is something similar to nutritional labels on college-planning websites and in books - materials with which the students were unfamiliar. High school administrators can make these materials more available, or provide links to websites that have such information listed on them on the Maple Park District website.
For Future Research

I did not examine educators’ perceptions about prospective first-generation college students. As I explained earlier, many educators that I talked with in trying to identify students who met the criterion of a prospective first-generation college student did not know what that population was. Then, after I explained it to them, they immediately indicated low-income students. Income is only one of the factors that form the basis of a student’s likelihood to go to college; the other is parents’ level of educational attainment (Glenn, 2008; Herzog, 2005; Horn, 1997; Ishitani, 2003; Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004). In an era in which popular educational thought dictates that all students are college-bound, it is important to evaluate educators’ perceptions on the challenges in the process to get all students to college.

As I mentioned, I thought that it was valuable to talk to educators about their perceptions of their students and how they form these perceptions. All of the educators that I had to talk to in order to perform this study have had experiences with higher education. It is likely, as I mentioned earlier, that these educators have assumed that the students with whom they interact are children of college-educated parents and have experiences with other college-educated people. However, the fact is that prospective continuing-generation college students comprise the minority of students attending schools in the Maple Park School District. If these education professionals have made this assumption, they are most likely missing their target audience, an audience of children of parents who were not college educated, which happens to be the majority in this district.
Simply put, if educators want to know how to better prepare their students for a place in higher education, they have to know who their students are. An example from special education elucidates this: The child study team describes to a teacher the particular disabilities of a child and the accommodations needed for that child in order to be successful in the classroom. Once a teacher has this information, she or he is better able to help that child learn.

Similarly, being a prospective first-generation college student is part of the student’s preparation for college. However, unlike the case for special education, no educator has designated or identified a prospective first-generation college student with a special need - that need being a knowledge about college culture. First-generation college students are an at-risk population for college attrition: Without knowledge of the problem, administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors cannot act effectively to help students with this at-risk designation.

This current trend in educational thought should be evaluated as well: Why can’t educators get more students ready to stay in college? The current discrepancy between college-bound rates and the steady college degree attainment rates indicate that a college education may not be for everybody (Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Rosenbaum, 2001). However, these rates could change if college admissions officials understood the needs of their incoming populations, identified these students as first-generation, and prepared them for the problems in transition. These rates would change if high school educators knew that they were handling an at-risk population, coordinated with the colleges, and fostered stronger college-bound atmospheres by building
communities and bringing alumni back to talk to prospective college attendees. These rates could change if the parents and students took a more active role in networking, asking questions, and making time to investigate the place where they are putting their most valuable possession, their future.

There is also a need to conduct similar studies to this one. As I described in the literature review, not many studies discuss the trend of college attrition from the students’ perspectives while students are in the midst of college planning, few studies mention middle-income students, and few studies are qualitative. In reference to understanding the audience, gaining a perspective on what students have to say as they move through the pipeline from kindergarten through to college could help educators of middle-income students better prepare this majority of college-bound students to not only go to college, but to graduate from college.

The issue of college attrition rates is a national issue. I was fortunate enough to conduct this study in a suburban area that had easy access to a great number of colleges which are extremely different in size and scope. Nevertheless, the students in this study still had little knowledge about college culture. This was true in spite of the fact that the students could have enrolled in college programs during their senior years if they were willing to make a 10-minute drive from the school and if the program in which they were interested were available at the college. How do education professionals prepare students for college when the colleges are not so easy to access?

I also did not have the time or the opportunity, in conducting this study, to evaluate the parents’ attitudes about the college-bound culture. To do this would have
diverted me from my objective, which was to talk to students, not to parents. I feel that it might be important, though, to talk to parents, as their attitudes have a profound effect on their children. Parents' view of the college culture, or college-bound culture, especially if it is antagonistic, was a problem that both the scholarly research, such as Rosenbaum (2001) and non-scholarly reports, such as Leonhardt (2005), described as being counterproductive to college graduation rates. The students shared with me their interpretations of what their parents had said; I do not have any actual data from the parents themselves. It would seem that a township such as Maple Park would have a positive attitude about colleges because there are so many nearby, as I discussed previously, but that might not be the case. The proximity of the colleges might be more of a nuisance than a benefit to the surrounding communities.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study was to explore the decision-making processes that prospective first-generation, middle-income college students perform as they make their plans to attend college. I did this by interviewing 14 high school seniors from the Maple Park School district in individual interviews while they were in the first semester of their senior year, in the midst of making their college plans.

The students responded about how their families and friends influenced their college plans, explained what they knew about going to college and what they expected from their college experiences, told me why going to college was important to them and to their families, and explained what frustrated and confused them about the college-planning experience.
Students and families who are in this situation can benefit from this study in that they should develop a financial plan for college, develop a course of study from high school, identify reliable, informative sources who have had the experience of entering college, and learn to network with others who have similar plans.

Education professionals can help prospective, first-generation students by identifying who these students are, and then making prospective first-generation students more aware of how their high school experiences directly relate to their experiences in planning for college, fostering a stronger college-bound community, and bringing back young alumni to the high school to talk to students about what it is like to enter college and their college planning experiences.

Simply put, the more informed these students are about how to academically, financially, and socially prepare for college, the more likely they will know what to expect. If, as Oldfield (2007) and Bergerson (2007) described, and as the participants in this study reported, the students believe that they go to college to prepare for a job, and the officials at the colleges believe that students go to college to lead richer lives, then the discrepancy between the two expectations needs to be resolved. The students in this study wanted to go to college to prepare for a better life than their parents had in respect to their parents’ jobs, and they viewed college as the job-training site for this goal. The colleges’ goal, as Oldfield (2007) identified, is to provide students with that better life, but not in the same way the students expect their needs to be met.

Once students have decided that a college education is what they need, then they must take an active role in preparing for that education. They should be prepared to
understand the mission of the college and its expectations of them. Likewise, they need
to identify their own expectations of the college experience.

Students cannot do this if they do not actively conduct a search, interact with
people who have had experience at the college, or visit a college campus or classroom.
Their parents cannot help them if they remain uninterested and uniformed of their child’s
choice to pursue a college education, and if they do not help the child prepare financially
for the various aspects of the college experience. Finally, educators cannot help these
students and their parents if they do not identify who needs this help. Educators must
become more aware of the population with whom they work in order to be effective in
their service to these students.
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