

A Study Examining the High School Counselor Experiences in College Choice Decision-Making

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“When you learn, teach. When you get, give” – Dr. Maya Angelou

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Chapter I

Introduction

Enrollment into higher education institutions has increased across all racial/ethnic demographic groups in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003, 2011, 2012). Between the years of 2001 and 2011, there has been an increase in African American and Hispanic college enrollment (Baum et al., 2013). In 2011, 66% of African American high school graduates and 62% of Hispanic college graduates enrolled in college one year after high school graduation compared to 70% of White students (Baum et al., 2013). Additionally, between 2005 and 2015, there has been an increase in college enrollment with students from low socioeconomic households (Gurantz, Pender et al., 2020; Pender & Welch, 2018). Although enrollment is on the rise, many high school seniors are not applying or enrolling in postsecondary institutions aligned to their academic qualifications (Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Hurwitz et al., 2012; McGlynn, 2011; Smith et al., 2012); this phenomenon has been referred to as academic undermatch, or simply, “undermatch” (Roderick et al., 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011).

There are many negative consequences of academic undermatch with the most critical being college completion. It has been found that students who attend an academically “matched” institution spend a shorter time to complete their degree and are more likely to graduate college than those who undermatch (Smith et al., 2012). This research supports the conclusion that academic undermatch may influence student college completion rates. It is also particularly important to acknowledge that low-income, first-generation, and/or minority students are more likely to undermatch (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011; Smith et al., 2012). In addition, this population of students are not completing college at the same rates as their non-minority, higher income peers (Baum et al., 2013; Dynarski, 2015).

Problem Statement

Even though there have been trends in college enrollment, there are disparities within enrollment amongst institution types. Students from low-socioeconomic households are more likely to enroll in less selective institutions when compared to students from high-socioeconomic households (McFarland et al., 2019). Within these disparities with institutional enrollment, there are discrepancies with student completion rates, which are also influenced based upon the economic status of students. Students from low-socioeconomic households are attaining a postsecondary degree at a lower percentage than students from middle- and high-socioeconomic households (Kena et al., 2015). In a national study collecting data from private, public, and charter schools it was found that 24% of students from low-income high schools completed a postsecondary degree within 6 years compared to 45% of students from high-income high schools (Kena et al., 2016). The issues of college enrollment and college completion are areas of concern, as research has found that there are direct links to educational attainment and social mobility (Baum et al., 2013). The attainment of a college degree increases the opportunity for social mobility (Baum et al., 2013) and produces individual and societal gains (Douglass, 2006), which is why it is critical to understand all that is threatened when a student undermatches to an institution that does not align to their academic qualifications.

The completion of a bachelor's degree will allow an individual the opportunity for upward socioeconomic mobility (Baum et al., 2013). Individuals with higher levels of education are more likely to have lower rates of unemployment, increased employment earnings, increased lifetime earnings, and increased chances to obtain health insurance (Baum et al., 2013; Douglass, 2006). Additionally, there are several societal benefits that are gained with increased higher education such as: less individual dependence on public assistance programs, reduction in

national expenses on health care, and increased civic involvement and democracy amongst citizens (Baum et al., 2013; Douglass, 2006). Furthermore, a more educated nation allows the United States to remain a global competitor in an international global economy.

To aid in increasing the enrollment and completion gaps, former President Obama held a national summit inviting 140 college presidents and organizations and addressed academic undermatch and the inequities that are a result of this phenomenon (Sanchez, 2014). At this summit, President Obama implored the policymakers in attendance to increase the acceptance of low-income, high-achieving students into selective institutions (Sanchez, 2014). But additional, and more direct, interventions should be put in place to address these concerns other than increased admissions of students from low-income households. Specifically, increased interventions with high school stakeholders, like a school counselor, could help to alleviate the enrollment and completion gaps between students. Current studies show that students from low-socioeconomic households are less likely to seek college application and enrollment information from their parents, and/or college publications, websites, and college search guides when compared to students of middle- and high-income households (Kena et al., 2015). Due to this, low-income students are more likely to rely on their school counselor for college advising and counseling (Belasco, 2013; Hoxby & Avery, 2012).

High School Counselors as a Gatekeeper

The role of a high school counselor is a comprehensive role with varying responsibilities. Originally, the role of a high school counselor was established solely to support students with college counseling (McKillip et al., 2012; Rosenbaum et al., 1996). In the 1970s, the role began to shift, and more administrative tasks were added to role (Lambie & Williamson, 2004;

McKillip et al., 2012). But the new tasks did not replace older tasks, creating a growing list of responsibilities for the high school counselor (McDonough, 2005; McKillip et al., 2012), forming the high school counselor position as we know it today.

Presently, the role of the high school counselor position includes supporting students with academic, career, personal, and social development needs, (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) as well as mental health counseling (McKillip et al., 2012). In addition, the high school counselor serves as a “gatekeeper” providing the proper college knowledge to inform students to match to a postsecondary institution that aligns to their academic qualifications (The Executive Office of the President, 2014). The daily activities of a high school counselor are not exclusive, as the responsibilities are everchanging and can vary based on any emerging crises to support the students and administration (McKillip et al., 2012).

The varying roles and responsibilities of the high school counselor require the high school counselor to juggle several competing priorities daily (College Board, 2012), which obscures the role for the counselor, creating role confusion (McKillip et al., 2012), conflict, and ambiguity (Drury, 1984; Thompson & Powers, 1983). When analyzing the responsibilities within the role, there is not one activity that is more important or takes precedence over another. The many responsibilities of a high school counselor may influence the support, guidance, and knowledge provided to students in college counseling sessions. Understanding the complexity of the high school counselor’s role and determining the influence that their responsibilities has on their college advising is important, as they are a crucial source of college knowledge for students from low-socioeconomic households.

Purpose of the Study

Undermatching is not a new phenomenon in educational research. Many researchers have examined academic undermatch by studying the factors that may influence a student's decision to undermatch. Although there is much research detailing the factors that influence a student's decision to undermatch, the experiences and activities of the high school counselor as a gatekeeper or institutional agent of college knowledge in the college decision-making process is understudied. Stanton-Salazaar et al. described an institutional agent as a person that is "well positioned to provide social and institutional support in a multiple dimensional stratification system" (2010, p. 15). As an institutional agent, school counselors provide students with the college information that will allow them to select a match institution that meets their academic and personal needs. Studies have shown that the impact of college counseling can positively influence the college-going outcomes of students (Hurwitz et al., 2012). This is especially true of low-income students, as they require more support and guidance from the high school counselor during the college application process (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Additionally, it has been found that if school administration added one additional counselor in the school building, student enrollment to a four-year institution would increase (Hurwitz et al., 2012).

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors in order to gain a greater understanding of how high school counselors serve as institutional agents within the college decision-making process. Through this study, it was the goal to gain an in-depth understanding of the role that high school counselors play in the college application and enrollment process, as well as the practices that are employed during college counseling sessions to assist students with selecting a match institution.

Research Questions

The guiding research question in the study is: How do high school counselors serve as institutional agents in the college decision-making process? To help address this guiding research question the following research questions were used in the study:

1. What are school counselors' understanding of academic undermatch?
2. How, if at all, do school contextual factors influence the ability of high school counselors to serve as institutional agents during the college decision-making process?
3. What strategies, resources, and activities do high school counselors utilize during college counseling sessions to help students select a match institution?

The research questions helped to gain a deeper understanding into how high school counselors perceive themselves within their role. Current literature has identified that school counselors serve as social capital and most importantly as institutional agents within the school building (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Students who are most at risk to undermatch are most in need of school-based institutional agents to obtain the information necessary for college decision-making as they often do not have access to social capital in their family unit (Avery & Turner, 2010; Belasco, 2013; College Board, 2012). The research questions that guided this study examined how high school counselors perceive themselves as institutional agents and the resources that they provide to students in order to assist with enrollment in a match institution.

Significance of Study

Continued research is required to fully understand the role that high school counselors play in college decision-making. Most importantly, further investigation is needed to provide

deeper insight into the experiences of high school counselors as institutional agents. Current research examines the impact that college counselors have as social capital influencing student college application behavior, postsecondary enrollment, and the overarching college-going process (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Robinson & Roska, 2016; Velez, 2020). These studies present findings that confirmed the positive influence that high school counselors have on the college-going behavior and decision-making of students applying quantitative methods. In a mixed methods approach, Avery (2010) found that students who were offered individualized college counseling submitted a greater number of college applications to more competitive postsecondary institutions. There is current literature that aims to understand the role of high school counselors as social capital in the college decision-making process; however, there are limited studies that explore the experiences of high school counselors using a qualitative approach.

Rosenbaum et al. (1996) investigated how high school counselors view their role in guiding students through the college-going process and the strategies that are used to support students throughout the process. This current study will replicate the goals of the research by Rosenbaum et al., but it will also explore the high school counselor's perception of academic undermatch. Understanding academic undermatch from the perspective of the high school counselor has been understudied. The findings from this study will provide insight into how high school counselors view their role within the phenomenon of academic undermatch and will provide a deeper understanding into the college advising provided to students who are most at risk of undermatching by exploring the college counseling received by institutional agents within the building.

Additionally, current research is needed to update and add to the findings of Rosenbaum et al. (1996), as the study was conducted more than 20 years ago, and much has changed in the college application process. New findings are needed to represent the changes in how students apply and enroll in a postsecondary institution. Furthermore, the findings from this study will provide an updated review of how counselors view their role as institutional agents in the college decision-making process. Additionally, it will add to the research providing data on the high school counselors' perceptions and the current strategies employed by high school counselors during the college application process.

Clarification of Terms

“Academic undermatch:” In this study, the phenomenon of undermatch will be defined as the occurrence of a student enrolling in a postsecondary institution that does not academically match their observable academic qualifications, adopting the definition provided by Roderick et al. (2008). For example, academic undermatch occurs if a student enrolls in a less selective institution when they possess the academic credentials and qualifications to match to a more selective institution. In addition, academic undermatch can also occur when a student, specifically a high-achieving student, fails to enroll in a college or university. Unless otherwise noted, this definition will be the primary definition of academic undermatch to guide this study.

“Match:” The definition provided by Byndloss et al. (2015) will be used in this study to define a match as, “[a match] occurs when a student enrolls in a college with a selectivity level that matches [the student’s] qualifications” (p. 2). In this study, a match will only be defined on the academic level and other contributing factors were not considered.

“Best fit:” The definition of this term that will be adopted and applied to this study is provided by the research of Byndloss et al. (2015) of a “match college,” which is defined as when a postsecondary institution meets not only a student’s academic potential, but meets the financial, personal, and financial needs of the prospective student. However, in this study, this definition will be used to define a best fit or match for a student.

Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

The term undermatch was developed by researchers Roderick et al. (2008) in a study examining the college enrollment patterns of high school graduates in Chicago Public Schools. The researchers found that many of the high school graduates enrolled in a college that was below their academic qualifications (Roderick et al., 2008) and that many of the students with the academic preparedness to attend college did not apply or enroll in a postsecondary institution (Roderick et al., 2008). Academic undermatch can occur amongst all students (Abdul-Alim, 2016), but current research details that the phenomenon is more likely to occur amongst specific student populations. In a national study aimed to examine the influences of academic undermatch in students, it has been found that the phenomenon is more pervasive with low-income, first-generation, and/or minority students (Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Roderick et al., 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011; Smith et al., 2012). Current literature provides many factors that may influence a student's decision to apply, enroll, and/or attend a postsecondary institution that does not align with their academic qualifications. A student's postsecondary decision will impact not only the academic completion of the student, but it will have societal consequences that will affect not only the college completion rates across the nation, but the nation's ability to compete in a global economy.

Explanations of Academic Undermatch

As mentioned, there are contributing factors cited in the current literature on academic undermatch that assist researchers, administrators, students, and families understand the

phenomenon and the causes of students applying, enrolling, and/or attending a less selective institution. These factors include: the student's demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and family's household income; student's social capital network; and the college-going culture found in the student's graduating high school.

Socioeconomic Status

There are several disparities within the types of institutions to which low-income, middle-income, and high-income students apply and enroll (Aud et al., 2013; Baum et al., 2013). In various studies, socioeconomic status has been proven to be a predictor in a student's tendency to undermatch. Based on data reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2008) and Baum et al. (2013), in 2004 forty-two percent of low-income students who were eligible to attend a selective college undermatched. This is compared to 26 percent of students with a high socioeconomic status who undermatched (Baum et al., 2013; Radwin et al., 2013). These findings support the previous research of Bowen et al. (2009). In an examination of the college enrollment of high school seniors at public universities in North Carolina, Bowen et al. (2009) found that 40% of graduating high school seniors undermatched, with low-income students more likely to undermatch than their higher income peers. In this study, it was found that 59% of the students located within the lowest income quartile undermatched. Additionally, Belasco and Trivette (2015) conducted a national study of the postsecondary transition of high school sophomores from 2002 to 2006 using data from the NCES – Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) during 2002–2006. The findings support previous studies that low-income students undermatched at a higher rate than students with a higher socioeconomic status. More importantly, the findings detail the intersection between academic undermatch and a student's

socioeconomic status and the influence on a student's application behavior, and ultimately their college choice decision-making.

Low-income students regardless of their academic abilities are more likely to apply and enroll in colleges that do not match their academic qualifications (Baum et al., 2013; Belasco, 2013; Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Turner, 2013). For example, studies show that students from low-income households are less likely to enroll in a four-year institution, specifically a selective institution in which the student's academic achievement qualifies them for enrollment (Baum et al., 2013; NCES, 2013). This finding is supported by Belasco (2013) who found that low-income students who do enroll in a college or university are more likely to enroll in a less selective institution, "where resources are comparatively scarce and rates are comparatively low" (p. 1) when compared to more selective institutions (Carnevale et al., 2010; Thomas & Perna, 2004). Additionally, families with a household income of \$29,600 or less disproportionately enroll in for-profit and two-year public institutions and are less likely to enroll in four-year public and private institutions (Aud et al., 2013; Baum et al., 2013; Ingels et al., 2007). Current literature states that a lack of resources, such as school-based social capital, may play a critical role in the college decision-making of low-income students, making it important for low-income students to have access to social capital that can guide them through the college application process (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004).

Race/Ethnicity

A student's racial/ethnic background also influences application behavior and college decision-making. In the study of college enrollment data in Chicago Public Schools, it was found that Latino students were more likely to undermatch at a rate of 44% when compared to their

White peers who undermatched at 36% (Roderick et al., 2008). Bowen et al. (2009) also found in their study that African American students were more likely to undermatch when compared to their White peers. Based on the findings, the most disadvantaged populations, low-income and minority students of color, are more likely to apply and enroll in postsecondary institutions that do not match their academic qualifications.

When examining race/ethnicity as an explanation of undermatch, it must be stated that schools that predominantly serve students of color lack the school-based social capital that would shape the social mobility amongst racial minority groups (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The school-based social capital found within schools can share the knowledge and resources for college planning, as well as establish the college-going culture within the school building (McDonough, 2005; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

College-Going Culture

A college-going culture is defined as the environment created by the adults found within a high school building that positively promotes college enrollment and attendance. The high school climate provides students with the resources to successfully navigate the college transition and is critical to the college decision-making of students (Roderick et al., 2008, 2011). School counselors play a primary role in the development and the management of a college-going culture within a school building. School counselors provide knowledge and advice on course selection, admissions, and selecting “best-fit” institutions (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). In addition, certain colleges are more likely to promote and recruit at positive college-going high schools where the student body has previously demonstrated strong academic performance (Hurwitz et al., 2012).

In the study conducted by Roderick et al. (2011), 55% of Chicago Public Schools graduating seniors participated in an online senior exit questionnaire to measure the effect of college-going culture on the decision-making process of urban students. In addition, data were collected from 4,000 teachers who self-selected to participate in the survey within Chicago Public Schools. The results of the study found that urban students who attended a high school that intensely and positively implemented a college-going climate attended four-year institutions at a greater percentage. The findings suggest that the role school counselors play in creating a positive college-going culture will influence students to a college match (Roderick et al., 2011).

Access to Social Capital

A student's social capital influences his or her application behavior and college selection. Social capital theory has diverse meanings throughout the academic undermatch literature. Coleman (1988) defined social capital as a resource derived from social ties that creates the pathways in which information is transferred between individuals, which presents the outcomes of opportunity and material gains. Putnam (1993, 1995) described social capital as networks that create a sense of community and belonging for individuals where members develop a sense of equality. Furthermore, recent literature has defined social capital as a "resource-rich" (Lin, 2000) network that creates a sense of community filled with support and trust (Morrow, 1999). In the context of academic undermatch, social capital theory can be applied to information sources that aid students in the college application process. Social capital can include familial networks like parents, and non-familial networks, like teachers, high school counselors, and mentors.

During the college application process, students typically seek information and guidance regarding how to navigate the application process and how to select a matching institution from their primary source of social capital: their familial unit (Avery, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Perna &

Titus, 2005). For low-income students whose parents may not have attended college, this is an arduous task (Perna, 2004). Smith et al. (2012) and Bowen et al. (2009) conducted both national and statewide studies that presented the findings that a student's parental educational level played a role in undermatching. Bowen et al. (2009) found that 64% of students with parents who did not attend college undermatched compared to 31% of students with parents who have a graduate level education. Based on this study, students with parents who did not attend college are twice as likely to undermatch compared to students with parents who have a graduate level education. This may be due to the fact that low-income students whose parents did not attend college lack the knowledge to successfully guide them through the application process creating barriers to effectively match to a postsecondary institution (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Hurwitz et al., 2012; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). If a student's primary source of social capital is unable to provide the support and guidance during the decision-making process, a student may then look elsewhere within their social network to obtain the guidance and advice for proper college planning (Hurwitz et al., 2012).

But social capital is not always accessible for those who need it most. There are disparities between race, class, and gender groups that provide unequal access to social capital resources (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Lin, 2000). The same population most at risk to undermatch—first-generation, low-income, and/or minority students—have minimal access to social capital (Ceja, 2006; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2008; Tornatzky et al., 2002; Vargas, 2004). School counselors serve as social capital to students and family without knowledge of the college application process (McDonough, 2005; Robinson & Roksa, 2016). In

this study, the theory of social capital as defined by Coleman (1988) was used to examine the non-familial support system of the high school counselor as an institutional agent in postsecondary decision-making.

The current literature provides many factors that may influence a student to undermatch: socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and access to social capital. Despite this information, there is little research that examines the experiences of school counselors within the college decision-making of students who are most at risk to undermatch.

The History of School Counselors

The role of the school counselor is a transformative role that is highly influenced and impacted by the needs of society (Coy, 1999; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Throughout every decade of the 20th century, the role of the school counselor transformed into how it is recognized today. It is important to understand that the school counselor role has shifted to provide support not only to students but administratively within the school building (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). As the role expanded over time, there have been no responsibilities that have been removed from the position. There have only been new responsibilities added to meet the demands of an evolving society (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Ultimately, there has been constant role ambiguity and overload associated with the school counselor role since its inception (Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

The school counselor role or “vocational guidance” as it was originally titled was developed by the “Father of Guidance,” Frank Parson. This role was formed in the early 20th century to help assist young students transition from school to work (Brewer, 1942; Coy, 1999; Lambie & Williamson, 2004, p. 125). The title of vocational guidance was created as the primary

duties within the role included aligning a student's abilities to occupational professions prior to graduation (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Schmidt, 2003). Teachers were originally assigned to perform the duties of this role in addition to their teaching responsibilities, resulting in teachers being forced to balance teaching and guidance tasks (Ginn, 1924; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

The vocational guidance role continued to expand, sparking a significant change to the role. In 1942, Carl Rogers, often referred to as the "father of counseling" published a book, *Counseling and Psychotherapy: New Concepts in Practice*, where he stated that the role of counseling should take a more holistic approach on the individual development of the student (Lambie & Williamson, 2004, p.125; Schmidt, 2003). In this book, he stated that counselors should "...assist clients in their growth process, improving their abilities to cope with current problems and future challenges" (as cited in Lambie & Williamson, 2004, p. 2). This work shaped the view of vocational counselors where school counselors were no longer seen as career placement professionals within the school building but professionals who will help students with the social/emotional development required throughout life. It can be assumed that Rogers's work helped to influence the development of the American School Counselor Association in 1952, which provided professional development and trainings, as well as a shift in the counseling framework into a one-on-one model that aimed to develop individual student needs (Baker, 2000; Coy, 1999; Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

Additional changes within society continued to impact the role of the school counselor. The launching of Sputnik in 1957 by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics caused the creation of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 (Coy, 1999; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Lambie & Henderson, 2004). This act allocated funds to school counseling programs to provide professional development to school counselors on how to guide students to enroll in more

science and math courses. In addition, professional training was used to prepare, identify, and support students with college entrance, especially students with exceptional abilities in science and math (Coy, 1999; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Due to the urgency of identifying gifted students and assisting them with college enrollment, teachers were replaced by full-time school counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

In the 1970s, there was a decrease to school enrollment, which resulted in budget cuts and the reduction in force to many school counselor roles (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Mercer, 1981). Counselors who maintained their positions often assumed additional responsibilities, typically administrative duties, in order to support the needs of the school (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Thus, the work overload and role ambiguity that took place when teachers performed the role in the early 1920s continued. Furthermore, in addition to the expansion of the role, with the increase of administrative duties, the role broadened with the Education Act for All Handicapped Children of 1975. This act mandated that all children, regardless of any disabilities, would have access to free public education (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Schmidt, 2003). This new legislation impacted the school counselor role as it increased the student–counselor ratio with more students requiring counseling services. In addition, school counselors were now tasked with course placement and enrollment, as well as the accurate completion of the Individualized Education Plan or IEP (Humes, 1978; Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

As in previous years, the school counselor role continued to develop based on enacted legislation in the 1980s and 1990s (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Schmidt, 2003). Legislation increased the services that school counselors performed to meet the goals of society (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Throughout the 20th century, the school counselor role has continued to expand based on societal needs. What has remained the same throughout the years is the

uncertainty of the primary responsibilities within the professional school counselor role as new duties were assigned transforming the role. The competing priorities of the school counselor—vocational guidance, social/emotional development, course selection, academic testing, and college assistance—has extended into the 21st century as there remains a vagueness with regards to the responsibilities that should be prioritized and performed.

The Role of School Counselors in the 21st Century

Today, school counselors—specifically high school counselors—continue to play a dynamic role within the school building, juggling several competing priorities. Within this role, the school counselor has four main pillars of responsibility, which includes supporting students academically, personally, socially, and professionally (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone and Dahir, 2006). In addition, school counselors serve as institutional agents during the college application process. As an institutional agent, school counselors provide students and their families with the necessary resources to increase their college application behavior with the goal of college enrollment (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Within these pillars of responsibility, there are a vast array of activities that the counselor must juggle on a daily basis in order to meet the needs of each student (Campbell & Dahir, 1997).

Although the primary responsibilities of school counselors are to deal with the academic, career, and socioemotional development of students, school counselors are also responsible for providing administrative support, the coordination of academic testing, subbing for teachers, and providing a bridge for the school and communities among other responsibilities (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; College Board, 2012; Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al.,

2006). In 2012, the College Board conducted a national study aimed to understand the perspectives of middle and high school counselors and explore how their views aligned to student success. There was a total of 2,890 online interviews completed. Majority of the interviews—specifically 2,084—were completed by high school counselors. One counselor from the study gave the following description of their responsibility as a school counselor (College Board, 2012):

I listen, I answer emails and phone calls, I do technology, I write recommendation letters, I handle parents, I parent kids and parents. I support, advocate, teach, guide, reflect, and counsel. I explain rules, prerequisites; I repeat myself. I manage expectations, and I manage teachers, parents, and students. And what I really should be doing is going back to what I've been trained to do: listening, guiding, supporting, counseling, reflecting, teaching, and advocating. (p. 13)

Based on the data that were gathered from the study, a high school counselor can be described as a “jack of all trades” (College Board, 2012). In addition, based on the data obtained from the interviews, high school counselors struggle with many conflicting demands that prevent them from supporting students as school-based social capital. Many counselors held the opinion that changes should be made to their job responsibilities in order to achieve the goal, “...in which all students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and career” (College Board, 2012, p. 13). High school counselors recognize their many responsibilities that prevent them from providing students with the college transition support needed to limit the cases of undermatching.

In addition to a demanding workload, school counselors must balance high student caseloads. The American School Counselor Associations recommends a student-to-school

counselor ratio of 250 students per counselor (Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006), but the average high school counselor caseload is 367 students to one high school counselor (College Board, 2012). Public high school counselors are reported to have an average caseload of 386 students per high school counselor, while private school counselors typically have much smaller caseloads averaging 197 students per counselor (College Board, 2012). Furthermore, high schools that serve a larger population of minority students report a higher caseload of 417 students to one school counselor (College Board, 2012). In addition, schools with a higher population of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch also reported student caseloads of 408 students per counselor (College Board, 2012). These data indicates that high school counselors serving a larger population of minority and low-income students have on average, higher student caseloads. Therefore, school counselors serving populations most dependent upon them to make an informed college decision may struggle to find the balance within their caseload to support all their students during the application process.

Within this, school counselors are faced with a lack of time managing numerous daily responsibilities and high student caseloads. Current data indicate that public school counselors only spend 23% of their time on college counseling (Clinedinst et al., 2011). In a study that included a sample of counselors serving minority students in low-income schools by Corwin et al. (2004), the findings showed that counselors were not able to find the adequate time for all guidance activities (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006), which would include college counseling. On the other hand, counselors serving students in more affluent schools were able to provide more intimate, in-depth college planning discussions to assist students successfully match to an institution that aligns to their academic qualifications (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; McDonough, 1997). The competing priorities and large caseloads found in high schools serving

predominantly students of color and/or low-income students make it difficult for high school counselors to develop the social capital relationships with the students they serve. This presents a disadvantage to these students as college counseling positively influences the enrollment of those most at risk to undermatch in selecting and enrolling in a postsecondary institution that aligns to their academic abilities (Avery & Turner, 2010; Belasco, 2013; College Board, 2012).

Research has found that many students decide to undermatch because of a lack of social capital (Avery, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005). However, due to the demanding workload required in the role, it is difficult for the school counselors to balance college readiness and planning with other responsibilities thus limiting the opportunity to transfer college knowledge to students when navigating college options, which may lead to undermatching (Bowen et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2012) with those most at risk (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). Current literature states that schools that serve predominantly African American students are not structurally organized to create and develop social capital between students and school-based institutional agents (Ariazza, 2003; Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Kozol, 1991; McClafferty et al., 2002; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002), which can be a result of historic and structural processes (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Lin, 2000). To learn more about the perspectives of high school counselors in the college decision-making process it is important to understand the role of school counselors as school-based social capital who aid in supporting and preventing students from undermatching.

Social Capital as a Theoretical Framework

As previously mentioned, Coleman's social capital theory (1988) guided this study. Coleman was influential in developing social capital theory, with the following definition,

“...social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible...” (Coleman, 1988, p.98). Social ties in social capital networks are developed where resources are shared and obtained that otherwise would be unobtained (Coleman, 1988; Morrow, 1999). Social capital is defined as an extension of human capital networks that is developed and maintained among relationships. Most often, social capital is sought within the family unit, but can be found outside the family unit as it is established within strong communities (Coleman, 1988).

In this study, school counselors are social capital for all students within the building, but especially first-generation, low-income, and minority students, who are most at risk of undermatching. School counselors serve as the primary source of college knowledge and college resources with students who otherwise would not have access to the critical college information needed for college decision-making (Venezia and Jaegar, 2013). This fully supports Coleman’s belief that social capital exists when an individual serves as source of information for another individual. School counselors assume the role of institutional agents, as described as Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995), within the school building providing the resources for college planning and selection.

Institutional Agent

An institutional agent is an individual that has a high-status position “who [is] well positioned to provide social and institutional support” (Stanton-Salazaar et al., 2010, p. 15). The high school counselor is an institutional agent providing institutional resources as social capital to students with the school building (McDonough, 2005). As institutional agents, high school counselors can provide students with the college knowledge that will allow students to make an informed college decision that aligns with their academic and personal needs. Studies have

shown that the impact of college counseling can positively influence the college-going outcomes of students (Bryan et al., 2011; Hurwitz et al., 2012; Velez, 2020) as well as the enrollment to selective institutions (Avery, 2010; Belasco, 2013; Engberg & Wolniak, 2010). As discussed, low-income and minority students are more likely to rely on the advice and guidance of a school counselor during the college choice process, as they may not be able to rely on their family unit as their main source of college guidance (Belasco, 2013; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Therefore, the high school counselor is school-based social capital supporting students as institutional agents within college choice decision-making.

Summary

Based on the current literature it is apparent that school counselors are school-based social capital. Within this role school counselors serve as institutional agents assisting students with obtaining the college knowledge required to select a best-fit institution. In most academic undermatch literature the phenomenon has been studied through the lens of understanding the factors that contribute to a student's decision to undermatch: socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, access to social capital, and college-going culture. What has been understudied in the literature is the experiences of high school counselors and their perspectives as institutional agents. Examining the phenomenon of academic undermatch analyzing the perspectives of high school counselors will provide further insight into the phenomenon of undermatch: specifically, understanding the role of the high school counselor and the constraints within the role—demanding priorities, high caseloads, and lack of time—that may or may not impact high school counselors' abilities to serve as institutional agents in college choice decision-making. This study will add to the current literature and provide updated research to the previous study of

Rosenbaum et al. (1996) by examining how high school counselors serve as institutional agents that may or may not limit the cases of academic undermatch. By deepening our understanding of academic undermatch and how it occurs, we can determine the best interventions for prevention.

Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

Current research on undermatching has identified many factors that can influence a student's decision to apply to a less selective institution such as socioeconomic status (Baum et al., 2013; Belasco & Trivette, 2015; Bowen et al., 2009; Radwin et al., 2013), race and ethnicity (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2008), college-going culture within high school buildings (Hurwitz et al., 2012; Roderick et al., 2008, 2011; Smith et al., 2012), and access to social capital (Avery, 2010; Belasco, 2013; Bowen et al., 2009; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Lee, 2001; Perna, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005; Smith et al., 2012). In addition, research details that high school counselors play an important role in assisting students with college decision-making within the school building (Avery & Turner, 2010; Belasco, 2013; College Board, 2012; Venezia and Jaeger, 2013). There are many school contextual factors such as a counselor's student caseload and the amount of daily workload that may impact the level of counseling provided to students who are most at risk of undermatching (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; College Board, 2012; Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006). However, there is limited literature that examines high school counselors' perceptions of themselves and their experiences as institutional agents using qualitative methods. There is a need to further understand the experiences of high school counselors and examine the resources/activities provided to students that aid in matching students to colleges and universities based on individual qualifications and capabilities.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of high school counselors in order to understand the ways in which counselors serve as institutional agents and provide

students with the resources and tools to make informed postsecondary decisions. Guided by the theoretical framework of social capital, this narrative study aimed to explore high school counselors' roles as institutional agents during the college decision-making process.

Research Questions

The guiding research question in the study was: How do high school counselors perceive themselves as institutional agents? To address this guiding question the following research questions were used:

1. What are school counselors' understanding of academic undermatch?
2. How, if at all, do school contextual factors influence the ability of high school counselors to serve as institutional agents during the college decision-making process?
3. What strategies, resources, and activities do high school counselors utilize during college counseling sessions to help students select a match institution?

Research Design

In this study the experiences and activities of high school counselors were examined to understand the role and perceptions of the high school counselors in the college decision-making process. As the natural experiences of high school counselors were explored, it was appropriate to apply a qualitative mode of inquiry to this research study. Qualitative research has various approaches and methods, but it is generally "the study of natural social life" (p.3) with the goal to gain new understandings and insights on individuals and complex social structures (Saldana, 2011). The most common modes of qualitative inquiry include narrative

research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, ethnographic research, and case study research (Creswell, 2013).

A narrative approach—the study of the way humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) —was used to examine how high school counselors serve as institutional agents. This mode of inquiry is often used in educational research as it allows the researcher to collect and analyze stories that express the lived experiences of participants (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Creswell, 2013; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The narratives of high school counselors will be used to “make meaning” of high school counselor experiences and how they serve as institutional agents who aid students in selecting a match. This research design will allow the researcher to share these stories and narratives and understand the phenomenon of academic undermatch through the experiences of a high school counselor.

Exploring the role of school counselors in the college decision-making process through a qualitative approach will provide a full picture of the strategies and resources used to aid students in making an informed decision. Most often this topic is explored using quantitative methods—descriptive statistics and regression analysis—which helps to provide knowledge of the impact and the influence that school counselors have in the college decision-making process. But a quantitative method cannot inform of the high school counselor’s actions during college advising sessions and provide the richness and detail that can be obtained from a qualitative approach (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). Additionally, as this study mirrors the previous work of Rosenbaum et al. (1996), it was important to adapt the research method used by these researchers.

Sample Selection

Purposeful sampling was the intended recruitment strategy to select the most appropriate participants to achieve the goals of this study (Creswell, 2013). This recruitment strategy aimed to ensure that participants were selected to help answer the guiding research questions (Creswell, 2013). It was the design to recruit only high school counselors currently employed in the state of New Jersey for participation in this study, as New Jersey has a statewide average of 348 students to every counselor (American School Counselor Association, 2021). Although New Jersey has a student to counselor ratio that is lower than the national average of 424 students per counselor (American School Counselor Association, 2021), New Jersey has 31 Abbott school districts, which are more likely to have higher student-to-counselor ratios as stated in the current literature (College Board, 2012). Recruiting counselors employed in New Jersey Abbott school districts would allow an understanding of how high school counselors aid in influencing student decision-making to students most at risk to undermatch.

Prior to recruitment, data were collected to calculate the student-to-counselor ratio in the 31 New Jersey Abbott school districts. This was determined, first, by identifying the number of students enrolled in Grades 9 to 12 in all districts by using the National Center of Educational Statistics – Common Core Data Set (2017). Information regarding the number of secondary school counselors employed in high schools in New Jersey Abbott school districts was not available on the Common Core Data Set. Therefore, I determined the number of high school counselors in each Abbott district by identifying the number of secondary school counselors listed on the district website or the independent website for each high school. Once determining the number of secondary school counselors for each Abbott district, the number was divided by the number of secondary students enrolled per school. This calculation yielded a raw number—

which was rounded up, if necessary—to produce the ratio of students per counselor for all Abbott school districts in New Jersey. The determination of student caseloads in the 31 Abbott districts was critical, as previous literature cited that school counselors serving a higher population of low-income and minority students have higher student caseloads (College Board, 2012). In addition, counselors with high student caseloads do not have the time to spend on college planning (Clinedinst et al., 2011; Corwin et al., 2004; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). It was my goal to recruit two school counselors from each criterion who exceeded, met, or was below the recommended student caseload of 250:1 (Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006). It was important to consider this criterion, as the current research details these contributing factors as influential in the school counseling provided by high school counselors (Clinedinst et al., 2011; College Board, 2012; Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006).

High school counselors in the identified 31 Abbott school districts were emailed seeking participation in the study. If, by chance, the email addresses were not available on the district website, high school counselors were contacted by phone to request recruitment in the study. Only two high school counselors from Abbott districts responded to the emails and agreed to participate in the study. I assumed that many high school counselors did not respond to email recruitment messages during Spring 2020 due to the switch to remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the lack of responses from potential participants, the sample population was expanded to include school districts that receive Title I funding. This funding is allocated through federal grants that provide school districts with financial assistance for low-income families to ensure academic and educational equity for all students (U.S. Department of

Education [U.S. DOE], 2019). There are currently 558 school districts in New Jersey receiving Title I funding (U.S. DOE, 2019), which allowed me to ensure a total of 12 research participants in the study. Again, Title I school districts were an important criterion because of the potential of high school counselors serving students most at risk of undermatching.

The remaining 10 high school counselors were recruited using the same recruitment methods as in the purposeful sampling strategy. Emails were sent to high school counselors employed in districts identified as Title I funded schools on the New Jersey Department of Education, 2017-2018 Approved Title I Schoolwide Programs (2017) seeking participation in the study. If, by chance, the email addresses were not available on the district website, high school counselors were contacted by phone to request recruitment in the study.

Data Collection

Interviews are the primary method of data collection methods for narrative research (Genzuk, 2003). Semi-structured interviews were the main data collection instrument applied in this study (see the appendix for the interview protocol). When using semi-structured interviews, an interview protocol is applied to ensure that certain topics are addressed during the interview (Patton, 2005). Additionally, the semi-structured interview allows the participants to develop their thoughts and ideas based upon questions asked from the interview protocol (Denscombe, 2014), thus allowing the researcher to learn the culture and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Genzuk, 2003).

The interviews gathered stories from participants regarding their lived experiences as high school counselors (Creswell, 2013). The interview protocol that guided the research interviews consisted of 19 questions that were formed based upon similar studies (Rosenbaum et

al., 1996), current literature on undermatching, and social capital theory. In addition, the questions included in the interview protocol were tested on six counselors during a pilot study in March 2016. Based on the feedback received from qualitative research experts, the questions have been revised to best answer the research questions and the purpose of the study. High school counselors were asked questions about their responsibilities as a school counselor, their college advising sessions and the amount of time spent on college advising, the strategies and resources used to inform students, discussions around applying to a match institution, and parental involvement. In addition, high school counselors were asked about their college counseling training and professional development opportunities. It was the goal to obtain a full picture of the high school counselors' experiences during the college decision-making process.

Prior to conducting interviews, all participants were presented with an informed consent form. The consent form described the nature of the study and explained that the information gathered and collected through interviews will be published and used. In addition, the consent forms detailed the role of the lead researcher in the study, as well as the role of the mentor as the supervisor of the research study, and the Institutional Review Board at Seton Hall University.

Confidentiality is important to establish in the study in order to protect the personal information of participants. The privacy of participants was protected through several measures. Interviews were recorded using an audio recorder and were saved to a USB flash drive. The flash drive was stored securely in a locked drawer. Additionally, pseudonyms were given to all participants and school districts included in the transcriptions and research study.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data collected in the interviews and interpret findings. This method allowed the researcher to make connections and seek out explanations in the data in order to develop theoretical propositions (Tesch, 1990). In order to conduct a thematic analysis, the constant comparative method was applied to code and categorize the data. Coined by Glasser and Strauss, the constant comparative method assists with developing categories to analyze qualitative data (Tesch, 1990). The process of data analysis began after the first interview was completed and continued simultaneously during data collection. The first interview was transcribed while listening to the audio recordings of the interview. After transcription, the interviews were read line by line while listening to the original audio recording. This helped to ensure that the interviews were transcribed accurately, and there were no errors in the data (Tesch, 1990). This method was completed until all the interviews were conducted and transcriptions were completed.

To assist with the organization of data, MAXQDA (data analysis software) was utilized. All transcriptions were uploaded onto the MAXQDA software to begin the coding process. It is important to note that all identifying information was removed from the transcriptions prior to being uploaded. The transcriptions were organized by the student caseload, and participant interviews with the highest reported student caseload were coded first. This was important, as student caseload is a school contextual factor that impacts the high school counselor's ability to serve as an institutional agent (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; College Board, 2012; Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006). Based on the current literature, it was assumed that starting with the participants who reported the highest student caseload would help to identify the data and complete the coding scheme that would be applied to other transcriptions.

All transcriptions were read line by line in order to conduct open coding and identify critical pieces of information or patterns that emerged. All data were coded using the true words of participants (Strauss, 1987; Tesch, 1990). After coding the third transcription, the coding scheme was established, and it was applied to all transcriptions. Throughout the process of coding, many codes were combined or eliminated based on the analysis of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Tesch, 1990).

After reflection on the codes, data were grouped into categories to continue analysis. Categories were developed based on the connections to the codes, to the relevant research questions, and conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 1984), allowing the researcher to group similar data into related categories (Strauss, 1987; Tesch, 1990). In the MAXQDA software I was able to analyze all categories in a matrix display with the associated codes. This helped to analyze for patterns and determine if categories could be combined or eliminated (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Tesch, 1990). The matrix display assisted the researcher with developing theoretical propositions based upon the results of the data. Interpreting the data within the matrix helped to identify relationships and linkages within data—similarities, differences, and/or anomalies—and provided evidence that supported findings. Themes were developed based on the findings of the study (Genzok, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Tesch, 1990). I completed theoretical researcher memos throughout the data analysis process to allow the identification of emergent themes, recognize patterns, and explore ideas within the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Strauss, 1987). Furthermore, recording memos allowed me to critically analyze the data and helped to ensure confidence within the research methodology and validity of the data.

Role of the Researcher

Like millions of American high school students, meeting with my high school guidance counselor (as they were previously titled) was critical during my junior and senior years. During these 2 years, it was my main priority to research, select, and apply to colleges for the next journey of my educational career. It was an exciting time for me, but I was also worried about making the “most important decision of my life” as it was often labeled. As an African American female raised in a single-parent household and two older siblings who did not attend college, I did not have much knowledge of how I should pursue the college search process. Although my mother attended college, she attended on an academic scholarship, which was not the same process that I would endure. Even though my mother was highly involved in my higher education journey, there was a lack of knowledge regarding the college decision-making process. It was important for me to receive college knowledge from my school-based social capital—my guidance counselor—on how to navigate the college search process.

I recall my meetings with my high school guidance counselor being very rushed and unfulfilling. The cost of college tuition weighed heavy in my mind. I do not recall a thorough discussion of the financial options available to me with my guidance counselor. I also did not receive much assistance with drafting my college admission essay. My social capital was found in the mentors of the Sister 2 Sister program, in which I was a student member, to learn about financing college. Additionally, my high school English teacher met with me during “zero” period—7a.m.—before school to assist me with writing my college essay, one of the most important pieces of the application. (Thank you, Mr. Clifford!)

Looking back, I always believed that my guidance counselor could have provided more college counseling and assistance during my college decision-making process. I was

overwhelmed with the process, and I could have benefitted from the social capital most knowledgeable about the college process in my school building.

As a doctoral student, the topic of undermatching deeply interested me, as I felt I could have easily been a student who decided to attend a postsecondary institution that did not align to my academic abilities or not attend at all. When studying advanced qualitative research, I developed a pilot study that would examine the experiences of New Jersey public high school counselors and how they may or may not prevent the cases of undermatching. There were five counselors included in the study all employed within suburban schools, with a variation in years of service ranging from 1 year to 20 years of service. In addition, there was variation in student caseload ranging from 205 to 262 students per counselor. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and via telephone as the primary data collection tool. The findings suggested that Naviance, a software tool, was utilized by school counselors to help reduce the possibilities of overmatching and undermatching. Additionally, counselors understood that there may be factors that influence a student to undermatch such as: proximity to home, financial aid, tuition costs, or the quality of specific academic programs. Based on the findings, I wanted to conduct the same study on wider scale for a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon.

It is important for me as a researcher to recognize the bias that I have regarding the topic of undermatching as it aligns to my experiences with my own high school counselor. Although I am passionate about undermatching and the access all students have to postsecondary institutions, I did not let my experiences with my guidance counselor influence the study. My personal experiences were recognized and addressed and did not guide or influence the study at any stage. I understand that the results of qualitative studies are based heavily on the researcher's ability to interpret the meanings that are found in the data (Fink, 2000). It is because of the

critical role that I hold within the study as a researcher that I completed continuous researcher memos to help assist me with recognizing my own bias as I navigated throughout the study. It is the responsibility of the researcher to recognize any individual bias that he/she may have related to the phenomenon and restrict these personal views and experiences from influencing the research study. Understanding my role within the study and recognizing my own bias allowed me to stay focused on achieving the goal of study.

Validity

Ensuring validity is critical to prove qualitative rigor in a research study (Creswell, 2013). Validity is the attempt to prove that the interpretations of the data can be trusted, and the findings are accurate (Creswell, 2013; Wolcott, 1990). There are many qualitative strategies that are presented in the current literature to prove the validity of findings. The main strategies used by qualitative researchers include triangulation, writing with detailed and thick descriptions, and member checking with participants (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation requires researchers use a variety of "...sources, methods, and investigators, and theories to provide" evidence within their research (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Writing with detailed and thick descriptions requires the researcher to include rich details regarding the participants, settings, or the theories and themes found in the study. This will allow the readers to determine whether the information provided in the study can be transferred to other studies (Creswell, 2013; Erlandson et al., 1993). Lastly, member checks involve the sample in the analysis stage of the study. In this validity strategy, participants are provided the conclusions and interpretations of the data to ensure that there is accuracy in the findings (Creswell, 2013).

In this study, procedural validity was applied to ensure trustworthiness and quality of the data (Hayashi et al., 2019). This is an ongoing approach that is conducted specifically for qualitative data to ensure validity (Hayashi et al., 2019). The approach has many stages and can be conducted fluidly by the researcher (Hayashi et al., 2019). The following stages of the processual approach were completed in this study.

1. Immersion in the research: With the completion of the pilot study in March 2016 I was immersed in the research of academic undermatch and high school counselors' experiences in the college decision-making process. The completion of the pilot study allowed for the qualitative expert review of the research questions, theoretical framework, and interview protocol.
2. Research design: As this study mirrors the previous research of Rosenbaum et al. (1996), the qualitative method and data collection methods align with previous research.
3. Data saturation: I conducted participant interviews until saturation was reached.
4. Well-designed collection and analysis: All data collection methods and analysis were grounded in research.
5. Use of memos during analysis: Clarifying researcher bias was achieved throughout the study with the completion of the researcher's memo that aimed to recognize bias and my assumptions that may impact the study. In addition, the data presented in the research include rich and thick descriptions to describe the conclusions based on the findings. Procedural validity was ensured throughout the data to ensure the adequacy and reliability of the data (Hayashi et al., 2019).

Limitations

While the collection of in-depth interviews provides insight into undermatching through the experiences of high school counselors, triangulation of data collection methods would provide further understanding into the phenomenon (Carter, 2014). For this study method, triangulation—the application of multiple data collection methods in the same phenomenon—would help to increase validity of the findings (Carter, 2014). The use of student interviews and observation of counseling activities would provide triangulation and increase the validity of findings. Furthermore, the use of additional data collection methods would add different perspectives into the phenomenon and increase the understanding of high school counselors' experiences in undermatching. Lastly, as high school counselor interviews rely on self-reporting data, the use of triangulation would allow further insight into the experiences of school counselors outside of their own perspectives.

This study was designed to focus on the experiences of high school counselors in order to better understand their experiences in college decision-making. Due to the difficulty with securing participants for the study, the sample population was expanded instead of recruiting exclusively from Abbott School districts. This resulted in a sample of high school counselors that did not predominantly serve students most at risk to undermatch: minority, low-income, and/or first-generation students (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011; Smith et al., 2012). In order to gain insight into what factors lead to a student's decision to undermatch, the sample should have consisted of high school counselors who served a majority of students most at risk to undermatch. Collecting data from this sample would allow for better understanding of the phenomenon, as more students in this population are more likely to undermatch. This sample would also provide more insight into the strategies and activities that

are employed by high school counselors to prevent students from attending a less selective college and university.

With the sample population including only high school counselors from New Jersey high schools, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the experiences of all high school counselors. The data from this study can only present inferences and insights into patterns that may occur regarding the role and experiences of a school counselor. The findings presented in the study may be similar to high school counselors from other states and areas, but they cannot represent the experiences of all high school counselors. The concluding data may stimulate interest into how different aspects of the study can be examined presenting areas for future research.

Summary

Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to understand and comprehend a phenomenon in a way that cannot be explored in quantitative methods (Fink, 2000). In the case of this study, a critical narrative research design was applied to understand the perspectives of high school counselors as institutional agents that provide college knowledge to students during the college decision-making process. All data in the study were collected in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with participants. All participants were recruited based upon the Title I designation of their school/district. Research participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. All interviews were transcribed and coded applying the constant comparative method to categorize codes and analyze data in order to develop themes. All findings were analyzed and interpreted to determine their meanings in relation to the research questions and the purpose of the study.

Chapter IV

Findings

Introduction

The goal of this study was to examine the role that high school counselors play in the college decision-making process in order to better understand the phenomenon of academic undermatch. As stated, academic undermatch is not a new phenomenon to educational research, but the high school counselor's role in the college decision-making process is understudied. The purpose of the study was to gain further insight into the experiences of high school counselors in the college decision-making process to better understand why students undermatch. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the high school counselors' understanding of academic undermatch?
2. How, if at all, do school contextual factors influence the ability of high school counselors to serve as institutional agents during the college decision-making process?
3. What strategies, resources, and activities do high school counselors utilize during college counseling sessions to help students select a match institution?

This chapter will present the findings of the narrative study of 12 high school counselors. The chapter will be organized into three sections. The first section will include a review and background of the study participants. Pseudonyms were used for all participants in order to maintain the participants' confidentiality. The second section of this chapter will discuss the findings and the themes that emerged from the research. The final section will include a brief summary of the major findings that resulted from this study.

Research Participants

To complete this research study, 12 interviews were conducted with high school counselors serving in school buildings receiving Title I funding. Interviews took place over the course of two semesters: Fall 2019 and Spring 2020. Participant interviews varied in length from 25 to 56 minutes. Table 1 details the demographic background of all the participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Background

Pseudonym	Student caseload	School setting	School type	Years of experience
Michael	300	Urban	Traditional	3 years
Joshua	Current supervisor	Urban	Traditional	24 years
Brittany	260	Urban	Traditional	2 years
Jessica	150	Mixed	Vocational	11 years
Grace	150	Suburban	Vocational	4 years
Michelle	500	Suburban	Vocational	7 years
Stephanie	208	Mixed	Regional	11 years
Brielle	260	Urban	Traditional	12 years
Ayla	250	Suburban	Traditional	6 years
Audrey	234	Urban	Traditional	8 years
Stephen	300	Urban	Traditional	7 years
Maya	207	Suburban	Traditional	17 years

The years of experience of all participants in the study ranged from 2 years to 24 years. The school type of the participants varied: eight high school counselors served at traditional high schools, three high school counselors were employed at vocational high schools, and one high school counselor was employed at a regional high school. The current caseload of high school

counselors who participated in the study ranged from as low as 150 students to one counselor, to as high as 300 students to one counselor. It is important to note that although Joshua is a current district supervisor of high school counselors, his interview consisted of what is performed daily by the counselors under his supervision.

Additionally, the school setting—urban, suburban, and rural—was self-reported by the school counselors. Six high school counselors described their school setting as urban, four high school counselors described their school setting as suburban, and two high school counselors reported a mixed school setting. All high school counselors who self-reported as serving in an urban school setting, with the exception of Audrey who reported a student caseload of 230 and Joshua who did not report a student caseload, reported student caseloads above the recommended 250:1 by the American School Counselor Association (Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006).

Furthermore, all high school counselors who self-reported as suburban were at or below the recommended caseload. Michelle was the only exception in this category with a caseload of 500 students due to the vocational school model put in place at her school with split-day sessions: 250 students in the morning and 250 students in the afternoon. Two counselors—Jessica and Stephanie—identified their school settings as “mixed” consisting of a mix of both urban and suburban. This was most likely reported as these high school counselors serve in vocational and regional schools, accepting students throughout the region.

Lastly, it is important to note, with the design of semi-structured interviews and the timeline of when interviews were conducted, participants Stephanie, Brielle, Ayla, Audrey, Stephen, and Maya were asked an additional question in the interview protocol. Specifically, “how the COVID-19 pandemic is impacting their college advising?” It was important to ask

participants these questions to get a better understanding of how high school counselors and students were adjusting to the remote counseling format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, it was critical to explore how remote counseling may or may not have impacted student college decision-making and the student's decision to possibly undermatch. Data analysis was conducted using the constant comparison method (Tesch, 1990) to aid in identifying major findings.

Major Findings

This section will present the major findings that resulted from this study: (1) undermatching is not perceived as a negative decision by high school counselors; (2) there is overload within the role of the high school counselor that impacts access to social capital; (3) building relationships with students is a key resource in matching. The below will include a discussion of these findings and situates the theme in current research and literature of social capital theory.

Undermatch Is not Perceived as a Negative Decision by High School Counselors

The study's conclusion is that high school counselors do not view academic undermatch as a negative decision. Although the literature indicates that academic undermatch may negatively influence college completion rates (Smith et al., 2012), many high school counselors recognize the non-academic factors that aid in a student's decision to undermatch, such as: location – proximity to home, climate, transportation access; class sizes; responsibilities at home; employment; and where their friends enroll. This aligns with the current literature that concludes there are several personal, psychological, and casual factors that influence a student's decision to

undermatch (Tiboris, 2014). Determining a student's best fit to a postsecondary institution is a subtheme that came up frequently during my discussions with high school counselors.

Best Fit

There are many different ways a high school counselor would determine a best fit with students. Many high school counselors would begin by asking students a series of questions, such as: What is the price of tuition that they would like to pay for a higher education? Would they like to stay close to home? What are their goals with pursuing a postsecondary education? What major(s) would they like to study? High school counselors recognize that selecting a best fit institution has to be on multiple levels, and not just academic, unlike a match. Joshua stated when determining fit for a student you are “certainly [looking at] academics because it's college,” as well as extracurricular and travel. Asking students these questions assists students with developing a target list of colleges and universities that fits their individual needs and criteria in order to select the best fit.

Most importantly, high school counselors recognize that financial factors play a major role in the postsecondary decisions of students. High school counselors discussed that students are fearful of an institution's sticker price, which aligns with the current research of Byndloss et al. (2015) who found that students are fearful of the listed cost of tuition without factoring in financial and merit-based aid. This is especially true of low-income, first-generation students (Gurantz, Howell et al., 2020). In addition, participants stated that students are discouraged by the large amount of debt that may be associated with attending a more selective institution. Financial is the number one contributing factor shared by high school counselors that influences a student's decision to apply or attend a less selective college or university. Oftentimes, students

with the academic capabilities are not able to attend the top selective schools because of the cost of tuition. Brittany stated:

I think money is the number one thing that impacts [student's] decision. They may be discouraged from applying to a certain school if they see the price tag because they may feel like, well, I'm probably not going to get an academic scholarship from that school and the FAFSA only covers so much, so they might be discouraged and that could impact their decision the most, I would say.

Audrey reiterated this statement detailing, "A lot of [students'] decisions are based number one on financial issues. We do have a large percentage of our students who wind up going to community college because of financial reasons." Although students may be selecting to enroll and attend institutions primarily based on the cost of tuition as opposed to an academic match, it is not negatively viewed by the high school counselor. Jessica stated:

I have a student, she's probably number three or four in the class, and she got into MIT. But she's not sure that she is going. Why? She's a triplet and she needs the money. She may settle for a school that's much less competitive than MIT if she gets some kind of merit money, and I understand that.

Further, Ayla continued to explain the choice to attend a less selective institution because of financial factors is not viewed negatively by high school counselors, "A lot of [students'] parents they have financial hardships so sometimes [students] have to start at a community college, which is not a bad thing. I also don't feel negative about that because financially they can't afford a four year." Further, Joshua detailed that there can still be success if a student ventures off their postsecondary plans and enrolls in a two-year college with the goal to transfer to a local public four-year university.

Furthermore, for high-achieving, immigrant students undermatching may be the only option, as they are often ineligible for financial aid and scholarship opportunities, a significant obstacle for this population of students during the college decision-making process. Audrey explained:

We have a large percentage of undocumented students and they're not getting a bunch of financial aid. They're not receiving scholarships or some of them can't really take out a loan because they [can't], they're not documented either. Those types of issues [are] one of the big reasons why most of our kids don't go to a four-year college.

This is described by high school counselors as a challenge for immigrant students, as they are faced with obstacles in the college decision-making process because of their citizenship status in the country. High school counselors recognize that college decision-making is a comprehensive process with many different factors that need to be weighed by students. The determination of best fit cannot just include the alignment of an academic match but should include the cost of tuition, postsecondary goals, and student retention in the selected college, which aligns with current research (Kelly et al., 2016). Additionally, there are citizenship factors that shape a student's decision to undermatch. Therefore, a student's decision to enroll in a less selective institution is not viewed as a negative choice by high school counselors but a choice that may be the best for the individual student.

Role in College Decision-Making

In addition, high school counselors do not perceive their position as one where they should tell a student where they should or should not apply. As described, the role of a high school counselor in the college advising process is to do just that – advise. High school

counselors do this by ensuring that students have postsecondary plans and goals. During the college application process the high school counselor will guide students to select and apply to a balanced list of safety, target, and reach schools that supports student goals. High school counselors believe it is their role to share college knowledge—college information, testing details, critical deadlines, and financial aid guidance—but it is not their position to tell a student where they should or should not apply. When Jessica was asked how she handles a situation where a student applies to a college that is below their academic capabilities and SAT scores, she stated:

Yeah, I leave it alone. I think we have a job. It's not my job to dictate what school [students] apply to, my job is to guide, to advise. It's not up to me to make those decisions. That's a parental decision with their child. I'm here to facilitate the process. But I still ask the question. So if I think they're reaching, or they're not reaching high enough I might suggest a few more schools that are a bit more competitive, but if they're not biting that's not my qualm, that's not my business. That's [the student's] choice and I tell them that...

All of the high school counselors interviewed believe that it is the student's decision where they apply, and ultimately enroll. It is the high school counselor's responsibility to guide students through the process, not to dictate or demand where a student applies or enrolls. Stephanie detailed, "It's not up to me where a [student] applies, all I can do is give them information..." These data align with the findings of Rosenbaum et al. (1996) who found in their study of the perspectives of high school counselors that some participants discourage telling a student "no" or they withhold advice because they feel as if it is not their place or position. One counselor was quoted as stating, "I don't give advice; I give information" (Rosenbaum et al., 1996, p.263),

which is almost similar to what Stephanie is quoted as stating in this study, “It’s not up to me where a [student] applies, all I can do is give information.” In both studies, redirection is used to steer students to a postsecondary institution that may be a better fit. In this study, high school counselors stated they will assist if they feel that a student can aim higher, and if high school counselors observe that students are aiming too high, they will encourage students to include less selective colleges and universities in the application process. High school counselors acknowledge that there are several factors that determine a match in the college decision-making process and that it is not their role to dictate where a student applies or enrolls.

Overload Within the Role of a High School Counselor

This study’s conclusion is that school contextual factors, specifically the overload within the high school counselor role, limits the availability of the high school counselor to build relationships with students and serve as social capital for students. When asked to explain a typical day of a high school counselor, every participant responded with “there isn’t one.” Audrey explained, “There really isn’t a typical day as a school counselor. I mean, I can tell you some of the different things we do. [But] it really does vary greatly depending on the day, and what comes up during the day.” While most of the tasks that a high school counselor accomplishes on a daily basis may be unplanned as they assist with solving school building and student needs, high school counselors still must remain on target with all deadlines. All of the participants explained that they have the same deadlines throughout the year in terms of college advising. Brielle explains these deadlines as “targeted seasons” with different college preparation target dates specific for each grade level: freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. She described:

In the Fall, its senior's college applications are due, meeting with all the students that are behind in their course sequence, and not on target to graduate, and come up with academic plans for [these students]. While you're doing all that, you have all these students that have needs, scheduling in the fall for the first couple weeks of school. And, you have your students that have 504 plans, emotional needs, academic needs. You might have an outline what your target is, but then in addition to your target you have everything that changes day-to-day.

Although high school counselors may have targeted college preparation and planning deadlines for students, it does not eliminate the additional responsibilities of a high school counselor including: academic counseling; academic scheduling; academic testing; crisis counseling; college and career counseling; emotional counseling; managing harassment, intimidation, and bullying policies and programs; managing 504 plans; new student transfers; parent conferences; student conferences; and other concerns as needed by the student or administration. This dense list of responsibilities creates a feeling of overload for high school counselors. Byndloss et al. (2015) described this overload of responsibilities as a secondary level factor that may influence a student to undermatch, as the school counselor's caseload limits the availability of individualized counseling. Participants in this study did not associate their overload as a consequence of their student caseload but the result of their responsibilities within the role, which impacted a high school counselor's availability as social capital for individualized counseling.

The lack of time within the workday to meet with students one on one eliminates a critical factor in building social capital with students – trust. Based on the findings, trust is the most important factor in the social capital relationship between student and counselor. This finding is supported in the current literature as trust is defined as the “essence” that allows

individuals to develop and cultivate relationships, and this can only be done through time (Ensminger, 2001; Gellner, 2000; Torche & Valenzuela, 2011). The lack of time available in a school counselor's workday does not allow for the development and cultivation of a trusting relationship, so as the findings detail, many school counselors are finding workarounds like working through lunch to create this availability as social capital. Stephanie shared, "We technically get a lunch, but very rarely does anybody take it. We get 45 minutes a day and I think maybe like once or twice a week, I'll try to take like 20 minutes, like it's just chaos." Or, staying late in order to develop and maintain relationships with students. Michael shared:

I do think all five of the counselors at my school will work one-on-one, like [we] will spend a lot of one-on-one time with the kids helping them with applications. I'll stay after school and help a kid with an application. It's not how I'm compensated. I'll do whatever that kid needs to get through that application.

Even in school buildings where the student to counselor ratio is low, high school counselors are still inundated with daily tasks. Grace, who reported a student caseload of 150 students, discussed how time consuming managing the day-to-day responsibilities can be as a high school counselor, even with a caseload that is below the recommended average (Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006). Grace explained:

Most schools are not this low. Most schools you'll find as you're going are, if you're lucky, they're 250 [students per counselor], but that's if you're lucky. I know people who are like 400 [students per counselor]...Even in my school, you're dealing with the 504s and IEPs, all the meetings that you have to go to, and the paperwork and the testing, and everything takes up so much time. I can't imagine being at a school where my caseload is that big, "how do I counsel them all?" When I meet with [students] every marking period,

when we're doing college meetings, [the meetings are] like a good 15–20 minutes long each and that's four times a year. It doesn't sound like a lot. But if you have a caseload of 400 [students], you have to do that with hundreds [of students], and then balance your other three levels and all their issues, I would imagine it would be impossible. That's why a lot of schools will have your counselor and then they'll have a college counselor that just goes over college. That could be a way around it.

High school counselors of all student caseload sizes have to perform the balancing act of managing their workload. This attempt to manage all of the several “hats” impacts the amount of one-on-one time that counselors have with students, conclusively influencing the ability to serve as social capital to students. Because of this, counselors scramble to find opportunities and time within their day to serve as institutional agents. Gaddis (2012) detailed in his research on social capital factors in mentoring relationships that “youth must first have access to an adult to be able to benefit from his or her human capital” (p.1238). If school counselors are strained to find time to build trusting relationships with students, it diminishes the positive benefits of social capital relationships and eliminates the high school counselor's ability to serve as an institutional agent.

Building a Relationship Is a Key Resource

This study's conclusion is there are numerous resources that are provided to students throughout the school year on a variety of college application topics beginning as early as freshman year in some school buildings. In this study, the resources provided to high school juniors and seniors are discussed and analyzed to complete the goal of the study: to understand how high school counselors serve as institutional agents in the college decision-making process. Throughout junior and senior years, many college presentations, workshops, and activities are

offered as resources during the college application process in order for students to make the most informed college decisions. This aligns with the current research that finds that students are more likely to apply to selective postsecondary institutions when they learn about the range of options (Byndloss et al., 2015). School counselors recognize the need to provide students with college knowledge, and they provide this information in a myriad of methods and strategies. The findings show that although there are many resources and strategies that are used by high school counselors to assist students with selecting a match institution, the primary and most critical resource used to assist students is building a relationship with students.

Naviance

Naviance—a college and career readiness software tool used to help assist students and school counselors with post-graduation goals (Hobsons, n.d.)—is a major resource used throughout the lifecycle of the college decision-making process by high school counselors during college advising sessions. To begin college advising discussions, participants state that students may complete a career interest inventory, a questionnaire that allows students to see what careers and/or majors are best suited for them based on their personality, interests, and skills (Hobsons, n.d.). This survey can help high school counselors initiate postsecondary conversations with students who may be unsure of their postsecondary interests or can help students create a list of postsecondary institutions that aligns to their interests.

After determining postsecondary goals, participants state that students can use Naviance to research prospective schools and identify safety, target, and reach schools that are unique to their academic standing. Naviance maintains collective student SAT/ACT and GPA scores of former students who attended the same high school as the applicant. Based upon these collected

data, Naviance plots the applicant on a scattergram to help the student determine the possibility of gaining admission into the selected college or university. This is a primary way that high school counselors initiate discussions around match for students, as most conversations about match are centered around the scattergram. Stephanie explained how she would handle a conversation with a student who wants to apply to a less selective institution based on their current academic standing:

If you hear of the school and you want to look it up, you could look it up on [Naviance] and you could look at the charts and you can kind of plot yourself on the chart and say, “am I surrounded by the little green dots that got accepted, or am I surrounded by the little red dots that didn’t get accepted.” You can kind of gauge, so if a [student] is saying that [they would like to apply to a less selective institution] I would point out for them that it’s a safety school, but I think there’s a huge argument for going to a safety school and we would always encourage students to apply to a safety school.

This feature potentially aids in reducing the cases of undermatching, as it clearly identifies safety, target, and reach institutions for students. Naviance serves as an addition to the college counseling session as it can be utilized to jumpstart and engage students in the college advising conversations, and statistically determine academic match institutions. The use of Naviance during conversations about match redirects the point of view for the student so that it is no longer what the high school counselor is saying is a good match, but what the data are saying is a good match for the student. Stephanie explained, “I think that Naviance has been immensely helpful because it makes it so much easier to have those really difficult conversations [with students]...” Rosenbaum et al. (1996) cited in their research that high school counselors often provide students with a “soft response,” where they do not discourage or dismiss the student’s plans if

they are unrealistic instead of engaging in difficult conversations. The use of Naviance today in college counseling sessions eliminates the need for a soft response as the conversation is driven by the data presented in the scattergram. Moreover, Naviance can assist in reinforcing college advisement by providing clarity to students and families on what constitutes a match in a complicated process.

But not every high school counselor interviewed has access to Naviance in their school buildings. Out of the 12 school counselors interviewed, three of the school counselors who self-reported serving in urban school settings did not have access to Naviance. Ayla detailed that Naviance is mostly used in her school building to send transcripts and letters of recommendations because the school does not have the highest licensing subscription. She described, “We unfortunately don't have the highest subscription that has more offerings for the [students], but there are some research things that the [students] can do on there.” Stephen, who described the absence of Naviance in his school building as “crazy,” gave the following response when asked if the lack of Naviance “impacts the college decision-making of his students?” He stated:

...I think having the more resources that are available obviously is helpful for students, but, you know, I think that we do the best that we can and I don't try to remind students of what they don't have. I just try to, kind of make the most of what we do have, and hopefully try to fill in the gaps wherever we are. We're able to do that.

As high school counselors utilize Naviance heavily during college counseling to help students identify match institutions, this raises issues around equity and access to resources. High school counselors that are not provided the tools to assist students in identifying the match institutions could potentially impact the college decision-making of students served. Those without access to

Naviance utilize other tools like the College Board website, a free internet tool, that can aid students in identifying and researching safety, target, and reach schools (College Board, n.d.).

In-Class Presentations

In-class presentations are a common method used to provide students with college information tailored specifically for individual grade levels, as students in different grade levels are at different phases in the college application process. Michelle described the in-class presentations as an opportunity for school counselors to share college information to a large number of students in a short period of time. Michelle also found the informality of the in-class presentations creates a relaxed environment where students are more receptive to the information being shared. Stephen also recognized the importance of in-class presentations and the college knowledge shared with students during these meetings, which is why he worked to expand access to all juniors and seniors in his school building. Stephen stated:

I try to really provide whatever extra support I can to my students, but that was another reason why, like my second or third year at the high school when I saw what kind of systemically was not taking place, I really tried to take the lead in terms of let's do some more class presentations, so that it wasn't just me talking to my kids, it was about expanding access for everyone. Making sure that we were able to get into senior and junior English classes, but then also making sure that we were going into a resource class to make sure that [students] got that information. You know we're still continuing to work with one of our bilingual counselors going into the bilingual classes, making sure that [students] get that information.

Stephen explained the importance of all students receiving the college knowledge that is presented during in-class presentations and how it should be shared with all students and not just those who are enrolled in specific English courses. The literature stated that access to social capital impacts the college decision-making of students, especially students from a low-socioeconomic household (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). Stephen understands the need for all students to have access to college knowledge, and by opening the in-class presentations to every student Stephen is establishing the connection between the student and school-based social capital. Not only is he expanding student access to college knowledge, but he is identifying institutional agents in the school building to support students through the college process. Most importantly, Stephen is reassuring to all students that they have a place in higher education, if they choose.

Evening Workshops

In addition to in-class presentations, all of the counselors mentioned that college knowledge workshops were held in the evening for families to attend. The topics of these workshops varied, but the most commonly held workshops included: Parent College Night, Financial Aid Night, and Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) Night. These specific events served as a resource for families especially for reviewing the financial aid aspects of the college application process, a critical factor in college decision-making, as discussed by participants. Additionally, this aspect of the application process is typically the most challenging for students and parents. It is important for high school counselors to review the financial aid process with families to ensure comprehension and accurate completion, as high school counselors serve as social capital to not only students but to parents as well. Some high school

counselors invited financial aid officers or a Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA) representative to these workshops to provide families with the opportunity to accurately complete the FAFSA. HESAA is a New Jersey state agency that aids families with financial resources and information to meet postsecondary goals (HESAA, 2021). Brittany explained, “We hosted two FAFSA nights at our school where we bring someone in to train the students and the parents on how to fill out the FAFSA for financial aid.” Audrey detailed how the FAFSA is often a challenge for not only students, but parents as well, and the challenge is even more complex for first-generation students and students with immigrant parents. Audrey explained:

We have a financial aid workshop and we have a huge turnout where [parents] can actually come to the school and do the FAFSA because the FAFSA for anyone is, it’s not easy. And so, take the fact that you haven’t gone to school in this country at all. It really is just foreign.

Being a first-generation parent, and even an immigrant parent, creates a different set of barriers for parents that may impact parental involvement in the college application process, as it unfamiliar for this population. All of the school counselors interviewed did serve first-generation students in their caseload, even if it was a small percentage, but half of the participants (6 of 12) reported a majority of their student caseload consists of first-generation students. When discussing the knowledge many first-generation students have of the application process, Michael stated, “Most [students] come from [first generation] families and they don’t have experience with these things. Most [families] are Spanish speaking. The understanding of the process is not common [and there is not] much experience or knowledge.” In addition to serving first-generation students, three of the 12 high school counselors who reported serving majority

first-generation students also reported that these students have immigrant parents who have no understanding of the college application process.

The challenge that high school counselors recognize when advising first generation college students, specifically those with immigrant parents, is the lack of social capital. As described by Coleman (1988), social capital provides a transfer of information in order to gain positive individual benefit. In this study, the high school counselor is the primary resource for first-generation and/or immigrant students. Although students can access information via internet resources like College Board and Naviance, the high school counselors are typically the first to introduce students to these resources. The high school counselor provides college knowledge as well as guidance regarding the college admissions process that would be unavailable for many students in both populations – first-generation and/or immigrant students. Audrey explained how first-generation and/or immigrant parents cannot provide the social or knowledge capital for students; therefore, high school counselors serving this population go even further:

Most of those students are maybe not born in this country, but parents are definitely immigrant. If [parents] don't have really the information to help their children with the college application process, with all of that, we're [high school counselors] really doing a lot with [students] in terms of, you know, where some other districts might not because the parents do a lot more with [students].

The reliance that first-generation and/or students with immigrant parents have on the high school counselor aligns with the current literature (Hurwitz et al., 2012). First-generation and/or immigrant students cannot look to their parents for guidance or advice on how to navigate the college application process. Because of this many of these students seek their high school counselor as their institutional agent throughout the college application process.

It is important to note that many of the high school counselors serving first-generation and/or immigrant students reiterated the fact that parents would like to serve as social capital, but oftentimes there are contributing factors that hinder them from being involved in the college application process. Audrey stated, “It’s not that they’re not willing to be involved, they’re definitely willing to be involved” there are just many barriers that limit the involvement of parents. Stephen echoed this point stating,

I would say, you know, because such a large portion of our population is first-generation, [parents] themselves don’t necessarily have the background and the knowledge base in terms of the college admissions process and what that looks like. In the past, I would say at least two or three years, I would say that we’ve seen a steady decrease in parents coming out...the parents just reaching out.... [location redacted] has an ICE substation in the city. A lot of parents are reluctant to go out at night. Again, we have a lot of families, who might be someone who’s undocumented, it’s a lot of distrust contacting the school, getting reported, getting their name out there. I think that is absolutely a factor in why some parents are not coming into the schools just because they hear stories of people getting picked up, just deported. There definitely have been raids that have taken place in [location redacted], but for a portion of our population, I think that is a very real reason why they’re not engaging with us.

For others...they’re very open to asking for the help. For some they’re not able to, you know, come in for a meeting during the school day because they themselves are working. I’ve never really found that parents aren’t being involved, or they’re not as active because they don’t want to, or because they don’t care, but there’s usually a reason or some other obligation that if they could, they absolutely would, but they’re just not be able to.

In this quote Stephen reiterated the fact students with parents who did not attend college or those with immigrant parents do not have the knowledge to assist students with the college process. He even went on to list barriers like the fear of deportation that may prevent immigrant parents from attending workshops and getting involved in the college process. The findings presented on the need of first-generation students to have access to social capital aligns with the current research that states students who cannot seek social capital at home from the familial unit will seek access elsewhere (Avery, 2010; Hurwitz et al., 2012; Lee, 2001; Perna & Titus, 2005). High school counselors recognize that students, specifically first-generation and immigrant students, need access to institutional agents in the college application process. High school counselors recognize this need to serve as a resource of knowledge and guidance to both students and parents, while understanding that there are certain barriers that may prevent some parents from being involved in the college choice process. To aid with this, high school counselors provide the extra support to the students who need it.

Building Relationships

Developing relationships with students was often explained by participants as a tool used by high school counselors to assist students with selecting a match institution. When high school counselors are able to build relationships with students, they are building bonds, which helps to transfer trust and information between the student and the counselor. Social capital is a relationship that has a transfer of support and trust (Morrow, 1999). High school counselors recognize the importance of building trusting relationships with students to aid as social capital in the decision-making process. When asking Brielle how she helps students determine the best match institution, she responded, “It’s the conversations that we have, building the rapport, really

looking at what the student's goals are, the family's goals..." Jessica continued, expressing how building a relationship with students helps to build trust between the student and counselor, which can impact their college decision-making:

The [students] want to hang out in our offices and they come in and they've learned to trust us. And I think a big part of this is about trust. They come to us with these decisions and say, "I can't make this decision myself. I need your help," and so we help them. We're able to do that like I said, because time allows and because the caseload is small and because they trust us. If they didn't, um, you know, then it would be different, but they do. They seem to keep coming back and asking for our help, which we're happy to give.

Jessica detailed her small caseload allows her to develop trusting relationships, but it is more than just a small caseload as all the high school counselors with varying student caseloads and within varying school types discussed the importance of building a relationship with the students. Michelle explained that building a relationship with students provides an "extra layer of support," which can be defined as a social capital network for the student to assist with navigating the college decision-making process. The current literature stated that students may undermatch because they have a lack of access to social capital, parental or institutional (Avery, 2010; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Lee, 2001; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Perna & Titus, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). High school counselors understand that they are the institutional agents that serve as the social capital, and for many students in their caseload they are the primary source of social capital during the college application process.

In this study high school counselors recognized that without the establishment of interpersonal trust between a student and a counselor, they are less effective as institutional

agents. Providing social capital in the college advising process goes far beyond assisting students with a college and career planning tool. This is specifically true for first-generation and/or immigrant students, as they are less likely to have access to social capital to support with college decision-making. Building trusting relationships with students aligns with the theoretical framework that defines trust as the driver in any social capital network (Coleman, 1988). In order for a positive social capital network to exist, trust must be present; a lack of trust reduces the benefits of social capital (Lin, 2001), such as the transfer of resources. Most importantly, current studies have found that students are more likely to enroll and attend a selective institution when they receive guidance, encouragement, and support throughout the college advising process (Byndloss et al., 2015). This can be transferred from high school counselor to student during the development of trusting relationships.

Conclusion

In summary, the following conclusions can be drawn to further the insight into the high school counselor's role in college decision-making. First, high school counselors understand academic undermatch. It was not addressed or explained as an educational phenomenon with potential negative consequences on a student's postsecondary career. But it was explained as a decision that is often made after carefully weighing all academic, financial, and personal factors when making a college selection. Additionally, high school counselors do not necessarily believe that it is their role or position to dissuade a student from applying or enrolling in a less selective institution if there are contributing factors that make the institution a best fit.

Second, high school counselors did not discuss many school contextual factors like school setting, student caseload, or student background as an influence on their ability to serve as

an institutional agent. What was discussed by high school counselors and described as a “challenge” by most participants was the overload of responsibilities within the role that creates a lack of availability to serve as institutional agents. It is important for high school counselors to have the time within their day to support students with college decision-making and other critical needs.

Third, as high school counselors recognize their role as institutional agents in the college decision-making process, they understand it is their responsibility to provide college knowledge to assist students with selecting a match institution. High school counselors employ several strategies and resources to help inform and guide students, as well as increase parental involvement, in order for students to select the match college or university. The most important resource employed by high school counselors to assist students during the college decision-making process is developing a trusting relationship with students. High school counselors recognize the importance of individualized counseling and developing trusting relationships, and the impacts that it has on the college decision-making of students. The importance of relationship building aligns with the current research, as it has been found that individualized counseling and direct service to students is more effective in changing the application behaviors of students (Barr et al., 2016; Gurantz et al., 2017; Gurantz, Howell et al., 2020). Within this, high school counselors can identify the barriers such as overload of responsibilities that exist in the role that limit their ability to build trusting relationships with students and ultimately influences their ability to serve as institutional agents.

Chapter V

Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

The goal of this study was to examine the role that high school counselors play in the college decision-making process in order to better understand the phenomenon of academic undermatch. With the aim of studying the experiences of high school counselors, I anticipated to gain further insight into the “why”— why do students decide to enroll in a less selective postsecondary institution than those for which they are academically qualified? And, how do high school counselors help to limit the cases of undermatching, if at all? Hence, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are high school counselors’ understanding of academic undermatch?
2. How, if at all, do school contextual factors influence the ability of high school counselors to serve as institutional agents during the college decision-making process?
3. What strategies, resources, and activities do high school counselors utilize during college counseling sessions to help students select a match institution?

A narrative approach was used to explore the lived experiences and activities of high school counselors. The theoretical framework of social capital theory was applied to aid in understanding how high school counselors serve as institutional agents in the college decision-making process. Applying this theoretical lens was critical in the study as current literature states that those most at risk of undermatching – low-income, first-generation, and/or minority students – are most in need of institutional agents to provide the college knowledge necessary to apply or enroll in a college or university (Avery & Turner, 2010; Belasco, 2013; College Board, 2012). Additionally, the use of a narrative design allowed the researcher to learn how high school

counselors served as social capital examining their lived experiences in the role, in addition to the strategies and practices employed to assist students in selecting a “match” institution.

Twelve high school counselors participated in the study, working in public high schools in New Jersey. All twelve public high schools received Title I funding. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and was analyzed using the constant comparison method (Tesch, 1990).

Based on the results of the study three major key findings emerged from the data: (1) undermatching is not perceived as a negative decision by high school counselors; (2) there is overload within the role of the high school counselor that impacts access to social capital; (3) building relationships between counselor and students is key to matching. Study participants did not necessarily perceive a student's decision to undermatch as a negative decision, despite the what has been founded in current literature, such as students who match are more likely to graduate from a college or university than those who undermatch (Smith et al., 2012). Regardless of the current research, there are supporting factors such as proximity to school, class sizes, and rigor of programs of interest, and most importantly financial, that allow high school counselors to believe that undermatching is not a negative decision. High school counselors believed that a postsecondary decision can only take place after a student (and their family) have weighed all options. Only after weighing and analyzing all aspects of a student's college option can a decision be made that is truly the best fit for the student.

The second finding that resulted from the study is there is overload within the role of the high school counselor that impacts the high school counselor's ability to serve as social capital to students with the building. High school counselors are tasked with many different responsibilities on a daily basis including, but not limited to managing the academic, career, personal, and social development of every student in their caseload, in addition to administrative

responsibilities within the school building (Campbell and Dahir, 1997). Although, high school perceive their role as the sole institutional agent within the school building to provide college knowledge during the college decision-making process they recognize that there is a lack of time in their workday to serve as social capital for the students they serve. Despite the arduous list of tasks that creates an overload within the position, high school counselors work outside of their contractual agreements to serve as social capital for students.

The third finding that resulted from the study is building trusting relationships between counselor and students is a key strategy employed by high school counselors to assist students with selecting a match institution. There are several activities that are commonly utilized by high school counselors to assist students with selecting a match institution like Naviance, in-class presentations to students, and evening workshops for parents and guardians. However, the strategy that was described as the most important by participants was building trusting relationships with students. When developing relationships with students, high school counselors are transferring trust – a critical component in social capital networks (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). It is through the development of trusting relationships that high school counselors can fully serve as institutional agents in the college decision-making process.

Discussion of Findings

In many ways the findings of this study support the current research, while still adding knowledge to what is known about the high school counselor's role in the college decision-making process. High school counselors supported the current research when detailing the main factor in college decision-making for many students is financial. Study participants described how students are discouraged by an institution's sticker price and the possibility of accumulating

a large amount of student debt associated with attending a more selective college or university, which is supported in the current literature (Byndloss et al., 2015; Gurantz et al., 2020). This study adds to the current literature as it provides insight to the high school perspective on the phenomenon undermatch – that it is not necessarily a bad decision – and the high school counselor view of their role as an institutional agent – an advisor, not a dictator in the college decision-making process.

Participants discussion of overload within the role details a lack of time and access to serve students as social capital, which supports the current research (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). High school counselors in the study discussed that the overload of responsibilities within the position does not allow the time needed for one-on-one counseling with students. This study adds to the current literature as it highlights the view high school counselors have of their role as institutional agents. During discussions with high school counselors it was found that many students, specifically first-generation and/or immigrant students, are more dependent on high school counselors as a source of college knowledge as they lack familial social capital (Hurwitz et al., 2012). High school counselors understand that they need to serve as an extra layer of support for students and families unfamiliar with the college choice process, which is also supported in the current research (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). Current research states that high school counselors have difficulty establishing social capital relationships with students due to the lack of time (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; McDonough, 2007). But the opposite was discovered in this study. High school counselors understand the importance of their role in the college decision-making process and because of this, participants detailed finding time to serve as institutional agents. Many high school counselors will meet with students before school,

during their lunch breaks, and afterschool because they understand the importance of serving as in institutional agent in the college decision-making process.

In addition, developing relationships with students as a key strategy to match students to postsecondary institutions is supported in the current research. Studies have shown that college advising sessions can positively influence the college going outcomes for students (Bryan et al., 2011; Hurwitz et al., 2012; Velez, 2020). High school counselors recognized the need to establish relationships with students during college advising sessions. Participants described high school counseling offices where students liked to hang out creating a community atmosphere. Oftentimes meeting with counselors will include discussing a favorite movie or television show, as it is important to develop a trusting bond with students (Putnam, 1993, 1995). This study adds to the current literature because it provides insight to the high school counselors perspective of the importance of developing social capital relationships with students in order to aid in the college decision-making process. Current research on social capital theory details the importance of social capital relationships, but this study emphasizes the high school counselor's perspective of social capital networks.

The results of this study supports the current research in many facets: financial being a main factor in a student undermatching (Byndloss et al., 2015; Gurantz et al., 2020); the overload within the high school counselor role (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; College Board, 2012; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006); the need for high school counselor's to serve as institutional agents, especially those most at-risk of undermatching (Avery & Turner, 2010; Belasco, 2013; College Board, 2012); and the significance of developing strong, trusting social capital networks (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). But this study does add to the current research on academic undermatch by affirming the high

school counselor's perspective of their role in the college decision-making process. High school counselors do not believe a student's decision to undermatch is necessarily a bad decision if it is the best fit for a student. It was stated by participants that a college decision should not be based solely on an academic fit, but overall what will be the best postsecondary that fulfills all the student's needs.

Additionally, this study highlights how high school counselors perceive themselves as institutional agents in the college decision-making process and how they serve as institutional agents in the college decision-making process. The high school counselor role in the decision-making process is more than a role where you work solely providing college knowledge through the application of college planning tools. It is a complex role that requires individuals to balance several different "hats," while providing wholistic advising support to students and family's regarding the college decision-making process. High school counselors understand the importance of their role in the college selection process, which why they work outside their contracted hours in order to serve as institutional agents. But what is most valued by high school counselors is the cultivation of strong, trusting social capital relationships that allow counselors to provide support to students in the college decision-making process, or within any other situation that may arise. High school counselors believe that developing trusting relationships with students, providing students with the independence to make the best decisions regarding their academic careers, while supporting them along the way with any academic, emotional, mental, or personal needs is the role of a high school counselor.

Implications of Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and perceptions of high school counselors in order to gain a deeper understanding of how high school counselors serve as institutional agents within the college decision-making process. The findings suggest that high school counselors understand that students do attend less selective institutions than what they are deemed academically capable, most often due to the tuition sticker prices. What high school counselors did not discuss during participant interviews were the research-based results of a student attending a less competitive degree, oftentimes resulting in not completing a degree (Smith et al., 2012).

In addition, the findings indicate that high school counselors are faced with a daunting list of responsibilities, which creates role conflict as high school counselors struggle to find balance within their many tasks. Furthermore, school counselors discussed the lack of training provided around college counseling and college planning tools. All study participants stated that there was no formal training provided in the areas of college counseling and the best use of Naviance, and their training was provided on-the-job by coworkers and colleagues.

Based on the results of the study, the implications discussed below are geared towards district, state, and national administrators who can establish change directly within high school guidance offices, and within the high school counselor role. Professional development trainings will be discussed as an approach to assist high school counselors with connecting research to practice. Additionally, national state-facilitated mandatory trainings focused on college counseling standards and norms should be developed as a plan of action based on the findings. Lastly, administrators should consider redefining the school counselor role in order to reduce ambiguity as counselors grapple with balancing many different task and responsibilities.

Professional Development & Mandatory College Counseling Trainings

Analysis of this finding indicates that there is a disconnect between policy and practice. The current research on academic undermatch states a student's college completion rates can be determined based upon a match, as students who match are more likely to obtain a college degree (Light and Strayer, 2000; Smith et al., 2012). But, the current perceptions of high school counselors regarding academic undermatch does not reflect this research, as high school counselors may be unaware of the evidence-based negative consequences of academic undermatch. Further connection needs to be made to align the current research to the practice.

District, state and national administrators of guidance counselors and guidance offices should work in collaboration to incorporate mandatory professional development trainings centered around the research that impacts the work of a high school counselor. Participants in the study mentioned that the professional development offered to high school counselors is voluntary. This should no longer be the standard. Additionally, study participants shared that professional development is hard to attend as much of the high school counselor position takes place in the school building, and it is difficult to find the time away from the school building. High school counselors should be provided paid time out of the building in order to attend the meetings as the knowledge gained is critical to effectively provide students with college counseling.

Professional development trainings should discuss, review, and analyze current research on college counseling and college access, like academic undermatch, as it would inform high school counselors in their position. *In Search of a Match* (Byndloss et al., 2015) is an evidence-based guide that was created for counselors, and all building stakeholders to assist those most at-risk to undermatch select a best fit institution. The guide was designed to help students select a

postsecondary institution that will meet their academic, financial, and personal needs. *In Search of a Match* (Byndloss et al., 2015) would serve as a best practices' toolkit during professional development trainings to aid high school counselors in learning the current research in order to fully serve as institutional agents in the college decision-making process.

Furthermore, all of the study participants stated that they received no college counseling training while completing their academic degrees. This data aligns with the research that states formal education is not provided on college counseling (McDonough, 2005; Byndloss et al., 2015). Study participants mentioned that it was their responsibility to conduct research on colleges and universities – through college campus visits during non-working hours – in order to learn about various college. Additionally, participants stated that there was no training received that detailed how to conduct college advising sessions, how to use and navigate college planning tools, or how-to best assist students with selecting and enrolling in a postsecondary institution that meets their needs. Thus, creating a lack of standardization around the college advising and counseling process.

The lack of norms and standards around college counseling protocol allows students to receive variation in their advising based on the high school counselor in which they have been assigned. Some study participants mentioned how much they enjoyed the college advising responsibility in their role and how that is reflected in the college advising provided to students in their caseload. This produces the question: what if a student is assigned to a high school counselor who does not enjoy conducting college counseling?

The development of national college advising standards should be developed and shared to all high school counselors through state sponsored trainings in order for college counselors to provide beneficial counseling to all students. The development of college counseling trainings

would allow all high school counselors to operate with the guiding principles when providing college counseling in order to eliminate any possibility of students receiving varied college counseling based on the high school counselor in which they have been assigned. Most importantly, the creation of college counseling standards and principles would provide equity to all students in order to make the most informed postsecondary decisions.

In addition to receiving a training around college counseling standard, high school counselors should have access to the Naviance college planning tool and receive an annual training around the software in order to best serve students during college advising sessions. As discussed in the findings, there are barriers within these resources that impact certain student populations more than others in terms of selecting a match institution. Naviance was not accessible for three high school counselors serving in urban school settings. This is critical as participants described Naviance as a beneficial tool in the college advising process as it helps to support students throughout the college application process. The lack of access for three high school counselors and the students they serve creates a lack of information for students and increases the need for students to conduct college searches using multiple tools and resources. Current research states that both the lack of information available within the school building and the reliance on students to conduct large college searches independently decreases the likelihood of a student matching to a postsecondary institution (Dillon and Smith, 2009; Hurwitz et al., 2012). Students who do not have access to this college advising tool will have to spend more time determining a match through a plethora of resources. Implementing Naviance as a standard college planning tool utilized in every high school would help to achieve not only student and district postsecondary goals, but it would ensure equity to all students, as Naviance has been shown to positively increase college application rates (Christian, Lawrence, and Dampman,

2017). Moreover, all high school counselors should receive an annual training to review how to best use the software during college counseling sessions.

Redefining the Role of a High School Counselor

The findings suggest that the school contextual factor of overload within the role of a high school counselor impacts the high school counselor's ability to serve as social capital. The management of demanding priorities limits the opportunity of the high school counselor to build relationships one-on-one with students, which decreases student access to social capital, especially for those most in need. In order to alleviate the demand of the high school counselor position as a "jack of all trades" role, many participants discussed redefining their role.

Participants described their role as a "dumping ground" where they support and serve many different areas in the school building. The redefinition of the high school counselor role would include the restructuring of the role to create two distinguished roles – a college counselor and an academic counselor. This recommendation is supported by McKillip, Rawls, et al., (2012) who stated that a more explicit definition of the high school counselor is needed. A redefining of the high school counselor role would help to alleviate the current strain that high school counselors experience balancing their growing list of responsibilities. A college counselor would have the time to focus on the postsecondary planning and the relationship building necessary during the college admissions process. Whereas, an academic counselor would focus on the academic areas of a student – course scheduling, test coordination, IEP, and 504 plans. Dividing the current high school counselor role into two separate and defined roles would reduce the amount of responsibilities assigned to the high school counselor, which currently produces overload and burnout in the position (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; College Board, 2012; Lambie &

Williamson, 2004; Lapan et al., 2007; Lee, 2001; Sandhu, 2000; Stone et al., 2006). In addition, it would eliminate the role confusion that is often found within the position (Janson, 2009; Lieberman, 2000; McKillip, Rawls, and Barry, 2012). Instead of serving as a “jack of all trades” redefined roles would allow the high school counselor to provide students with the social capital necessary during college decision-making. It is critical for high school counselors to have individualized college counseling sessions to develop strong, trusting relationships with the students they serve. The findings show it is the most critical resource to support students with a college match. Redefining the role of a high school counselor would allow those employed in the role to serve as the social capital needed in the college decision-making process.

Future Research

There are several areas for future research to help broaden the understanding of academic undermatch and the experiences of high school counselors in the college decision-making process. First, a qualitative study can be developed to increase the understanding of immigrant students or students with immigrant parents when deciding to enroll and attend a college or university. Many high school counselors discussed the difficulty that immigrant students or students with immigrant parents face in the college admission process whether it is with completing the college essay as an English language learner, or with the financial obstacles they face with funding their college tuition. As described by study participants, this specific population of students is often ineligible for federal financial aid or other financial scholarships, disqualifying them from obtaining the aid to afford the growing costs of college tuition. Even students who are academically at the top of the class are unable to attend a college or university because of financial challenges. A qualitative study should explore how immigrant students or

students of immigrant parents navigate the decision-making process, exploring their college application and decision-making behavior, which would add to this study's findings.

A mixed methods study can explore the rate of undermatching of students enrolled in different school settings – a high school located in a low-income community compared to a high school in an affluent community. In this quantitative analysis the number of students who undermatch can be analyzed to determine if there are discrepancies in student college decision-making based on the different communities in which students are enrolled. Within this, researchers can observe the lifecycle of the college application process of participants selected at random in both schools, beginning in the student's junior year of high school. Similar to this study, this qualitative approach would allow a more extensive exploration of the high school counselor's strategies, tools, and resources used to match students to postsecondary institutions at schools in varying communities. Additionally, this study would provide further insight into the into the potential variations of college counseling based on school setting, and amongst counseling employed within the same school buildings. The results of this component of the study would demonstrate the need of standardized norms within the practice of college counseling.

Lastly, another topic for future research that can be further explored that was presented during the study is the impact that COVID-19 has on the student college decision-making. Similar to this study, a qualitative study can be developed to explore the experiences of high school counselors in the decision-making process during COVID. Findings from the proposed study can be compared to this study to understand if: (1) high school counselors are observing more cases of academic undermatch; (2) what is the high school counselors' perceptions of academic undermatch – is it more positive, negative, or unchanged during the pandemic? (3)

how are school counselors serving as institutional agents in a virtual setting? COVID-19 and college advising is a critical topic to explore as the National Association for College Advising and Counseling reports that COVID-19 is disrupting the ability of school counselors and teachers to submit required college application documents, the opportunity for students to visit college campuses for tours, information sessions, open house events, and even academic testing (National Association for College Admission Counseling, [NACAC], 2020). As high school counselors and students face obstacles in the traditional college advising and application process, it is important to explore the influence the pandemic will have on undermatching.

Conclusion

Undermatching is an educational inequity that threatens the educational attainment and the social upward mobility of those most at-risk, first-generation, low-income, and minority students (Bowen et al., 2009; Roderick et al., 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011; Smith et al., 2012; The Executive Office of the President, 2014). This phenomenon has the ability to widen the educational attainment gap as students who match to a postsecondary institution aligned with their academic abilities have higher college completion rates (Tiboris, 2014). A continued shortage in degree attainment rates in the nation has the possibility of devastating the nation's economy as we have seen with the COVID-19 global pandemic (St. Amour, 2020). As reported in the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center Fall 2020 Report, college enrollment has declined with first-time freshmen down 3.6% since fall 2019, and this decline is highest at community colleges with a 21% decrease in enrollment (St. Amour, 2020). Most importantly, community colleges serve the highest population of those most at risk to undermatch and are the higher education institutions hit hardest by the pandemic (St. Amour, 2020). Addressing the gaps

in educational attainment is more important than ever, as those without a college degree were most affected by pandemic job losses with only 22% of workers with a high school diploma or less able to telework during the pandemic (Daly et al., 2020). Although college enrollment rates have increased with students from low socioeconomic households from (Gurantz, Pender et al., 2020; Pender & Welch, 2018), undermatching continues to remain a key higher education issue with the current pandemic and the impact that it has had on higher education enrollment. It is critical to fully understand all the factors that influence a student's decision to undermatch in order ensure access and equity to all individuals.

There is still much to learn about undermatch that can aid in gaining deeper insight into the phenomenon. Effective interventions cannot be developed and implemented until all perspectives and roles are analyzed. A student's decision to undermatch is comprehensive and includes many contributing factors. In addition, the high school counselor's role in the college decision-making process is complex and significant as a student's institutional agent. As with students, there are many contributing factors that influence a high school counselor's college advising—overload of responsibilities, student caseload, availability, lack of resources, and college counseling training—all of which impact the high school counselor's ability to establish and maintain trusting relationships with students. Future research should delve deeper into the role of high school counselors as a critical social capital with the influence to alter college application behavior (Barr et al., 2016; Gurantz et al., 2017; Gurantz, Pender et al., 2020). Due to this, interventions should begin with the high school counselor to aid in creating more equal college enrollment and attainment rates across all socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. Can you walk me through a typical day as a school counselor?
2. What are your main responsibilities as a school counselor?
 - a. How much time do you spend on counseling?
 - b. How does the amount of time spent on counseling vary depending on the months of the year?
 - c. How much time is spent completing other responsibilities?
3. What does a typical college advising session look like?
 - a. What are common topics of discussion?
4. What time of the year do you begin discussing college selection with students?
5. Besides counseling sessions, what are other ways that you inform students with necessary college knowledge?
 - a. If activities and workshops are planned, what time of the year do they begin?
6. How does a student's current grade level in high school impact the amount of time and college information spent on college advising?
7. How does a student's GPA and/or SAT scores impact the amount of time and college information spent on college advising?
8. How do you deal with a situation where a student wants to apply or attend to a college that is above his/her academic capabilities based on current GPA/SAT scores?
9. In reverse, how do you deal with a situation where a student wants to apply or attend a college that is below his/her academic abilities based on current GPA/SAT scores?

10. What are common topics that students typically struggle with during the college application process?
 - a. How do you help support students with these areas?
11. Based on your experience, how prepared are students to make an informed decision regarding college selection?
 - a. How could your students be more prepared?
12. Are there any additional resources or supports that you refer students to help assist them with college selection?
13. How do you involve parents/guardians in the college selection process?
 - a. When do you decide to involve parents in the college selection process? Why?
 - b. How does involving parents assist students in the decision-making process?
14. About how many of your students complete a college application by the EOY?
15. About how many of your students are accepted into a postsecondary institution?
16. How were you prepared to work with students on the college choice process?
 - a. Where did you learn?
 - b. When did you learn?
 - c. What did you learn?
 - d. How has this helped in your role?
17. What challenges do you experience when conducting college counseling?
18. What trainings or professional development opportunities are available for you to overcome these challenges?
 - a. Do you attend?
 - b. How often do you attend professional development trainings?

- c. How have these trainings helped you to improve as a school counselor?
- d. How will these training better serve your students?

19. Is there anything that you would like to share about your role as a school counselor that I haven't asked?



June 26, 2019

Beverley Gaines

Dear Ms. Gaines,

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board office has reviewed and approved as submitted under expedited review your research proposal entitled "A Study Examining the High School Counselor Experiences in College Choice Decision-Making."

Enclosed for your records is the signed Request for Approval form.

Reflecting the process for federally funded research, there will be no longer be a continuing review. Informed Consent documents and recruitment flyers will no longer be stamped.

Thank you for you cooperation.

Sincerely,

Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D.
Professor
Director, Institutional Review Board

cc: Dr. Rong Chen

Please review Seton Hall University IRB's Policies and Procedures on website (<http://www.provost.shu.edu/IRB>) for more information. Please note the following requirements:

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or adverse reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to immediately notify in writing the Seton Hall University IRB Director, your sponsor and any federal regulatory institutions which may oversee this research, such as the OHRP or the FDA. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending further review by the IRB.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, please communicate your request in writing (with revised copies of the protocol and/or informed consent where applicable and the Amendment Form) to the IRB Director. The new procedures cannot be initiated until you receive IRB approval.