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Four-year college choice considerations among high-achieving lower-income community college students in Michigan

Dilip A. Das
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A Dissertation

titled

Four-Year College Choice Considerations Among High-Achieving Lower-Income
Community College Students in Michigan

by

Dilip A. Das

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the
requirements for The Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education

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The University of Toledo

August 2013
An Abstract of
Four-Year College Choice Considerations Among High-Achieving Lower-Income Community College Students in Michigan

by
Dilip A. Das

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for The Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Higher Education

The University of Toledo
August 2013

The college choice considerations and decisions of high school seniors matriculating full-time to four-year colleges is well-documented. However, a growing majority of students do not fit within the high school to four-year college group, leaving gaps in the college choice research literature. This qualitative study addresses the college choice research gap through semi-structured interviews of 17 academically talented – 3.5 or higher grade point average with over 25 college credits completed – Pell Grant-eligible community college students seeking transfer to a four-year college. All participants demonstrated high levels of motivation to complete a baccalaureate. Twelve of participants applied to only one transfer college and five applied to two. Constraints on college choice included a variety of financial considerations, strategic recruiting strategies by four-year colleges, and a lack of detailed guidance and college knowledge. Utilizing a cultural capital framework for analysis, marked differences between the college experiences of traditional four-year students and high-achieving, low-income non-traditional community college students were found including differences based on class, race and cultural traditions.
For Janice, Sylva, and Sofi. I’ve been a little distracted and impatient at times. I love you.

And for my parents, Sunil and Merial, and sisters, Kalpana, Monica, and Molina for their unflagging support and love.
Acknowledgements

To Dr. Dave Meabon, committee chair and tireless advocate, teacher, and mentor along the pathway of the dissertation marathon: thanks for your patience, commitment and sense of humor. The dissertation committee of Dr. Penny Poplin-Gosetti, Dr. Mary Ellen Edwards, and Dr. Larry McDougle were insightful and patient as well in helping to guide the dissertation into a useful framework.

Thank you Dr. Lester P. Monts at the University of Michigan for your unwavering support and encouragement.

Finally, thank you Glenda Haskell for helping to coach me through the tricky terrain of the research process, the writing, and getting to the finish line.
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Chapter 1

Overview of the Study

This chapter describes the statement of the research problem, the purpose of the research and the conceptual framework and research questions that shaped the study. Following these sections are summaries of the methodology employed and the limitations of the methodology as it is utilized herein.

There are over 4,000 undergraduate-serving colleges spread liberally over the United States with both a steadily increasing student diversity and student enrollment of 19 million, as of 2010 (NCES, 2010). Prospective college students may choose to attend public or private institutions, two or four-year colleges, and non-profit or for-profit: there is an abundance of choice. A recurring theme of research in higher education, the sociology of education, and the economics of education - positioned within the large college access framework - is college choice, specifically, the considerations that guide a prospective student’s decision-making process.

While considerable research has focused on the college choice process for traditional students – defined most commonly in the research literature as those enrolling full-time in a four-year institution immediately following high school graduation – less is
known about college choice considerations among students with so-called nontraditional attendance patterns. This large group of nontraditional college students are defined by indicators such as first-time community college enrollment, delayed entry after high school, part-time enrollment, and combining employment with school, variables that today comprise the majority of all undergraduates in the U.S. (Long & Kurlaender, 2008). As Perna (2006a) has suggested, “focusing only on the college-choice processes of individuals who enroll full-time in a four-year college immediately after graduating from high school ignores a substantial portion of the college-going population” (p. 146).

Given the paucity of research on choice considerations among nontraditional students, this study focused on a specific group of this understudied population: high-achieving, lower income community college students seeking baccalaureate degree attainment at a four-year college.

1.1 Statement of Problem

As the pace of transition from a locally-based industrial economy to a globally competitive informational age quickens, sped forward by economic shocks that shrink both wages and the workforce, the message that postsecondary credentials are required to escape poverty-level wages has taken hold (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; Kirsch, Braun, & Yamamoto, 2007). Thus, while 71% of high school and college respondents to surveys have high aspirations for postsecondary achievement (Perna, 2006a), the educational outcomes for many of these students are unsuccessful, leaving them stuck in low-wage, limited opportunity lives (Rose, 2010).

Literature in the sociology and the economics of higher education has focused on inequities in higher education increasingly during the last three decades and how those
structural inequities contributes to negative consequences for aspiring college students. What has been firmly established in the literature are the large gaps in access, achievement, and degree completion between traditional full-time, four-year undergraduate students and students who take the nontraditional pathway to postsecondary education (Perna, 2006a). The characteristics of traditional students are: within the upper half of the family income distribution; having parents with baccalaureate degrees or above; attending more selective four-year institutions full-time immediately after leaving high school; and usually graduating within six years at relatively high rates (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Cabrera, Burkum, & LaNasa, 2003). The characteristics of nontraditional students are: both White and a high percentage of underrepresented students-of-color; within the lower half of the family income distribution; first generation college students; attending open access public or proprietary two-year and less-selective four-year institutions often part-time and several years after leaving high school; and experiencing long time to degree completion, or not completing at all (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Horn, 1996). If, as prominent politicians, scholars, and educational foundations argue, national and individual stability depends on increases in postsecondary credentials, then it is precisely the non-traditional majority of students in the U.S. that require the attention and sustained support to achieve those valuable credentials (Sponsler, Kienzl, & Wesaw, 2010).

This study examined the transfer college choice considerations of a subset of the nontraditional student group, specifically, high-achieving (i.e., 3.5 grade point average and above) lower-income (Pell Grant-eligible) community college students seeking a baccalaureate degree. This particular subset of students is even less visible in the research
literature than the larger group of all community college students, despite the promise of achievement they represent. Two studies have shown a significant percentage of high-achieving, lower-income high school students who are effectively excluded from continuing their education because of social, financial, and institutional barriers to access (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007). For the purposes of this study, an analogous and relevant question that these reports only minimally address is whether high-achieving lower-income community college students seeking a baccalaureate experience the same sets of barriers to access as high-achieving lower-income high school students when making their college choices for transfer. These students – who are capable of academically succeeding at the nation’s best colleges – are often excluded from institutions that act as gateways to power, prestige, and wealth, largely due to institutional and societal constructs that impede their choices and opportunity (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Dowd, 2007; Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008). Furthermore, many of these high-achieving students experience a phenomenon labeled by Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) as “undermatching” wherein, for similar reasons outlined above, high-achieving students either matriculate at two-year or non-selective colleges, or do not matriculate at all. The impact of undermatching is felt at both the personal and societal level. Because graduation rates have been shown to be a function not only of prior academic achievement but also of the level of selectivity at each institution, high-achieving students may experience either delayed time to graduation or not graduate at all if choosing a less selective college (Bowen et al., 2009). Secondly, when the proportion of jobs available is increasingly tied to some level of college completion, further erosion of absolute college completion numbers, especially by those
most capable, inhibits the long-term global competitiveness and economic health of the nation (Bowen et al., 2009; Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; Kirsch, Braun, & Yamamoto, 2007).

1.2 Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the transfer college choice considerations – the thought processes, influences, motivations, biases and expected outcomes – of lower-income, high-achieving community college students. The study design contributed to the research literature particularly in the understudied area that qualitatively explores transfer college choice for community college students. A substantial corpus of longitudinal survey research exists on college choice considerations for high school students planning to immediately enroll in a postsecondary institution (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Noel-Levitz 2007, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2006a). This research has convincingly determined the top reasons for choosing a particular college among high school students, including, but not limited to: reputation; cost of attendance; financial aid packages received; personalized attention; campus appearance, campus size, geographic setting, and recommendation from family or friends. However, the students surveyed to determine these college choice factors are high school students matriculating directly into four-year colleges. Survey data – much of which relies on large-scale national databases – does not include community college students making decisions about where to transfer for a baccalaureate degree. Many transfer students work and attend community college part-time, are older than traditional-aged college students, and have to consider family-care as part of their college transfer choice. These choice factors stand in sharp contrast
with the traditional-aged college choice considerations of the majority of high school seniors.

A qualitative methodology is well-suited to the goals of exploring and probing for details concerning the social, educational, and economic factors influencing college choice considerations for this population of community college students. Postsecondary attendance and completion increases job/career opportunities as well as monetary lifetime returns, in addition to other known personal and societal benefits, such as increased life expectancy and increased civic participation (Oreopoulos, 2009). The benefits of postsecondary completion being positively correlated with an array of lifetime outcomes, as they are, suggests that a much clearer understanding of pathways to completion is desirable. However, given the multitude of variables involved with choosing a college and the complexities of applying for and deciphering financial aid packages, the millions of prospective students who lack the depth of college knowledge and lifelong guidance that upper income families take for granted are clearly at a disadvantage when ultimately deciding where to enroll. These college access disadvantages lead to large gaps in degree attainment for the populations who stand to gain the most from postsecondary degrees – those students in lower-income, underrepresented minority, and first-generation college groups (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). This study is designed to better understand the transfer college choice considerations of this understudied group of students.

1.3 Assumptions

The immense role that community colleges play in the aspirations and outcomes of millions of students nationwide cannot be over-emphasized. As Cohen and Brawer (2008) suggested, “[t]he community colleges’ potential is greater than that of any other
institution because their concern is with the people most in need of assistance…that is why they deserve the support of everyone who values societal cohesion and the opportunity for all people to realize their potential” (p. 399). At the same time that community colleges have been launched onto a national stage by President Obama and identified as a critical link to the goal of considerably increasing the ratio of educational credentials in order to lift economic fortunes for individuals and the country as a whole, the Great Recession – the name that journalists and researchers have labeled the prolonged economic slump that began in 2008 – has precipitated steep declines in state and local funding support for community colleges (Sponsler, Kienzl, & Wesaw, 2010; Uchitelle, 2010). Like large urban and smaller rural high schools which experience student to counselor ratios of more than 350:1, community colleges are challenged to provide the kinds of college counseling – including transfer counseling – that is vital to the success of the burgeoning populations of students enrolled. Reduced financial support, reduced staffing, and reduced overall resources translates into deepening disadvantage for students from backgrounds already disadvantaged by class, academic preparation, and college knowledge, and increases the already high barriers in understanding the complexities and variables involved with transfer college choice (McDonough, 1996). There is, in effect, a penalty for those who understand the college access game the least, a penalty that plays out in outsized tuition increases each year and in the potential for reduced academic and economic lifetime outcomes.

Thus, at a time when postsecondary aspirations and enrollment are at historic highs, recessionary forces and structural state deficits are undercutting opportunity for millions of students who need both financial aid and college course and career guidance.
There is also growing evidence that many of the job opportunities and wage promises that have drawn so many to community colleges and shorter-term proprietary degree programs are not producing the jobs and wages expected (Goodman, 2010; Jacobs, 2011). Students who are the least prepared and who need the most guidance about college and career choices are largely on their own and left behind in the current educational and economic environment.

1.4 Conceptual Framework

This study was framed around the social class-based concept, formulated by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, of cultural capital, which is one of the most frequently cited frameworks in the research literature that focuses on inequalities in educational opportunity and outcomes (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Cultural capital is understood as the attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, and behaviors passed down from parents and the social behaviors of the community (Titus & Perna 2005). There are two implicit emphases within the cultural capital model. First, as attitudes and behaviors are passed down generationally, so too are life outcomes, such that social class reproduction ensues. Thus, notion of moving up the social class ladder through the hard work of personal effort and merit is shown to be an exception rather than the rule. Secondly, the cultural capital model argues that individuals who fail to advance on the social mobility scale – from poor or working class to middle or upper class – are impeded from advancing via structural and institutional barriers (Deil-amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Some of these barriers are straightforward because they involve systematic racial discrimination in educational and employment opportunity and in the systematic segregation of housing and schools (Massey, 2007; Sugrue, 1996).
While racial discrimination remains a persistent social ill with debilitating consequences, structural and institutional barriers to social class advancement for poor and working class families has become the largest target of advocates for educational and social equity (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Massey, 2007). These barriers are numerous, and include the vast disparities in K–12 school funding, which translates, for poorer school districts, into lower salaries for teachers who tend to be more inexperienced, fewer course offerings including far fewer Advanced Placement courses, older textbooks, older buildings and equipment, fewer co-curricular opportunities, and lower educational outcomes (Kozol, 2005; Peske & Haycock, 2006). Other barriers – particularly those embedded within the postsecondary sector, are more difficult to see. According to Bourdieu, there is a significant disjunction between what higher education institutions expect of incoming students – an expectation imbued with the dominant cultural norm for the middle and upper classes – and what many aspiring college students have experienced in their life – a cultural capital of a different order that is unfamiliar with the key skills and understandings needed to make sense of college choices and financial aid (Bourdieu, 1973; McDonough, 1997). Thus, while postsecondary institutions – especially selective four-year colleges – are guided by the rhetoric of meritocracy, they ultimately provide the bulk of access and advantage to upper-income students and constraints to lower-income students (Bourdieu, 1986; McDonough, 1997; Soares, 2007). In short, cultural capital is tied inexorably to a deeply entrenched, seemingly intractable set of social and educational inequities that guarantee a steady level of social class reproduction and impede efforts toward educational equity (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Gumport & Bastedo, 2003).
In Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper’s (1999) influential book titled *Going to College: How Social, Economic, and Educational Factors Influence the Decisions Students Make* the authors suggest that “econometric theories combined with the cultural capital model may provide the most serviceable perspectives on how students formulate their final consideration sets and how they decide what college they will go to” (p. 156). These considerations apply to the choice considerations of transfer students at community colleges as well as high school students. Building on Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), Paulsen and St. John (2002) used the cultural capital model as a framework to better explain class-based assumptions about prospective college students. Those assumptions include the fact that college choices are heavily influenced by family background, environmental and educational experiences, college knowledge, and an understanding of the complicated financial aid picture. The authors stated unequivocally that their findings on college choice considerations pointed squarely to “class-based differences in the ways students perceive and respond to college costs” (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 229). Furthermore, they suggest that these differences have negative impacts on lower-income students since their choice decisions “appear to operate as a basis for the reproduction of social class in our postsecondary system” (p. 229).

Perna (2006a) also draws from Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital model and demonstrates how this form of capital shapes college choices. Perna (2006a) incorporates cultural capital into her research and expands its applicability to the widest possible set of students by emphasizing that the essence of the college choice decision-making process – whether first-time college goers or transfers – is what Paulsen and St. John (2002) call “situated contexts” (p. 192). In other words, choice decisions cannot be generalized,
rather they must be understood within the very specific context of each individual or family’s current situation in life. As Perna explains, the “individual’s college-choice decisions are shaped by four contextual layers: (1) the individual’s habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. By emphasizing these layers of context, Perna’s research “recognizes differences across students in the resources that shape college choice” (p. 116).

In summary, existing conceptualizations of college choice considerations are weighted heavily on data from the perspective of high school students considering four-year colleges, while college choice conceptualizations among prospective community college transfer students are severely limited in number and scope. The cultural capital model expands the college choice scope with a deliberate focus on the social class context of the decision-making process. The situational and contextual nature of the cultural capital framework naturally includes any college choice, whether first-time or transfer. As Paulsen and St. John (2002) have found, drawing on both McDonough (1997) and Bourdieu (1986), “a student's social class and her related cultural capital and habitus consistently frame, constrain, and structure students' patterns of college choice” (italics added, p. 196).

1.5 Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical focus of this study is on the four-year college choice considerations of community college transfer students. There are few theoretical models in the higher education literature focusing specifically on transfer college choice among community college students. Choice research like the influential papers by Paulsen
(1990) – *College Choice: Understanding Student Enrollment Behavior* – and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) – *Studying Student College Choice: A Three-Phase Model and the Implications for Policymakers* – and the widely-read enrollment management research by the Noel-Levitz Benchmark Psychographic group (2007) – *Why Did They Enroll? The Factors Influencing College Choice* – are framed largely by Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) student development theory and Astin’s (1993) change theory. However, as Paulsen & St. John (2002) have suggested, both student development theory and change theory draw on national databases capturing information from the same traditional, but decidedly declining, segment of prospective college students: those matriculating into a four-year institution directly after high school graduation. Interpreting transfer student experience and suggesting outcomes, correlations, or recommendations based on traditional students in national databases is problematic when the age, experience, and identity of students is significantly diverse. For example, the Noel-Levitz research reports (2007), which are used ubiquitously to aid admissions offices target and refine their recruiting strategies, found that the three most consistently polled considerations among first-time college students and their families are cost, financial aid packages, and academic reputation. Survey research such as the Noel-Levitz data is useful for determining broad categories within any prospective college student’s choice considerations, and cost considerations clearly also apply to prospective transfer students. However, these reports are, again, based on high school student samples over-represented by higher income students attending four-year colleges and universities, and thus, like student development and change theory, “provide limited insight into the struggles of
poor and working-class students in the face of the financial barriers associated with college” (Paulsen & St. John, 2002, p. 191).

One of the most widely-cited models is the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-stage model that begins with the *predisposition* to attend college, and then evolves into a *search* phase, and finally *choice*. Among prospective transfer students, particularly nontraditional-aged transfer students, all three of Hossler and Gallagher’s stages are upended by the fact that students have already made their choice to first attend community college. Thus, the research literature’s focus on top considerations of high school seniors choosing colleges – among them reputation and academic quality, financial aid and cost of attendance, employment success after graduation, personalized attention, distance from home, campus appearance, and recommendations from families or friends, for example – must be reconsidered because the first college attended was already chosen, perhaps using many of these variables. It’s the transfer college choice considerations that are not well-understood and understudied, an observation supported by several choice and access scholars (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2006a; Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

1.6 **Research Questions**

1.6.1 **Research question one.** What are the factors that influence low-income, academically talented community college students when considering transferring to a four-year college or university?

1.6.2 **Research question two.** What are the factors that influence low-income academically talented community college students when deciding to attend an admitting institution?
1.7 Methodology

This qualitative study used the guiding principles of phenomenology. Phenomenology develops a detailed descriptive analysis of the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2008). This approach was informed by the semi-structured interviewing of 17 community college students at three community colleges who were recruited in a purposeful sample fitting the goals of the research, namely, students who identified as lower income, high-achieving (3.5 and above GPA in at least 25 credits of college coursework), and who were accepted for transfer at a four-year, baccalaureate-degree college or university. All interviews were transcribed and coded for emergent themes relating to the conceptual framework described above, and to the research questions.

1.8 Significance of the Study

An extensive review of the related research literature on the college choice considerations of high-achieving, lower-income community college students seeking a baccalaureate degree revealed few studies focused on the choice considerations of this non-traditional group of students, especially qualitative ones. While the abundant choice literature may help explain the first college choice of these students – community college – there are multiple differences impacting these students during their second stage of college choice – including age, work, family, and socioeconomic status. These differences strongly support the need to explore the college choice considerations of this population of students during that second stage. This study was designed to contribute to an understanding of the barriers and opportunities of those students during an era when significant economic, social, and educational inequities exist and postsecondary
credentials are an increasingly necessary form of capital to ensure a measure of personal economic security. As Goldrick-Rab (2006) suggested, “A true understanding of inequalities in higher education requires that we push further, to understand new forms of differentiation within the system, and where the greatest gaps exist between advantaged and disadvantaged students” (p. 2472). Qualitative studies enhance the understanding of both old and new forms of inequities and differentiation within the system through fine-grained probing of the reasons for college choice considerations and the context in which each student makes their choices. Furthermore, as Perna (2006a) suggests, “[q]ualitative approaches are especially useful for discovering theoretical propositions to explain student-college-choice processes, developing in-depth understandings of student-college-choice processes for particular students, and understanding the influence of the context or setting on student college choice” (p. 123).

1.9 Limitations of the Study

Qualitative research utilizing semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection source have limited applicability to general populations due to the small number of respondents and sites represented. Furthermore, interviewing respondents and collecting data based on those exchanges between the researcher and the respondent carry validity risks associated with selective memory or known falsehoods on the part of the respondent, and subjective interpretive bias on the part of the researcher.

1.10 Definitions

Below are definitions or explanations for key terms or concepts embedded within this study.
1.10.1 College choice influences. The final college choice decision is influenced by myriad forces including those that the prospective student has control over, and those she does not. If the student applies to a selective college, the decision rests with the college admissions staff. If the issue is cost of attendance and debt will be incurred to cover the cost of attendance, then financial issues become the decisive factor. If the student is a dependent, then family considerations loom large in regard to advice and in determining the level of financial support. Outside of the family, peer considerations may bear significant weight on the college decision, as well as either school counselor or teacher advice.

1.10.2 Cultural capital. Cultural capital includes the attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, and behaviors passed down from parents and/or the home environment. The scholar most closely associated with defining and studying cultural capital as a conceptual framework for educational inequality is Pierre Bourdieu, (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

1.10.3 Class reproduction. Sociological literature describes class or social reproduction as a condition endemic to highly class-based or stratified societies in which there is little social mobility within class groups due to structural and institutional barriers that inhibit advancement from lower to middle or middle to upper classes.

1.10.4 Habitus. Related to cultural capital, habitus was also introduced by Bourdieu (1986) as a tool to better understand the multiple variables that shape class reproduction. Specific to the ways that habitus shapes college-going considerations, Perna (2006a) suggested that “habitus, an individual’s internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and
perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment, conditions an individual’s college-related expectations, attitudes, and aspirations” (p. 113).

1.10.5 High-achieving. Academic high-achievement is defined in the educational research literature in terms of two primary, measurable metrics: grade point average and standardized test scores. For the purposes of this study, a grade point average of 3.0 for at least 10 community college credits is used.

1.10.6 Lower-income. In the postsecondary setting, lower-income is a metric used to identify students with financial need. On the low-income side of this sliding scale, students are eligible for either full or partial federal Pell Grant awards. On the low-to moderate-income side of the scale students may be offered institutional grant aid – in addition to loans and work-study award – up to a specific level of adjusted gross income or expected family contribution (based on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA) depending on each institutions’ aid budget. Typically, as tuition costs increase across the range of postsecondary institutions, grant aid budgets and moderate-income ranges also increase.

1.10.7 Undermatching. As described by Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2010) the phenomenon of undermatching happens when high-achieving students capable of attending selective institutions either matriculate at two-year or non-selective colleges, or do not matriculate at all. Hoxby (2009), while not using the term “undermatching”, nevertheless describes a growing cohort of high-achieving students who, because of social, financial, or institutional barriers, do not enroll at all into postsecondary institutions. This dynamic also occurs among prospective community college transfers.
1.10.8 **Stratification.** In the context of this study, stratification is a social phenomenon that describes the position, hierarchy, or class of different groups within a society. While the most common understanding of stratification is one described by economists based on wealth and income, stratification also applies to the ways that class, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion, among other things, can be indicators of a stratified society. Critical to this study, stratification also applies to the ways that the postsecondary system is arranged in a hierarchy of institutions from two-year, open access community colleges, to highly selective research universities.

1.10.9 **Traditional vs. non-traditional college student.** For the purposes of this study, traditional postsecondary students matriculate full-time into a four-year institution directly after graduating from high school. Non-traditional students experience delayed postsecondary attendance after high school, or matriculate part-time into a two-year community college.

1.10.10 **Selectivity vs. non-selectivity.** Selective postsecondary institutions have minimum requirements for admission – usually based on grade point average and ACT or SAT scores. Non-selective institutions, including community colleges, are typically open enrollment or require only a high school diploma or GED.

1.11 **Summary**

Chapter one provided the purpose and significance of this examination of transfer college choice for high-achieving, lower-income community college students framed by the primary conceptualization of class-based differences in cultural capital. Two research questions provided a basis for the qualitative methodology employed. Chapter two
addresses previous research related to the college choice and describes gaps in the research literature that underlie the significance of this study.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes the research that broadly addresses college choice and also those studies that more narrowly examine influences on college choice, particularly for lower-income prospective students in both the two-year and four-year sectors.

A deceptively simple question - “where should I go to college?” - has attracted the attention of many scholars, particularly within the last two decades, and has resulted in a rich vein of research focused almost exclusively on the college choices and considerations facing high school students. Far from simple, this question is loaded with multiple and overlapping areas of interest for scholars, with special interest in the fields of higher education, the economics of education and the sociology of education. This interdisciplinary interest is primarily due to the potentially life-changing impact of attending and either completing, or not completing a college degree, impacts that have been thoroughly and continuously documented through the well-known research of such scholars as Astin (2003), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Tinto (2005), Card, (1999), Grubb and Norton (2004), and Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2010).
2.2 Two-Year to Four-Year Transfer College Choice Considerations

Despite the depth of scholarship into the question of college choice, research on one part of that life transition - from two-year college to four-year college - is surprisingly limited. While the majority of undergraduates - 9.4 million students - are enrolled at four-year colleges, there are fully 7 million students enrolled in academic credit courses at two-year institutions as of 2008, a ratio that suggests the need for more studies on two-year to four-year college transfer choice considerations. (Aud et al., 2010).

The national visibility of community colleges and the larger two-year postsecondary education sector has significantly increased due to its identification by the Obama administration, the Lumina Foundation, and the Gates Foundation as a key institutional player in lifting national educational attainment rates (Sponsler, Kiezl, & Wesaw, 2010). This focus on the two-year sector has solidified the widely-held public policy view that a more highly educated population will inexorably lead to stronger economic outcomes for the country as a whole (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004; Grubb & Lazerson, 2004; Sponsler, Kiezl, & Wesaw, 2010). However, “during most of its history, the community college has been unnoticed, ignored by writers about higher education” (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p. 35). Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner (2007) go further, noting that the large majority of general community college research is not published in major journals and might suffer - within a faculty research perspective - from being perceived as the stepchild of education research, which is dominated by work in the four-year sector. This sentiment is echoed by McIntosh and Rouse (2009) who declare in their report on two-year college student retention and completion rates that “two-year colleges have long
been the stepchildren of the higher education family of institutions” despite the fact that 46% of all postsecondary enrollments are at the two-year college (p. 1).

Thus, there exists a mismatch in the volume and visibility of research on community college students compared with four-year college students, resulting in a lack of consistency and coherence in both datasets and data analysis. Steinmann, Pope, & Miller (2004) have concluded after an extensive review, that the literature on the transfer function specifically is both narrow in focus and case study-oriented, lacking data on national trends. The National Center for Education Statistics in 2001 concluded that “calculating the percentage of community college students who transfer has proven to be somewhat problematic” (p. v). Studies have indicated wide discrepancies among all two-year institutions for prevalence of transfer, between 5% and 84% depending on the criteria used, though closer inspection of the data shows that the rates for transfer were significantly higher for certain categories of students, especially those who took courses continuously over two years (37%), those who were enrolled for 12 or more credit hours (40%), and those who took courses in an academic major toward a bachelor’s degree (52%), (NCES, 2001). Sylvia, Song, & Waters (2010) found 13 different criteria for determining transfer rates from two-year to four-year colleges, and note that a significant number of community colleges have insufficient institutional research capacities to accurately track and record these data, adding yet another obfuscating factor in trying to decipher actual rates of transfer. There are similar gaps or discrepancies within the voluminous research literature of the economics of education focused on the financial ‘payoff’ to postsecondary educational investments, where one finds highly detailed quantitative data and analysis across a broad spectrum of the formal K-16 educational
pathway but “[w]ithin the vast literature...the transfer student has largely been neglected” (Hilmer, 2002, p. 457)

Published research on bachelor’s degree aspirations among community college students is also inconsistent. While the majority of data from research on aspirations tends to be rather high, from 71% to 90% (Perna, 2006a), Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins et al., (2008) found that only 39% of entering community college students indicated a baccalaureate as the primary reason for enrolling. Part of the inconsistency of results stems from the variance in factoring time to degree. According to definitions deployed for potential transfers using the U.S. Department of Education’s Beginning Postsecondary Student (BPS) longitudinal study over five years from 1989 - 1994, (BPS:1989/1994), authors of the NCES (2001) study found that, for all entering community college students in 1989, both part-time and full-time enrolled, only 25% actually transferred to a four-year college within the five year period studied.

However, there is considerable evidence that students are taking longer to complete both two and four-year degrees, and for those who transfer, the distance between first enrolling at community college and finally completing a baccalaureate can be unexpectedly long, particularly when taking part-time enrollment status or remedial course-taking into account (Hagedorn et al., 2009; Karp, Gara, & Hughes, 2008; Reeves & Haynes, 2008; St. John & Chung, 2006;). Light and Strayer (2004) have calculated that transfer students seeking a bachelor’s degree are enrolled a full year longer than traditional baccalaureate students beginning at four-year colleges. Complicating the analysis of data is the increasing habit among students of multi-institutional “swirling” in which students hop back and forth between two and four-year colleges or attend several
institutions simultaneously, a behavior negatively associated with degree completion (Adelman, 2004). Among students who begin their postsecondary studies at community colleges, more than 40% enroll in more than one institution (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, et. al, 2008).

The analysis of completion rates reveals more inconsistencies. In one of the many analyses of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988 Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins et al. (2008) found that degree completion of any kind for community college students - whether a certificate, associate’s degree, or bachelor’s - has the lowest six-year completion rates among any higher education sector: only 36% following initial enrollment. Stretching the time-to-degree period out to eight years, the same study found that, while a total of 32% of students starting at community colleges had transferred within an eight-year period, only 17% of those transfers had received a bachelor’s degree within that time (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, et. al, 2008).

Building on the NELS 1988 to 2000 database, Adelman (2004) studied the academic trajectories of traditional-age students moving from 12th grade directly to community colleges over 8.5 years with intentional focus on the variable outcomes of the diverse community college student population, taking socioeconomic status, ability, race, ethnicity, and the wide differences in attendance and course-taking intensity into account. Of this cohort, 37% transferred to a four-year college by 2000, and 22% of the original population beginning at community college had earned a bachelor’s degree by 2000 (Adelman, 2004).

Thus, comparing Calcagno, Bailey, and Jenkins et al.’s (2008) eight-year examination of NELS 1988 to 2000 completion data for beginning community college
students - a 17% baccalaureate attainment rate - and expanding it slightly to 8.5 years, as in Adelman’s (2004) study, yielded a five point increase in baccalaureate outcomes. Stretching the time-to-degree completion window out to nine years, as Long and Kurlaender (2008) did for all students enrolled in Ohio postsecondary institutions between 1998 and 2007, the longest time to degree analysis to date found a 26% baccalaureate completion among those students who initially intended to transfer. However, the authors also describe a “community college penalty” for all beginning two-year college students that effectively increased their odds for: stopping out entirely; taking fewer credits; having worse overall outcomes for African American students compared to White students; and decreased their odds, by 14.5%, for the likelihood of completing a baccalaureate degree within 9 years (Long & Kurlaender, 2008, p. 46).

Adelman (2004) examined older datasets of first-time community college matriculants including the National Longitudinal Study (NLS) of the High School Class of 1972, the High School and Beyond Longitudinal Study of 1980 high school sophomores (High School and Beyond/Sophomore Cohort), and the Beginning Postsecondary student study (BPS), and found that race, ethnicity, gender, second-language background or first-generation college status did not play a statistically significant role in determining who starts out at community colleges. However, he also found that socioeconomic status (SES) - a composite variable that includes family income, parents’ highest level of education and the prestige rating of parents’ occupation - was significant factor in determining community college attendance.

A significant indicator that social class within higher education remains a driving force is shown by the share of traditional-age students from the lowest socioeconomic
status quintile entering community colleges, which increased from 44% to 55% over the 30-year period from 1972 - 2001 (Adelman, 2004). These results were in slight contrast to other research, based on NELS 1972 data, which also found a predominance of students from lower socioeconomic status enrolled at two-year college compared to any group within the four-year sector, and characterized community college students as “inversely related to being White, achieving a strong high school grade point average (GPA), earning a four-year degree, having an academic high school curriculum, participating as a leader in high school activities, having a high socioeconomic status, having an on-campus job at first institution, and attending a private institution. (Christie & Hutchison, 2003, p. 31). Examinations of other datasets from the 1970’s and 1980’s confirmed that race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender were significant factors in predicting transfer rates but suggested that those three variables declined in significance starting in the 90’s when four-year colleges became more focused on equity issues including the objective of increasing transfer rates, particularly among minorities and lower SES students (Dougherty and Kienzl, 2006).

Within the literature of college choice itself, there was, again, a lack of focus on community college transfer students among any of the widely-cited models of college decision-making. Noel-Levitz (2007), which publishes research reports that help college admissions offices target and refine their recruiting strategies found that the three most consistently polled considerations among first-time college students and their families are cost, financial aid packages, and academic reputation. Additional considerations across all types of postsecondary institutions were personalized attention; campus appearance, campus size, geographic setting, and recommendation from family or friends.
Another Noel-Levitz study (2009) found that the majority of high school students polled considered the brand (closely associated with reputation) of the college as a high priority in making a final selection. Brand translates to degree of selectivity and such factors as employability and, critically, superior quality versus other institutions. These students polled by Noel-Levitz were also traditional students going straight from high school to a four-year college, and demographically, the majority of student polled were in the higher income categories.

The most in-depth studies have been focused on a handful of influential models at various points in time during a high school students journey in ultimately making their specific college choices (Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006a). Secondly, the dominant models of college choice are framed by Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) student development theory, based on a traditional, but decidedly declining, segment of prospective college or baccalaureate-seeking student, that being the student matriculating into a four-year institution directly after high school graduation (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). These widely influential studies and the majority of student choice and aspiration studies like them, depend on national databases that examine postsecondary enrollment and persistence patterns over time, usually up to eight years. As has been shown above, eight years or less may be too short of a time to include the outcomes of a growing cohort of qualified prospective baccalaureate students (defined by those who completed at least Algebra II in high school) who delay entry into postsecondary education for financial or other reasons, or who attend only part time over the course of a decade or more (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2010; Hagedorn et al., 2009; Perna, 2006b).
To address these deficiencies in traditional college choice literature and theories, Perna (2006a) proposed a new conceptual model for college choice that draws on the dominant econometric models of human capital and the sociological models of social and cultural capital to address the significant growth and changes within the higher education landscape that have occurred in the past 30 years. Before focusing attention on that model, a review of the relevant econometric and sociological literature and how it applies to lower income community college transfer students is required.

In summary, a review of the literature on college choice considerations found that existing national databases, which form the basis for research on college choice, are primarily composed of traditional prospective college students graduating from high school and matriculating full-time at a four-year college. As such, these data exclude a large percentage of prospective two-year and four-year students who may delay entry to college and only attend part-time. Data on completion rates are also skewed in favor of full-time attendance, not capturing the length of time necessary, in many cases, to complete either a two-or four-year degree when working, raising a family, and attending college part-time. The next section reviews the research literature on the economics of education and stratification, with a focus on how socioeconomic status plays a significant role in college attendance and college choice.

2.2 The Economics of Higher Education and Stratification

The economic dimensions of college choice and the consequences of those choices have proven a fruitful vein of research among economists. The impacts of what has become known as The Great Recession - beginning in 2008 and resulting in relatively high and persistent unemployment rates - has only magnified the higher education arena
as a productive research zone for economists. This is largely due to the theoretical connection between higher education credentials and economic productivity, a framework largely developed by economists.

Conceptually, research questions regarding college attendance and completion are often framed around a human capital model, based on the work of Becker (1975), which posits that individuals may be conceived as a type of commodity, fund, business, or stock which can remain relatively stable, grow, or decline based on the type and quantity of investments made. The assumption that going to college is an investment in building one’s skills and abilities has lead economists into numerous studies of the return on investment (ROI) in college, which has been labeled as either the ‘college payoff’ or the ‘college wage premium’. Hundreds of these studies “have confirmed that better-educated individuals earn higher wages, experience less unemployment, and work in more prestigious occupations than their less-educated counterparts (Card, 1999, p. 1802). This benefit is also certainly true internationally where, on the whole, a ten percent increase in educational expenditure - whether invested by the state or the individual - is associated with a one to two percent increase in annual earnings (Checchi, 2006). The payoff accrues progressively, according to level of degree attainment, but also to those who simply complete some college, even one semester of community college, which can provide a return, or payoff, of up to eight percent in annual earnings (Kane & Rouse, 1995).

Similar levels of growth accrue to students who transfer colleges, whether between two-year colleges, or between two and four-year colleges. Employing the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth database, the economists Light and Strayer
(2004) found that students who ‘swirl’ among two-year colleges have higher levels of associate’s degree attainment and those who transfer between more than one four-year college have a six-to-seven percent wage premium, presumably due to “having sought (and found) better investment opportunities via their transfers” (p. 768). Not only does transferring itself appear to be related to finding a better college match with a better result, transfer students, overall, were also found to have higher levels of measured ability (Light & Strayer, 2004). This ability measurement is in concert with the more nuanced findings of another economist (Hilmer, 2002) who found that, while two-year transfer students had lower levels of both family income and high school grades, by the time they completed a baccalaureate, transfer students as a whole also had the highest test scores among all college graduates.

Socioeconomic status as a predictor of who first attends community colleges or four-year colleges and eventual degree outcomes or completions is significant to the purposes of this study. It is well-documented that clear patterns of stratification exist between college students - and prospective college students - based largely on the level of education attained by their parents and the amount of money earned in their families, descriptors or proxies that are generally used to define socioeconomic status or SES (Astin and Oseguera, 2004). For example, the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2008) reported that, for all students who graduated high school with college-ready qualifications, only 20% of lower-income students had attained a bachelor’s degree eight years later, resulting in a potential talent loss - measured in the inability to attend college because of financial barriers - of up to 3.2 million bachelor’s degrees. A more recent study of NELS:2002 data revealed that, each year, 600,000 students graduate from
the top half of their high schools and have no postsecondary award - whether certificate, associate degree or higher - eight years later (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010).

Another examination of the NELS:88 data produced a metric that clearly delineates and defines the problem of disparity within educational access and attainment, and points squarely to economic stratification as the culprit, i.e., by age 26, 68% of students from families in the top income quartile with at least one parent graduated from college attained a bachelor’s degree, while only 9% of students from the lowest income quartile with neither parent graduating from college had attained a bachelor’s degree (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2010). The same study also found that low-income students are substantially more likely than students from high-income families to start at a two-year college – 30% versus 18% – and that even for high-ability low-income students with GPA's above 3.0, they are more than twice as likely to start at a two-year college than high ability high-income students – 23% versus 9 percent (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2010).

It is also well-documented that this stratification is intensifying. Yearly measures and total accumulations of financial capital are becoming more concentrated at the top levels of income, while middle and lower levels of income have either stagnated or actually declined with indicators such as child poverty rates increasing dramatically (Noah, 2010; Mishel, Lawrence, Bernstein, and Shierholz, 2009). A clear indication of the increasing concentration of wealth at the top end – and its direct corollary of increasing inequality – is the percentage of all earned income broken out by category. Internal Revenue Service tax records show that the top decile of earners in the U.S. captured a record 49.7% of total income in 2007 (50.3% for the bottom 90% of
earners); and the top 1% of earners captured 24% of all income (Saez, 2009).

Demonstrating the increasing disparity between the very wealthy and all others over time, Saez (2009) found that the rate of income growth for 99% of earners between 1993 and 2007 was 1.3% per year (the bottom 60% had decreased earnings); while the top 1% experienced growth of 5.9% per year, capturing 50% of all income growth over 14 years.

The economists Haveman and Wilson (2007) have drawn a direct connection between income inequality and decreased educational attainment at the lower levels of the income spectrum, finding that, between 1970 and 2000, the chance that a student in the bottom quartile of the income distribution either attended or graduated from college fell by 17% and 16%, respectively, while the gap between low-income and high-income student attendance and completion widened. Reflecting Saez’s (2009) top-tier earner results, Haveman and Wilson (2007) also found that the top five percentile students in family income had the largest increase in college attendance and graduation over the 30-year period, 3.5% and 6.6%, respectively. They conclude, based on their research, that

[c]ontrary to the oft-stated belief in the leveling effect of higher education, because lower-income individuals are much less likely to secure higher education, the nation’s colleges and universities appear to be an integral part of the process whereby family economic status is passed along from generation to generation. (p. 38)

The literature in the economics of education is quite clear in deducing, first of all, that educational pathways and achievement are inextricably entwined with financial and social stratification (Grodsky & Jackson, 2009; Gumport & Bastedo, 2003; Haveman & Wilson, 2007; Price, 2004). As Carnevale and Strohl (2010) and others have shown, significant numbers and increasing percentages of prospective postsecondary students
reside at the lower end of the income strata where barriers to postsecondary access and success accumulate. Secondly, lower-income postsecondary students have become increasingly concentrated at community colleges and less visible at the more selective institutions, reinforcing intergenerational stratification through the wide gaps in achievement and attainment across the vast spectrum of higher education institutions (Borman & Madison, 2010; Boswell & Wilson, 2004; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

Thus, in examining the trajectories of community college students, especially those seeking transfer to a four-year institution for a baccalaureate, it is imperative to conceptually place these transfer students within the larger social and economic dynamics impacting their college decision-making process. Community college students represent a critical demographic group that is both influenced and ill-served by the higher educational democratic ideal of upward mobility. The message that attending college, whether two or four-year is the stepping stone toward higher wages and a baseline level of middle class security has successfully pervaded the larger culture. However, in contrast to this perception, Haveman and Smeeding (2006) ask whether, in fact, the structure of higher education as it exists actually decreases social mobility. The authors’ findings served as a warning, suggesting that “it seems clear that higher education does not promote social equality as effectively as it often claims to do and as it is popularly perceived to do” (p. 128).

This lack of effectiveness is enmeshed in a complex societal picture that, on one hand, promotes and creates increasing access to higher education and the promise of better jobs and earnings; and on the other hand, structurally limits the capabilities of the
most disadvantaged prospective postsecondary students through a state-designed system that creates conditions Kozol (1991) described as “savage inequalities”. Community college students sit within a particular crucible of the national higher education landscape that produces large variances in overall outcomes. In the wake of the economic shocks that destabilized the banking, insurance, housing, and auto industries in late 2008 and lead to long periods of high unemployment rates, the intensity around the efficiencies and effectiveness of community colleges has dramatically increased. The debate often centers around community college outputs, namely ambiguous graduation rates which, as shown above do not fully consider the inputs including (a) vast preparation and ability ranges of students; (b) the dominance of adjunct instructors instead of full-time faculty; (c) the varying local and state subsidy amounts per student; (d) the preponderance of part-time attendance and; (e) the fact that transfer to a four-year college without completing a certificate or associate degree is not counted as a completion in federal records. For researchers and policymakers targeting higher degree completion rates, the crucible containing community college students represents hope for the future. It is hoped that the benefits accrued from an intense focus on the needs of millions of current and future students living on the economic and educational margins - those who are disadvantaged by lack of equal access to high quality education, health care, and housing - will lift the nation above its persistent economic and educational malaise (Grubb & Lazerson, 2007; Massey, 2007). Over a decade ago, the economists Kane and Rouse (1999) suggested that [f]or the past five decades, the debate over access to higher education and the role of higher education in economic development has implicitly been a debate about community colleges. In any discussion involving marginal incentives, community colleges have been the margin. They have been the gateway for those on the verge of enrolling in college: older students, those who cannot afford to attend full-time, and those who need to develop their basic skills. Ironically,
though, we know less about community colleges than about other sectors of higher education (p. 81).

Beyond the larger question of college payoff, economists have also delineated the payoff according to the quality of postsecondary institution attended - which is typically based on the level of admissions selectivity and measured by SAT/ACT test scores and high school GPA, primarily - the associated differences in payoff to varying levels of selectivity, and the differences in economic circumstances, or status, of the attendees. The investigation of these differences is motivated, among economists, “by concerns about increasing wage inequalities, about increasing costs of elite private colleges, and about the perceived increasing roles of highly educated individuals in maintaining international competitiveness” (Behrman, McPherson, & Schapiro, 1998, p. 14).

Concurrent with the increase in income inequality is the stratification amongst the higher education institutions themselves. As previously shown above a majority of the lowest quintile of socioeconomic status students first enroll at community colleges, where completion outcomes are the lowest of any postsecondary institution by sector (Adelman, 2004; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, et. al, 2008). At the most selective end of the higher education spectrum, on the other hand, the ratio of low-income students is far below the ratio of low-income college-ready students nationally. For example, 23.5% of 17-year olds in the U.S. live in households earning less than $30,000, but only 8.2% of students in top ranked private universities and about nine percent of students in flagship state universities are from low-income families (Pallais & Turner, 2006).

In terms of college costs, there is a correlation between degree of selectivity and amount of tuition, fees, room, and board. The most highly selective private four-year
colleges and universities charge the highest amounts of any group of colleges, currently ranging from $48,000 - $57,000, which is more than twice the annual poverty-line income for a family of four, and about equal to, on the lower end of the costs range, the national median household income of $49,777 (Brainard, 2010; U. S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, there is also a correlation between the rate of selectivity within private, four-year institutions and significant economic returns after graduation, with evidence indicating that this wage premium has been increasing over time (Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999; Card, 1999).

Thomas (2003) quantified the wage premium, finding that, four years after graduation from highly selective colleges, earnings were 12% higher than less selective peers. From a human capital perspective, then, it appears clear that paying higher costs for a private, selective postsecondary education is a worthy investment in terms of payoff, and the payoff is most pronounced for two key groups: students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and underrepresented minority students (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Dale & Kreuger, 2002; Dearden, Ferri, & Meghir, 2002). Yet, it is precisely these students who are most underrepresented at both the elite, four-year private colleges and the most highly selective public flagship universities (Dowd, Cheslock, & Meguizo, 2008; Pallais & Turner, 2006). Compounding the disadvantage for both underrepresented minority and lower-income students is the correlation between higher selectivity and higher graduation rates, resulting in an increasing gap of low graduation rates for less selective or non-selective institutions and high graduation rates for the selective ones (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Turner, 2004). Summarizing the increasing
stratification of postsecondary institutions over time, Carnevale and Strohl (2010) found that “[w]hite students from more affluent families have moved up, concentrating in the top tiers of selectivity, while minorities and lower-income students have improved access but have become increasingly concentrated in the least selective four-year colleges and community colleges” (p. 122).

Yet another gap between the most selective and least selective colleges is the per-student expenditure gap – the amount spent by institutions on all educational and general expenses per full-time student – which negatively impacts those students already experiencing disadvantage and feeds into the large graduation gaps between those institutions. Titus (2006) found a direct correlation between the amount of per-student expenditures and graduation or completion rates, coupled with the finding that the majority of low-income students are enrolled in colleges in the bottom half of per-student spending chart. Noting this inequity, again compounding disadvantage on those in the lower economic rungs, Titus recommends higher levels of subsidies for those serving the lowest-income students both for higher education and for pre-K-12. Grubb and Lazerson (2004) agree, noting that “basic essentials needed to support students in community colleges and the second-tier public universities - financial aid, guidance and counseling in new forms, improvements in basic skills instruction, access to a broader array of support services - are insufficiently funded” (p. 82).

Reflecting the variance in tuition and fees across all postsecondary institutions, per-student spending follows the same course. In a survey of high-achieving high school students across the country, Hoxby and Avery (2004) found that students applied to 40 colleges at which per-pupil spending was less than $7,000 and about an equal number of
colleges where spending was more than $28,000. Summing up the contributions of economists to the study of college access and success, Long (2007) states flatly, that “there has been increasing segregation on the basis of aptitude among colleges and an increasing correlation between the average aptitude of a college’s student body and its expenditure on education inputs” (p. 54). Student spending variances based on the selectivity of the institution has resulted in increasing differences in the infrastructure, amenities, and co-curricular opportunities between high tuition, high student spending institutions and low-tuition, lower spending ones, with the higher cost and spending institutions providing much more to their students, overall. The differences, or gaps, between these two types of institutions continues to increase amid competition between highly selective universities that has lead to an “escalation in spending for positional advantage with no natural constraint except for the willingness and ability of successive generations of students from wealthy families and alumni to fund such advantages for their children” (Carnevale & Strohl, p. 103).

These student spending differences at institutions that serve mostly different classes of students based socioeconomic status have clear implications for a country grounded in the political ideals of equality, democracy, and justice for all. If the inequality lens is placed over only those prospective college students who are the most academically meritorious, notions about equality of opportunity, meritocracy, and democracy are blurred by the reality of the increasing stratification among postsecondary institutions and the students they serve. As Grubb and Lazerson (2004) observed, “[e]quality is not the same as equity. In a society where inequalities are large and take many different forms, there is an almost infinite list of inequities that affect the ability of
students to take advantage of educational opportunities” (p. 229). Demonstrating the expanding stratification within the higher education sector, Hoxby (2009) found that more than 50% of all postsecondary institutions in the country have grown less selective over 40 years, while 10% have grown much more competitive and selective, to the point that the most selective universities in the country admitted students who scored, on average, in the 98th percentile of entrance test scores nationally. In an earlier study, Hoxby (2004) noted that the reason economists care about notions of meritocracy within a democracy is the fact that, among the academic high-achievers within all socioeconomic strata, those students “will later account for a disproportionate share of the nation’s leaders, scientists, and intellectuals. Their human capital and abilities are often thought to generate social spillovers” (p. 240).

Dowd, Cheslock, and Melguizo (2008) are more specific in highlighting the negative effects of postsecondary stratification, suggesting that the “exclusion of poor, working-class, and racial-ethnic minority students from elite institutions reduces the probability that these students will enter positions of power in society” (p. 444). Plank and Jordan (2001) have described the disproportionate participation of lower-income students at selective institutions as talent loss, defined as the percentage of high-achieving students who either do not first enroll in a four-year institution, or do not enroll at all within two years of high school graduation. In an analysis of the NELS:88 database, the high-achieving students surveyed - those who scored in the highest 20% on standardized tests - were marked by their large gaps in both college attendance and types of colleges attended. Only 13% of the highest SES quintile high-achievers did not enroll in four-year institutions, while, among the lowest SES quintile of high-achievers, 50%
did not enroll in four-year colleges. For those who did not enroll at all, only 2.7% were in the highest income group, while 22.6% were in the lowest (Plank & Jordan, 2001). For these students, the ideal of higher education as a means of social mobility becomes, in the words of Hearn (1984), a “false promise” (p. 28), and suggests that “inequity in the college choice process, from a meritocratic perspective, lies more in class-related factors than in ascriptive factors” (p. 28).

In summary, significant econometric scholarship has found wide gaps in college attendance and completion rates based on socioeconomic status and for those who do attend college, the type (two or four-year) and selectivity of the college attended was also found to be correlated to socioeconomic status. Economists have also tracked inputs and outcomes of college attendance and completion, and found large variances in per-student expenditures and lifetime earnings based on the selectivity of the college attended. The next section examines existing scholarship on community college development, attendance and the transfer function.

2.3 The Development of Community Colleges, Tracking, and the Transfer Function

At their initial founding at the turn of the 20th Century, the mission of the community college was to provide opportunities for larger numbers of people seeking a pathway to the baccalaureate (Bailey & Morest, 2004). This single-mission beginning did not last long, however, as calls for expanding community (junior) colleges into workforce and economic development began in the 1910’s, but did not fully come to fruition as a dominant track until the 1960’s (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). Adding to the multiple missions of the community colleges throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s were the
distinct roles of providing remedial (developmental) education, adult education (including English as a Second Language) and typically non-credit or avocational community and recreational missions as well (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty & Townsend, 2006).

Unique among postsecondary institutions, community colleges have continuously provided workforce training for the expanding and ever-changing needs of industry. This training is often short-term, from as little as six weeks to two years, providing either a single terminal certificate or a series of laddered credentials depending upon the specific workforce need. Within the postsecondary hierarchy that includes all two-year and four-year (undergraduate) institutions fully 23% of all credentials earned in 2006 were certificates within career and technical education (CTE) programs, while an additional 25% of all credentials were associate’s degrees (NCES, 2006). This large percentage of certificates is emblematic of their growing significance at community colleges and of the need to forge contracts with local businesses as a critical revenue source that staunches, to some extent, the declining flow of state subsidies (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; Lee & Rawls, 2010; The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Aid, 2008). To suggest that the workforce development, or vocational function was a deliberate ‘track’ designed by the founders of the first community colleges reflects a consistent record of truth, one documented in great detail by two highly influential books on the history and purposes of community colleges, The Diverted Dream (Brint & Karabel, 1989), and The Contradictory College (Dougherty, 1994). In both, the scholars revealed formal documents, speeches, research articles, and correspondences of the architects of
community colleges themselves and those who later influenced and implemented change within college operating procedures.

As indicated by their titles, the two primary pathways within community colleges were created to meet what was perceived to be a conundrum, that the demand for postsecondary education as a means to increased upward social mobility and the professional classes had outstripped the existing capacity within universities, and more importantly, the actual availability of positions within the professional and management classes themselves. Thus, community colleges were born, in part, to provide a solution to this problem of highly-placed job aspirations among the masses, a solution Brint and Karabel (1989) labeled the “management of ambition” (p. 7). Brint and Karabel sought to discover whether the community colleges, as was suggested by their thought leaders and founders, created a mass democratizing effect that helped in realizing a relatively classless educated citizenry, or whether community colleges actually diverted the masses from overwhelming and destabilizing the elite universities and the privileged classes, upsetting the status quo. The unique American structure of offering equality of opportunity for education was quite different from what became a highly state subsidized function in Europe, for example, where higher education became largely free of cost to a small number of students who passed the many stringent and demanding qualifying tests. In contrast, beginning in the late 19th Century, a differentiated higher education structure began to take shape in the United States that included high school extensions governed through the local K-12 school system and stand-alone junior colleges. Some of the impetus for the development of these new college opportunities were catalyzed by the immense influence of the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie who proposed, in 1885, an
expanded educational system that provided “ladders of ascent” for the common man (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 4).

The founders of the community college concept included presidents of elite institutions such as William Rainey Harper at the University of Chicago, and officials at the University of California, who projected a sense of sociological determinism in the role that community colleges played which was, in their minds, to provide a postsecondary option for “the great mass of high school students who cannot, will not, should not, become university students” (Lange, as quoted by Clark, 1960, p. 166). Thus, the higher education system expanded its capacity to accommodate the masses of less academically prepared and lower socioeconomic status students into non-selective community colleges and into the growing cohort of regional and normal teaching colleges, while the more selective research and private colleges continued to serve the predominantly wealthy body of students with solid academic backgrounds or legacy credentials (Dougherty, 1994; Karabel, 2006; Karabel & Astin, 1975; Thelin, 2004).

The aspirations of students who flocked to the new community colleges were focused primarily on the transfer function and baccalaureate attainment, not on workforce certificates or terminal degrees (Dougherty, 1994; Karabel & Brint, 1989). Despite majority enrollment in the transfer or academic programs of the community colleges, the expansion of the terminal or vocational programs was influenced by a variety of actors who, according to Dougherty (1994) were driven largely by self-interest. These included university presidents who wished to insulate the elite status of their institutions from hordes of less-qualified applicants seeking access to upward mobility; community college officials and leaders of the American Association of Community Colleges who sought as
early as 1920 to fill a niche market for two-year or less terminal degrees that prepared
students for middle-level or semi-professional jobs; K-12 school administrators seeking
increased status and college-level jobs; and government officials seeking political gain by
providing a relatively inexpensive postsecondary educational option favored by business
interest groups who encouraged publicly-funded education for private workforce training
(Dougherty, 1994; Brint & Karabel, 1989). Thus, by the late 1960’s the vocationalism
project of the community colleges had succeeded, to the point that enrollments had
achieved a ratio of roughly two-thirds vocational to one-third transfer courses, a
statistical reversal of the ratio of enrollments at community colleges through the 1950’s
(Brint & Karabel, 1989). Evidence from rapid enrollment expansions recently, however,
indicate that the momentum has once again shifted, with a majority of students indicating
a desire to transfer (Jacobs, 2011).

In 1960 a study appeared in book form - The Open Door College - that explained
in great sociological detail one of the primary mechanisms for this reversal of community
college functions (Clark, 1960). The typical student in 1955 - the first year of the study -
who enrolled in an academic course with high aspirations for a baccalaureate, was, within
a year or so, confronted with a coordinated and relatively covert process lead by the
counseling staff to “administer” the student “who is, in fact, destined to be a terminal
student but who does not know it or refuses to recognize this likelihood at the time of
entry” (Clark, 1960, p. 69). This process, which Clark labeled “cooling out”, and which
was focused on the many matriculants who Clark called the “latent terminal student” was
an effective and necessary strategy for dealing with a large number of “over-aspiring” (p.
161) community college students. These students were largely deceived by the American
democratic narrative of an equal opportunity for all, conflating the opportunity to go to college with the notion that there would be social equity and a class-less society on the other side.

However, as Brint and Karabel (1989) note about how community colleges fit within our system of governing, “the two-year college...has from the very origins at the turn of the century reflected both the egalitarian promise of the world’s first modern democracy and the constraints of its dynamic capitalist economy” (p. 6). As Clark (1960) saw it, the community college was simply doing what needed to be done, in a gentle, “face-saving” (p. 80) method that realistically confronted “the general value conflict of the latent terminal student” (p. 162). Commenting on the social structure that encouraged unrealistic dreams of upward mobility Clark remarked that “[w]hile a democratic ethos may set personal ends, the standards of higher education control the means” (p. 162). Those “standards” reflected an already stratified system of distinct socioeconomic classes and the differentiated “laddered” system of higher education was created in reflection and served to reinforce the basic existing social inequities, since, as Clark succinctly pointed out, the “means” were controlled by the leadership elites in higher education and industry, and it is the elites who define the standards. Summarizing his research on the community college, Clark concluded that “the student who filters out of education while in the junior college appears to be very much what such a college is about” (p. 84).

In summary, the community college was initially created to meet unmet demand for higher education that the existing research universities and liberal arts colleges could not or would not accommodate. While the majority of entering community college students focused on transferring to a baccalaureate college, various groups within
community colleges re-oriented their primary mission toward vocational terminal degrees lacking in broad liberal arts transfer curricula. Today, community colleges play unique and economically critical roles in workforce training and in baccalaureate preparation for millions of people. It is the social dimensions of the community colleges themselves and their students that are addressed in the next section.

2.4 The Sociology of Higher Education, Cultural Capital, and Stratification

It was the sociologist Burton Clark (1960) who took note of an embedded structure of stratification within the community colleges whose practices resulted in “maintaining and probably increasing the socioeconomic differentiation of clienteles among colleges” (p. 61). Clark was trained to observe and study what Massey (2007) described as the “holy trinity of stratification - race, class, and gender” (p. 36). Thus, having experienced the most selective, or elite, side of the higher education landscape as a student, professor, and researcher at UCLA, Berkeley, Stanford, Harvard, and Yale, Clark bluntly situated the social class distinctions embodied in community college environments within what he observed to be a pre-existing class-based structure in the United States. Noting the similarities between the U.S. system and the clearly class-based educational and occupational systems in Britain, Clark candidly suggested that “it is unrealistic to expect equality of status for schools when they are differentially related to an outside hierarchy of social status” (p. 169).

The study of stratification itself is a broad category of scholarship within the American Sociological Association and many sociologists argue that “by almost any measure, the Unites States is unambiguously a more class-stratified place than it was before 1975”, (Massey, 2007, p. 260). Increasing and seemingly intractable levels of
economic and social stratification and its relationships with a highly differentiated K-16 educational system has attracted the research attention of a significant number of sociologists interested in the questions of who is earning the college wage premium, what are the differences among those premiums and the people earning them, why do those differences occur, and why do they matter. In an effort to understand societal shifts over time and the ways those shifts highlight the links between higher education and economics, Massey (2007) looked at variances within earnings over 50 years, finding that gender explained 74% of all income variance in 1950 - men dominated the workforce - but by 2005, level of education explained 62% of the income variance. As suggested above, however, access to college in order to increase one’s social and economic mobility is not a simple panacea. A recent report documented the difficulties and barriers for lower-income families pursuing what is colloquially known as The American Dream, but in reality “the view that America is ‘the land of opportunity’ doesn’t entirely square with the facts. Individual success is at least partly determined by the kind of family into which one is born” (Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008, p. 4). While the goal of social mobility has become the most influential factor within American education, it is a goal with critical costs to the very social sectors it is designed to help (Larabee, 1997).

The consciously structured differentiation or hierarchy within the higher education system was exhaustively studied by sociologists since Clark (1960) began his investigations in the mid-1950’s. Following Clark were a long series of studies shaped by a Marxian perspective beginning in the 70’s from Bowles and Gintis (1979; 2002) and Karabel (1975; 1979), among others, that describe the rigid social divisions in labor, buttressed by unequal opportunities in schooling that result in an intergenerational
transmission or stasis of class subcultures. Perhaps the most influential sociologist to formulate theories that link educational aspirations, attainment, social class, and systems that promote the reproduction of class status over continuous generations - in contrast to the American Dream narrative of a rags-to-riches, merit-based system promoting social mobility - is Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1991). Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital is one of the most frequently cited frameworks in research focusing on educational inequalities and his “arguments concerning culture are now a staple of textbooks in the sociology of education” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 568). Bourdieu (1986) developed a different conception of Becker’s (1975) human capital model as a framework for understanding postsecondary educational choices, one related by discipline to the sociologist James Coleman’s (1988) model of social capital in that both emphasize the ways that social capital may be converted to human capital to gain the potentially scarce rewards that accompany educational investments. Social capital is more frequently cited as a theoretical framework in the educational research literature, and is often used interchangeably with cultural capital, despite the distinct differences between them (Titus & Perna, 2005).

Social capital is a functional tool employed, in concert with rational choice theory, as a resource most successfully utilized within individuals, families, and communities that nurture and build relationships between and among social networks toward a desired end (Coleman, 1988; Titus & Perna, 2005). Coleman is very specific in describing the mechanisms when social capital “works” and when it doesn’t. “The social capital of the family is the relations between children and parents” (p. 110). Thus, the intensity, deliberateness, and frequency of parental involvement with their children
around educational goals is the linchpin of social capital and the potential it holds for converting that capital into human, financial, and other valued forms of capital. When that parental involvement is missing, even if that missing parent possesses large caches of human capital, the potential for human capital conversion to the child is lost.

Social capital as described by Coleman (1988) can be interpreted as an either/or proposition, that is, either a family has the educational intent, aspiration, and trust in communications between child and parent and seeks to build social capital within their networks in pursuit of greater human capital; or that relationship and those crucial social networks are missing, to the educational disadvantage of the child. In contrast, cultural capital provides a more nuanced model for understanding the dynamics of and power relationships within a highly diverse socio-cultural landscape, beginning with the family but also including peers, neighbors, teachers, family friends, acquaintances etc. As Titus and Perna (2005) have described it, “[c]ultural capital refers to the system of attributes, such as language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms that is derived, in part, from one’s parents and that defines an individual’s class status” (p. 488).

Implicit within Bourdieu’s model are two primary and important distinctions. First, educational choice behaviors and outcomes can only be understood within the context of structural inequality, i.e., a students’ or families’ choice depends on various constraints which are a function of their cultural experiences or accumulated capital (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Secondly, these important constraints are situated within group contexts and take the form of structural, institutional barriers to equality of educational access depending on racial/ethnic, gender, and class differences primarily (Titus & Perna, 2005). Barriers that impact educational decision-
making and resultant life outcomes include: cultural norms and behaviors that are
circumscribed by a student and families’ social network, one that is often homogenous in
character, closed off to other classes and access to networks of opportunity those classes
control; structural inequalities that create vast disparities in per-student spending at both
the pre-K through 12 level and the postsecondary level; and institutional cultures that
have set up evaluative and expected criteria of behavior and understanding that are
typically aligned with the dominant middle-class and upper-class culture (Alon & Tienda,
2007; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). To put this in terms of schools and families, in
Bourdieu’s own “admittedly cryptic arguments” (Lareau & Wieninger, 2003, p. 581), an
educational system which puts into practice an implicit pedagogic action requiring
initial familiarity with the dominant culture, and which proceeds by imperceptible
familiarization, offers information and training which can be received and
acquired only by subjects endowed with the system of predispositions that is the
condition for the success of the transmission and of the inculcation of the culture.
By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of
everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what
it does not give. *This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and
that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family
upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture* (emphasis added, Bourdieu,

2.5 Cultural Capital, Habitus, and College Choice

Following Bourdieu, Lareau (1988), McDonough (1997) and others have shown
in their research that there are distinct advantages for students who possess the same
familiar levels of cultural capital (expected norms) as the educational institutions
themselves have set up, and distinct disadvantages for those with different sets of cultural
capital - typically the lower and working classes - who may lack key skills and
interactional norms to guide them through the labyrinth of higher education. A key
understanding within Bourdieu’s articulation of cultural capital is that the dominant classes sustain their advantages in an educational system that preserves hierarchies and differentiation such that social classes are reproduced inter-generationally. There is abundant evidence of this social reproduction taking place and the diminishing role that social mobility plays in American society and within higher education itself (Baker & Valez, 1996; Gumport & Bastedo, 2003; Hearn, 1984; Isaacs, Sawhill, & Haskins, 2008; Massey, 2007; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Soares, 2007). Social reproduction is anathema to the American democratic ideal of social mobility, and a deliberately structured hierarchy within education is counter to the notions that high achievement - merit - yields success no matter one’s particular demographic. Yet, as has been shown above, a deliberate tracking system focusing mainly on the vocational pathway in community colleges was developed by none other than the academic and cultural elites of higher education in the first half of the 20th Century. Grubb and Lazerson (2007) describe these dissonant, counterintuitive threads within the higher education labyrinth by suggesting that the “endless differentiation of institutions, with their varied student bodies and occupational targets and funding levels, constitutes the most extensive system of tracking in the entire educational system, dwarfing anything in K-12 education. It violates one of the basic conceptions of equal opportunity, the Jacksonian belief that government should not make the rich richer and the potent more powerful”’ (p. 82).

McDonough (1997) described the variances within specific school (institutional) structures, employing another Bourdieuian term - habitus - that provides more fine-grained detail to the concept of cultural capital by describing the ways that “class-specific dispositions” impact educational choices (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 589). In
describing the ways that habitus impacts college choice considerations, Perna (2006a) suggested that habitus, “an individual’s internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment, conditions an individual’s college-related expectations, attitudes, and aspirations” (p. 113).

Key to an understanding of habitus within the larger schema of cultural capital is that individual perceptions are a critical factor in any decision-making process, including that of college. The critical issue at stake and central to the purposes of this study is the vast ground separating the college choice process between two equally meritorious, high-achieving students. On one hand, there are the disadvantaged students who are making decisions based on limited information and guided by the perceptions and habitus of their cultural network. On the other hand are the more advantaged students, groomed from birth with the knowledge, experience, and the financial and cultural capital leading directly to four-year, usually selective universities. A number of studies have demonstrated these gaps in information and financial resources between high ability students of opposite socioeconomic circumstances. Goldrick-Rab (2006), for instance, found that “students with greater access to financial resources are better able to take advantage of the new higher education marketplace” (p. 73). Alon and Tienda (2007) have described the shifting meritocracy toward a higher education admissions landscape based most heavily on standardized test scores, notably the SAT, and how outcomes are naturally biased toward higher income students able to afford tutoring and multiple test-taking strategies to raise their scores while lower-income students are often hamstrung by poorly-resourced and under-achieving school systems. Soares (2007) also demonstrates how the SAT is culturally and socioeconomically biased toward upper income test
takers. Plank and Jordan (2001) found that, holding academic achievement constant, (i.e., comparing equally high ability students), socioeconomic background had a significant impact on postsecondary attendance and completion patterns, a pattern confirmed over again by follow-up studies later in the decade (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Also, there is a large body of research finding that lower-income and underrepresented minority parents and students consistently overestimate both actual tuition costs and total net costs of attendance after financial aid packages had been applied, a perception that slows, inhibits, and in many cases, negates their eventual participation in postsecondary education (Courant & McPherson, 2006; Long, 2007; O’Connor, 2009; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2008).

McDonough (1997) expanded the meaning of habitus to include the specific dispositions of organizational habitus which is directly tied to the cultural and financial capital of the social classes most represented in each school. In her qualitative study of high school juniors and seniors navigating the college attendance landscape, McDonough found that organizational habitus shaped students’ perceptions about the most appropriate constellation of college choices based on the specific cultural capital status at each school. Ultimately, McDonough found that the variance in resources present at each school, reflected by the socioeconomic status of the school’s immediate community, “contributed to the persistence and reproduction of a social class-based stratified system of postsecondary opportunity that thwarts meritocratic ideas” (p. 150).

Even within community colleges – the predominant pathway for lower-income and other disadvantaged students – structural barriers requiring prior knowledge or experience navigating complex systems - what the authors refer to as “hidden social
prerequisites” (p. 123) inhibit and constrain success for those students (Deil-amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). Utilizing a cultural capital framework for their qualitative study of seven community colleges and seven occupational colleges, the authors found that “disadvantaged students with limited time and finances to devote to education are often confused about their choices. They do not know how to get the information they need, and small amounts of confusion can evolve into large problems of wasted time and poor decisions. Students often come from public schools where counseling services are limited, and they lack the know-how they need to make the required choices” (Deil-amen & Rosenbaum, 2003, p. 123).

The notion that community college students are constrained in their choices and that, for the academically high-achieving students among them, those choices led them first to community college where overall success and completion outcomes are half that of the four-year sector, has garnered notice among researchers interested in the question of “mismatching” or “undermatching”, the phenomena of attending a college where the majority of the student body is on a lower academic level. While peer effects on individual outcomes is still poorly understood, broad patterns of either success or stopping out on the way to a baccalaureate have been documented for high school students entering college directly after graduation, and those effects create large gaps in completion rates. In their study of high-achieving Chicago Public School students - all of whom had 4.0 grade point averages and similar curriculum pathways - Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca (2008) tracked those students according to which kind of postsecondary institution they attended. For those 4.0 GPA students who enrolled in the Chicago region’s most selective university - Northwestern - they had a six-year
graduation rate of 92%. However, for identically matched students who attended a regional, non-selective college in the city - Northeastern Illinois University - their six-year graduation rate was only 27%. Clearly, place matters to the outcomes of students, especially those high-achieving students who have the world of choices at their calling.

However, the differentiation among higher education institutions is so acute, and can be overwhelming to disadvantaged students, that mismatches become inevitable and lead toward what Plank and Jordan (2001) refer to as talent loss. When students from disadvantaged backgrounds are faced with the overwhelming choices inherent in selecting and applying for postsecondary options, the word “haphazard” appears ubiquitously within the literature, that is, these powerful life choices are not guided by well-educated parents who have imparted their knowledge and various forms of capital to their children, but by other forces, constrained as they are by the habitus of the each individual’s family network and school norms (Bell, Rowen-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Grodsky & Jackson, 2009). Indeed, the higher education labyrinth can be said to encourage a haphazard quality to decision-making because of the density of choices and actions needed both to enroll and receive financial aid. As Grubb and Lazerson (2007) have suggested, “only with differentiated institutions and multiple ways of moving through them are false choices both likely and highly dangerous” (p. 223). This confusion in college choice applies to prospective community college transfer students as well as those coming out of high school, particularly for lower-income and underrepresented high-achieving students. Tuition and cost of attendance issues play a significant role in the decision-making of all lower-income students, and for lower-income community college transfer students.
Among prospective transfer students studied, St. John and Paulsen (2002) found that more than half chose their colleges because they were close to their work, because they could have low living costs while attending, or both.

If policy makers intend to follow-up their rhetoric about significantly raising bachelor-degree attainment rates to increase our nation’s economic competitiveness and avoid further dangerous erosion of our economic well-being, then national and state priorities must reverse the trends identified by the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2010). The Committee found that a major shift occurred between 1992 and 2004 among first time low-income college students that reinforces a stratified higher education attendance pattern and threatens to reproduce social status. In 1992, 54% of qualified (passed Algebra II in high school) low-income high school graduates matriculated at four-year colleges and 62% of those students obtained a bachelor’s degree within eight years, compared with only 20% bachelor-degree attainment among their academic peers who started at a two-year colleges in the same time period. However, by 2004, only 40% of qualified low-income high school graduates enrolled in four-year colleges, a decrease of 14 points or 26% within 12 years. This significant shift in initial college attendance among college qualified low-income students toward two-year colleges will result in an overall decrease in eight year bachelor-degree attainment rates among low-income and moderate-income students from 38% to 31% and from 48% to 46%, respectively, figures that contribute to the growing literature on talent loss and mismatches between student and institution (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2010; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Plank & Jordan, 2001).
In summary, the purpose of this research study was to complement existing research literature on the aspirations, motivations, and four-year college choices of high achieving lower-income community college students. There is considerable evidence that this segment of the prospective baccalaureate population is under-studied, and therefore not well understood. Secondly, the literature focusing on transfer student choices and outcomes is unclear and inconsistent with regard to benchmark data on time to degree, especially. This study employed a theoretical mix of econometric and sociological frameworks to undergird the research, including conceptions of stratification and forms of capital. Human capital is ubiquitous throughout the education of economics literature to describe rational personal investments in education to increase skills, wages, and status. Cultural capital is a conceptual framework recognized by leaders of college choice research as a particularly comprehensive method for understanding contexts of choice among lower-to moderate-income students, minority students, and non-traditional students (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2006a).

As shown in the next chapter this study utilized a qualitative approach to understanding the research questions around baccalaureate choice for transfer students. The research literature is clear in suggesting that qualitative approaches are not only helpful in better understanding the complexities of choice, but also under-utilized in research on the populations of students relevant to this study (Behrman & McPherson, 1998; Luker, 2010; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009; Perna, 2006a; St. John, 2006; Stuber, 2009).
Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Study Design and Rationale

This study utilized a qualitative approach in understanding the research questions of baccalaureate college choice for community college transfer students. The research literature is clear in suggesting that qualitative approaches are not only helpful in better understanding the complexities of choice, but also under-utilized in research on the populations of students relevant to this study (Behrman & McPherson, 1998; Luker, 2010; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009; Perna, 2006a; St. John, 2006; Stuber, 2009). The research questions at the core of this study – which focused on the multiple influences that shape college transfer considerations among lower-income, high achieving community college students - provided an ideal framework for applying an emergent research design.

This research project employed a phenomenological approach to interpret collected data from the respondents’ perspective. A phenomenological approach to qualitative research is a deliberate acknowledgement that facts, knowledge, or data are constructed subjectively based on meanings gathered from human interactions and interactions with existing social structures. As Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest,
“social phenomena, such as language, decisions, conflicts, and hierarchies exist objectively in the world and exert strong influences over human activities because people construe them in common ways. Things that are believed become real and can be inquired into” (p. 4). Respondents’ lived experiences were given voice through the use of semi-structured interviews conducted solely by the primary researcher. Semi-structured interviews avoid the use of an overly structured survey-like instrument that rigidly follows a prescribed script. Instead, a semi-structured interview allows for a freer conversational interview to take shape guided by the research questions as a framework, and allowing for unanticipated, probing questions to pursue areas of interest relevant to that framework. Mason (2002) suggests that the interview should be treated “as a site of knowledge construction, and the interviewee and interviewer as co-participants in the process” (p. 227).

A pre-constructed interview protocol that reflected the research questions were utilized to guide the interviewer in data collection. This general protocol encouraged respondents to discuss their own lived experiences as they have navigated and interpreted the higher education pathway toward a four-year college. Over many interviews and continuous analysis, clear patterns emerged that both confirmed conceptualizations and theories underpinning the study, or suggested alternative directions for theoretical examination (Kuzel, 1999; Mason, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3.2 Research Questions

3.2.1 Research question one: What are the factors that influence low-income, academically talented community college students when considering transferring to a four-year college or university?
3.2.2 Research question two: What are the factors that influence low-income academically talented community college students when deciding to attend an admitting institution?

3.3 Site Selection

As Creswell (2008) suggested, in qualitative research “we identify our participants and sites based on places and people that can best help us understand our central phenomenon” (p. 213, emphasis added). A purposeful sampling approach was used, which allowed the researcher to “intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (p. 214). Thus, three community colleges in Michigan were selected to identify and interview a wide diversity of participants who all shared the characteristics germane to this study, i.e., lower-income high-achieving Michigan community college students. These three colleges differed in their size, setting, and populations. However, the primary sampling strategy considered in selecting these colleges as research sites was convenience. Collegial relationships existed with key administrators and instructors at each of these colleges, relationships that provided key access and acceptance of the research project itself, and in identifying students who met the research criteria. Secondary sampling considerations included geographic differences, which correlate to college size and student demographics.

Urban community colleges nationally are often organized in multiple campuses to serve the many neighborhoods of a large city. These colleges typically have the largest enrollment of any other community college in the state, enroll a higher percentage of underrepresented minorities, serve a higher percentage of remedial students and, like rural colleges, offer a large mix of technological or vocational pathways in addition to
their traditional transfer pathways (Calcagno, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2008; Boswell & Wilson, 2004; Goldrick-Rab, 2007). Suburban community colleges are located within bordering suburbs of the largest city, and in the State of Michigan, the community colleges located within the Detroit Metropolitan area are numerous, large, and often better funded and staffed than either the urban or rural colleges (Calcagno, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2008). Rural colleges are the smallest of the State’s community colleges, with enrollments ranging from 1,200 - 3,000 students, and, despite the fact that rural colleges constitute close to two-thirds of all publicly controlled community colleges often serving as the sole higher education institution over vast stretches of rural counties throughout the country, distinctive characteristics of rural community colleges and their students remains under-studied (Higgins & Katsinas, 1999; Moltz, 2011). Out of the 28 public community colleges in Michigan, 12 are rural.

3.4 Participant Selection

The goal of this study was to explore college choice considerations among lower-income, high-achieving community college students seeking to transfer to a four-year, baccalaureate-granting institution. The participants selected for semi-structured interviews in this study required specific characteristics and were therefore selected utilizing purposeful sampling as described above.

Within the range of purposeful sampling options, the techniques utilized to better understand the research questions of this study included both maximal variation and snowball sampling, which captured the broadest possible number of variables and are considered the preferred tools within phenomenological research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stage & Manning, 2002). Kuzel (1999) also notes that one of
the benefits of maximal variation sampling is in challenging the researcher’s own preconceived biases about expected outcomes. As such, the many factors, or variables, of choice considerations among prospective four-year transfer students emerged and were expressed during interviews within the specific context of their unique community college setting. The specific characteristics of participants included (a) enrolled first-time community college students who have not previously attended a four-year college; b) community college students who have applied to one or more four-year colleges and have made a decision to enroll in one of them; (c) lower-income based on federal Pell Grant eligibility; (d) academic high-achievement, i.e., students who have a cumulative college grade point average of 3.5 or above, based on a 4.0 scale.

There were four primary methods for participant identification. First, flyers approved by the University of Toledo Institutional Review Board, then by the Institutional Research offices within each community college, were posted in high-trafficked areas of the college asking for student participation in the study and offering a monetary incentive of $30 only for those ultimately participating in an interview. Flyers identified the specific needs of the study, i.e., that the student has not attended a four-year college previously; has applied, been accepted, and is planning to enroll at a four-year college; is eligible for federal Pell Grant financial aid; has taken at least 25 college credits; and has a 3.5 grade point average or above. Second, personal contacts within the administration and faculty of each of the sites selected were sent copies of the recruitment flyer and asked to suggest or encourage students to participate. Third, prospective respondents were asked, via snowball sampling, to recommend an acquaintance as another prospective interview respondent. These prospective respondents were given the
flyer by their acquaintance and asked to contact me via email or telephone for more information. Fourth, after prospective students contacted me, I confirmed that they match the criteria of the study as spelled out in the flyer by asking them pertinent questions through telephone screening. I approached each of the three community colleges chosen for this study separately, one after the other, accepting the first four to seven respondents who match the criteria from the first college approached, and then following suit with the second and third. I received a total of seven matches at each college and completed seven interviews in the college library at each college sequentially.

In total, 21 individuals were interviewed. Each participant was screened via phone or email prior to the interview to confirm that they fit the criteria for the study. However, during the interviews themselves, it emerged that the experiences of four participants did not fit the research criteria. Two participants received grants or scholarships, but not Pell Grants, thus they did not fit the lower-income criteria. One student carried a cumulative grade point average below the 3.5 criteria. Finally, one student enrolled in a four-year college after high school, not a community college, which was outside the criteria as well. Thus, only data from 17 of the subjects was used in the final analysis after reaching a stage of saturation, or redundancy. Saturation is achieved “when the same information is heard repeatedly throughout the interviews” (Stage & Manning, 2003, p. 40). As Kuzel (1999) suggested, 12 to 20 respondents are needed “when looking for disconfirming evidence or trying to achieve maximum variation” (p. 42). It is at this point of saturation when a higher degree of trustworthiness can be achieved in the accumulated data.

3.5 Data Collection & Identification of Themes

Semi-structured interviews with respondents were guided by an interview guide
consisting of four-to six introductory interview questions (see Appendix A) that started with broad, open-ended questions focused on factors influencing student transfer decisions, and proceeded with examples of probing detailed questions that pursued threads of relevance as they applied to the research questions. Qualitative researchers have reported that interview questions that are too general or abstract often prompt clarification requests from the interviewee or the answers given “may often appear very clichéd and empty of any grounded meaning” (Mason, 2002, p. 228).

One approximately 60 – 90-minute audio-recorded interview per respondent was conducted, after the participant had read, initialed, and signed the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C) permission to record. Participants were asked to identify a comfortable, relatively quiet area on campus to record the interview and all agreed on each campus to meet at the campus library inside a study room. Immediately following each interview, observations were recorded in an observational field journal. Interview transcriptions were contracted and done within two weeks of each interview.

A process of inductive coding and categorizing into themes was conducted within the NVivo software program, a process that allowed relationships between themes to emerge (Miles & Huberman, 1994). NVivo was chosen after participating in a class on qualitative data analysis and having the opportunity to import data into eight different qualitative data analysis software programs. NVivo’s strengths include the number of ways that data can be viewed, manipulated, sorted, and displayed, and the relative ease in doing so. The primary function of NVivo is to code the interview transcripts for relevant themes and patterns that can shape a coherent response to the research questions.
The first step in my analysis and identification of themes was to write notes in an observational field journal immediately following each interview, notes consisting of memorable quotes, ideas, and themes that seemed to emerge from the interview. Secondly, I listened to the audio recording and wrote more detailed observational notes about potential quotes to be used and refining emerging themes. After receiving the written transcript, I uploaded the document onto NVivo and began creating codes as ideas and potential themes emerged from the transcript, a process Creswell (2008) describes as “lean coding”, in which as average of 10 – 15 codes were assigned per transcript (p. 252). After coding all 17 interviews, a total of 34 codes had been created (see Table 1).

Reducing these data into five to seven major themes, as recommended by Creswell (2008), required a reiterative process of writing down prospective themes and then attempting to substantiate or justify each prospective major theme with sufficient participant interview data and written text. This writing exercise often produced false or misleading themes which were discarded or layered into themes better aligned to the bulk of the data itself. Initial coding and written analysis resulted in the identification of three main themes and four sub-themes as major influences and factors in the transfer college choice considerations of high-achieving, low-income community college participants.

Major themes are presented in the findings of Chapter Four. Discussion, analysis, and implications of those themes are presented in Chapter Five.

3.6 Participant Safeguards

Since the personal interview format employed in this study involved detailed, open-ended, and probing questions designed to construct meaning and understanding about college choice considerations, it was imperative that the data procedures, data
collection, and data analysis process was transparent and well understood by each respondent, and that each respondent was protected through standard ethical conduct and confidentiality measures. Safeguards protecting participants began with approval of by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Toledo, which examined proposed interview questions and overall research design to ensure that ethical conduct was clearly delineated. Institutional Research offices at each of the three community colleges required separate research project forms which were reviewed and approved. There were numerous participant safeguards for this study. Safeguards included (a) a signed and initialed Informed Consent Form that clearly outlined the goals of the study and the plan for how data from their interview would be handled and utilized within the study; (b) actual participant names replaced by pseudonyms within the written study; (c) destroyed interview recordings after transcription and analysis; (d) participants told they had the option of not answering a particular question or ending their interview and requesting that their involvement in the study be terminated and all recorded data be given over to them or destroyed; (e) participants asked to review and approve a contextual interview summary document, which included any uses of direct quotes by the participant to assure accuracy and credibility of the recorded data (member checks); (f) attempted to include participants as respected members of the larger research process, a form of reciprocity in the research that builds trust and authenticity, and; (g) recorded non-verbal elements of the interview within the observational field journal to provide nuance or augment the taped interview transcript (Stage & Manning, 2002).

3.7 Trustworthiness and Limitations

A persistent criticism of employing interview techniques for data collection is the
small number of participants in data collection and the constraints those numbers place on constructing conclusions that are relevant beyond the small sample size (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stage & Manning, 2002). Low numbers of respondents stand in stark contrast to what traditional quantitative researchers consider to be the gold standard of research – the randomized experimental study involving hundreds, if not thousands of respondents that seek to ensure a strong standard of both internal and external validity. In contrast to quantitative methods, Guba and Lincoln (1989) employ an alternative assessment of validity with a focus on the trustworthiness of qualitative data, specifically, establishing the credibility of the data recorded and analyzed (as an analogue to internal validity); its transferability, or applicability of findings to other settings (as an analogue to external validity or generalizability); its dependability, (as an analogue to reliability); and its confirmability, (as an analogue to objectivity).

To gain credibility, triangulation of data is necessary. Triangulation is a method utilized to broaden the number of data points and increase the trustworthiness of the research. To minimize the risk of transcription mistakes and increase trustworthiness, multiple sources of data analysis was rigorously reviewed including listening to the entire audio recording and filling in missing details on the written transcripts, consulting observational field notes, and utilizing member checks (Creswell, 2008). To assure greater levels of trustworthiness a contextual interview analysis, or profile, that summarized the interview and included all direct quotes that I flagged for possible use in the written report was sent to each participant via email in addition to the fully transcribed interview. Based on feedback from six of the 17 respondents, corrections were made to the transcript and the contextual analysis. The other 12 members approved
the summary and the transcription without corrections made. Member checks are important not only for the credibility of the study, but also serve to include respondents into the research process and ensure that they have a voice in the final product. This process is considered by Guba and Lincoln (1989) to be “the single most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239).

Transferability is a unique construct within qualitative research because, while it may be considered an analogue of external validity within quantitative studies, “transferability is always relative and depends entirely on the degree to which salient conditions overlap or match” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 242). There is a level of elasticity within the interviews themselves—bounded by recollections of story and fact that are uniquely situational for each respondent— that presents a challenge to the applicability of any interview-based research. The technique utilized in this study to assure transference is what Guba and Lincoln refer to as “thick description” (p. 242), wherein enough detail was layered into the questioning and analysis to provide for as full a picture of the story as possible.

The confirmability and dependability of the qualitative data are particularly significant because of the distinctly subjective nature of both the interview data and its interpretation. Researcher bias is a persistent criticism of qualitative methods, “in which data collection or analysis are distorted by the researcher’s theory, values, or preconceptions” (Maxwell, 1999, p. 92). There may be a tendency to either inflate or dismiss data according to its relationship, or lack thereof, to the underlying research questions and conceptual frameworks. Some research bias is inevitable, but acknowledging personal bias and describing how I lessened its impact is necessary.
Furthermore, my personal biases must be accounted for in the data analysis process as well. I bring clear biases into this research project. I took two academic courses at a community college (not one included as a site for this study), and had positive experiences with the course instructors and the ease of transfer to the four-year institution. In my professional employment at a four-year college, I managed a grant project to increase the number of community college transfers to the four-year college, with particular attention to lower-income transfer students. Throughout the management of this transfer-focused project, I built collegial relationships with staff and instructors at all 31 of Michigan’s community and Tribal colleges learning, from counselors, instructors, and students themselves, and learned, along the way, about the multiple barriers to four-year college access for transfer students generally, and the additional access barriers to a large selective state university. In fact, two of the 17 participants in this study applied to my four-year institution, but their applications and decisions had already been made during our interviews. I made certain to treat these two participants exactly the same as the other participants in the questions and follow-up probing questions asked.

As a professional advocate on behalf of prospective low-income transfer students, I recognized the significant risks to trustworthiness of the data if, for example, I identified myself too closely with the participants as an advocate on their behalf. To assure that interpretations were not, as Guba and Lincoln warned, “simply figments of the evaluator’s imagination” (p. 243), I carefully and consistently recorded within my observational field journal every step of the interview and analysis procedure, such that data were transparently traced to original sources as needed as an audit check.
A related limitation of the dependability of interview data is the inherent power imbalance between researcher and respondent, an imbalance that has the potential to be “oppressive” to the extent that it limits or distorts the responses from interviewees and could produce knowledge unfavorable to the interviewee (Kvale, 2006, p. 483). Mitigating the inherent power asymmetry in interviews requires an understanding of all personal biases and transparency in all communications with the interview participants, providing each individual with clear explanations of the goals and purposes of the research, expected outcomes of the interview, and allowing interviewees to review the transcription of their interview and the final study itself (Kvale, 2006).

3.8 Summary

This study occupied a narrow, yet growing, subset of college choice research, specifically, college choice considerations for lower-income high-achieving community college students transferring to a four-year, baccalaureate-granting institution. To better understand the complexities and nuances involved in the four-year college choice process, I utilized a qualitative research approach with a purposeful sampling and semi-structured interview format that involved 17 participants at three community colleges in Michigan.

Various strategies were employed that ensured the trustworthiness of the method and analysis, including the use of an observational field journal, clearly communicated goals and outcomes of the study with participants, member checks, cross-case analysis, peer debriefings, and triangulated data collected. In addition, several safeguards that protected the rights, reputations, and personal integrity of the interview respondents were incorporated within the design of this study. As Miles and Huberman (1994) have
suggested, qualitative data is characterized by its “richness and holism, with a strong potential for revealing complexity; such data provide “thick descriptions” that are vivid, nested in a real context and have a ring of truth that has strong impact on the reader” (p. 10). The next chapter reviews themes found from analysis of the participant interviews.
Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of interview data collected from 17 high-achieving, low-income community college students considering baccalaureate college transfer choices. The findings of the qualitative data were guided by the following research questions:

4.1.1 Research question one: What are the factors that influence low-income, academically talented community college students when considering transferring to a four-year college or university.

4.1.2 Research question two: What are the factors that influence low-income academically talented community college students when deciding to attend an admitting institution?

I held recorded interviews in reserved, private library study rooms of three community colleges with high-achieving students who had applied for transfer to a baccalaureate institution. With few exceptions, these students readily shared their backgrounds, memories, and influences; their extraordinarily busy but focused lives; and
their future dreams with me. They generously allowed repeated follow-up questions from me that probed deeper into potential veins of relevant detail. Only two students stood out as initially hesitant to provide many details, offering only brief answers that left much to be explored. In their brevity, though, these two students spoke concisely and meaningfully about their experiences and added depth to the overall data.

One of these less talkative students, Scott, uttered a short comment that reflected the experience of many students in describing their current lives and hectic schedules. “It’s not fun” he said. The notion that college was not fun struck me as a signifier, a touchstone feeling among many students in this study that succinctly described the differences between traditional and nontraditional college students who are now the majority among all college students nationally. No other student mentioned the word fun in their interview with me: it wasn’t part of their vocabulary in describing their current lives. Anne complained that none of her friends understood why she couldn’t go out with them, but smiled confidently in describing how she would photograph her degree and post it on Facebook. Claire discussed the full load of 18 credits she was taking while also working as a waitress at a local restaurant and seemed resigned to the fact that, as she said with a sigh, “my social life is limited.” These students did not socialize often with other students at their community college. They did not attend collegiate sports games. They did not drink or go to parties or join fraternities or student groups. They did take full loads of credits, studied hard, and worked in retail, restaurants, or Work Study in the afternoons or evenings and on weekends. They took care of their children and fixed their cars. As a group, they were driven by their academic momentum and future plans. They were ambitious, hard-working, confident, focused, and kind.
The personally detailed stories these 17 participants shared with me yielded three main themes and four sub-themes that informed both their transfer college consideration and their final decision. These themes were reduced from an initial list of 34 codes that emerged from data analysis (see Table 1.1). The first theme was the geographic theme that compelled participants to restrict their transfer search process to within 100 miles or two-hours driving time from their home, largely due to family or work-related priorities. All of them were intently focused on completing a baccalaureate nearby. None of them felt the need to look far away for a degree program that could be had, with more convenience, closer to home. Some, like Kim and Jeff, were warmed by thoughts of going to college in California to join what they perceived as a more vibrant, tolerant, and hopeful environment. But neither Kim nor Jeff seriously considered a move out-of-state. Kim was geographically confined by a custody agreement requiring her and her daughter to remain within 100 miles from her ex-husband. Jeff was confined by his own ambitious plans to transfer and graduate from a local four-year college debt-free. He lived with his parents and worked at a fast-food restaurant off campus and a Work Study job at his community college.

It was clear from the conversations that unfolded with all these talented students that what mattered most for them in the context of their busy lives was not what baccalaureate college they would choose for transfer but how they would achieve it given their current constraints. Looming large as a heavy constraint was the financial cost of college, which is the second main theme that emerged from the study. Karen reflected on what she was thinking as a senior in high school, when many students have already applied and been accepted at colleges of their choice: “I thought, okay, I don’t have
money to go to college, so I’ll go here (community college) and then go to there (four-year college).” Sue quietly recalled her assessment of college options as a senior in high school, one again constrained by financial considerations. There was no regret or self-pity in her voice because her financial circumstances limited her choices, even as she and many other students in this study talked about observing some of their high school peers matriculating at various four-year colleges. Sue accepted the reality of her parents’ situation candidly. “My parents are going through tough financial times right now so I didn’t want them to pay too much for my college. At the same time, I didn’t just want to stop going to school and start working so I came here (community college).”

All students were extremely aware of the national spotlight on rising college loan debt and were worried about how their own limited financial means and experiences would fit into that troubling national picture. They were worried about loan debt, many were determined to maintain current jobs, and to reduce costs by living at home. The result of both the geographical and the financial constraints was that college choice became simpler. Two-thirds of the students in this study applied to only one baccalaureate college for transfer. All except one of the other six students applied to two colleges, both within 100 miles of their home.

The third theme that comprehensively impacted transfer college decisions, self-motivation and ambition, is detailed in this chapter through four sub-themes according to the specific nature of the participants’ motivation to succeed. The sub-themes include: (a) motivation to transfer and succeed from prior workforce experience; (b) motivation to transfer and succeed with or without family guidance or support; (c) motivation to transfer and succeed from intellectual curiosity; (d) motivation to transfer and succeed
with or without counselor or instructor support.

Following emergent codes (table 1.1 below), the next section provides a summary description of the participants in this study, followed by a detailed description of the three main themes and four sub-themes that emerged from the data, supported by participant quotes from their interviews. The final section of this chapter will summarize the results.

Table 1.1

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4.2 Summary of Participant Profiles

Seventeen participants from three community colleges in Michigan were interviewed for this study. All had completed at least 25 credits at their college, had achieved a grade point average of at least 3.5 and were actively considering or submitting applications for transfer to a four-year, baccalaureate institution. As shown in Table 1.2, below, six participants were male, 11 were female. Their ages ranged from 20 to 51 (M = 23). Fifteen of the 17 participants were first in their family to attend college (first generation). One identified as American Indian, two as Hispanic, two as Arab-American, two as Black, and 10 were White.

Three participants from two different colleges were home-schooled from kindergarten through high school before entering college. All three home-schooled participants were first generation students, though two had older siblings that had also attended college. Two of the home-schooled participants completed the equivalent of 12th-grade curriculum work at home. The third registered and completed his General Equivalency Development credential (G.E.D.) at his local community college and then immediately enrolled in general education courses full-time. All three readily identified the centrality of religious affiliation within their family or community. Two identified as Christian, the third as Catholic. Two of these participants had participated in mission trips abroad while the third had ambitions to do so after receiving a bachelor’s degree.

Six participants had wide achievement gaps between their high school grade point averages (below 3.0) and their community college record (above 3.5). A lack of motivation was the clear reason given for academic achievement differences among those six participants. A different set of five participants were single parents. Three had grown
children they raised alone and two participants had one young child whose care was provided, in part, by the participant’s parents. A sixth participant was expecting a child with his girlfriend, due in the same month he planned to matriculate at his chosen transfer college.

All but two of the 17 participants worked while attending college full-time, and of the 15 who worked, they averaged 23 hours per week in a variety of on-campus Work Study and off-campus service-sector jobs. Eight of the 15 who worked had two part-time jobs, often a Work Study job in addition to one off-campus part-time job. The range of hours worked per week was from 15-55. The two participants who did not work, for traditional and cultural reasons, lived with their parents and had tuition and book costs fully covered by Pell Grants.

The majority of participants, 12 out of 17, entered college directly after finishing high school, however, three of those 12 dropped out of college after one or two semester of community college enrollment. Two of the three who dropped out did so after becoming pregnant and third did so for financial reasons related to child care costs. All three expressed regret at dropping out and said that they were motivated and were doing well academically at the time they dropped out.

Seven students had definite ambitions for attending graduate or professional schools after completing a bachelor’s degree, including business (M.B.A.), law, nurse anesthesia programs, and psychology. Two were unsure about graduate school, but the idea appealed to them. Of the eight remaining, their focus was on obtaining full-time jobs immediately after completing their bachelor’s degree.
### Table 1.2
**Participant characteristics**

<table>
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<th>Name</th>
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\(^a\)First generation college degree completer in family  
\(^b\)Home-schooled, no grades  
\(^c\)American Indian  
\(^e\)Identified as Arab American
4.3 Geographical Factors in College Choice

Family ties, particularly the ability or necessity of living at home during college, played a critical role in both community college and transfer college choice decisions for the participants in this study. There were two primary threads to the ways that transfer college choice was influenced by the geography of family ties. The first was financial, since moving out of the family home incurs significant costs. Many participants never considered moving away to college as a viable financial option, a factor that is explored in more detail below. The second thread was cultural. Several participants voiced strong attachment to their family or cultural traditions rooted in their home and community and the need or expectation that they remain nearby. Attending a distant college created a sense of clear discomfort for many participants.

A sense of concern over distance to a transfer college was expressed by Terri, who applied to a private college in a bordering state attended by her honors college advisor. Terri’s advisor strongly encouraged her to choose the out-of-state college, and she had visited and toured the campus there. However, Terri had not often left Michigan and she was tentative and hesitant in describing what it might be like to be so far from home. “I’m just nervous going away, knowing no one there, even if it’s only five hours away. So, that’s kind of my worries.” Despite the pressure she felt from her advisor, Terri chose to attend Midwest State University, only 30 minutes from her home.

Just as financial barriers prevented even the thought of moving out of the house for some, strong family or cultural traditions prescribed, in some cases, participants living at home. Claire, James, Mary, and Karen described growing up in a religious tradition or community that helped shape their choices and three of the four had older siblings who
attended the same community college while living at home. Furthermore, all were planning to live at home after transferring to a four-year college within commuting distance. Among these four, only Claire had applied to a non-local transfer college in addition to her preferred transfer college choice nearby. After being admitted and making the final decision to enroll at the nearby private college and commute from home, she described in a rush of words the sense of ease and relief (and the lack of stress) she felt about her decision:

> It is just that it [local private college] seemed so like it was there. It was so much easier. It had the important things that I was looking for. And so why stress myself out searching for something else when I already have something that fits them all?

Karen also expressed a sense of ease and the avoidance of stress both to her and her family in choosing to attend a local transfer college while living at home. It was clear from Karen’s thoughtful and earnest comments about her parents and her sisters how central they were to the decisions she made about her own life:

> So, I thought it would kind of be, like, hard on my parents, you know what I mean, since my dad has his car and we only have one other car. So coming with them [sisters] would be just kind of easy.

Anne and Kim depended on their grandparents or parents, respectively, to help them with child-care and both emphasized to me that they could not have achieved at such a high level in their community college courses without that trustworthy and free child-care help. Jeff, Dean, Scott, Karen and Terri all lived with one or both parents while attending community college and they did so for financial reasons. The proximity of the
community college to their parents’ house was the most logical reason to attend. Of these five participants, only Jeff, who was attracted to Midwest State University but planned to attend Local State for financial reasons, planned to continue living at home for his bachelor’s degree. Scott’s college choices for both community college and his bachelor’s degree were shaped by the geography of his divorced parents and his grandparents. Living with his dad in high school, he initially enrolled in the local community college but dropped out after a semester to work in a factory. After tiring of factory work, he called his mother who lived over 100 miles away to ask if he could live with her and his step-dad to attend the community college near them full-time. After completing his courses at the second community college, he applied to only one four-year college, near his grandparent’s home and not far from his hometown.

Carol and Jane were both active in the Phi Theta Kappa honor society at their community college and both had a cumulative GPA of close to 4.0. Given their high-achievement, many options for transfer were possible. However, both felt that their transfer college choices were clearly defined by their needs and they applied to only one transfer college, an online accounting bachelor’s degree program at Local Private College that had strong articulation agreements in place with their community college. Approximately two-thirds of their general education and major credits would transfer into the online accounting bachelor’s degree there, significantly reducing the number of courses and costs required for graduation. The completely online program also allowed Jane to continue living with her parents, and for Carol to continue her waitressing job to help pay for classes. Jane crisply described the ease of identifying her transfer college choice, guided by her specific needs for staying at home and completing sooner at Local
Private College because of their generous articulation of credits. “This is what I want”, she said, “and I went for it.”

4.4 Work, Loans, and Financial Factors in Transfer College Choice Considerations

Financial factors in college choice arose conspicuously across all interviews, especially the perception of high cost-of-attendance at four-year colleges and the clear awareness of loan debt and its potential burdens on their lives. Working while attending college full-time for 15 of 17 participants was necessary to help pay the general costs of living and to make up any tuition, supplies, or books shortfall not covered by Pell Grants. Mark’s determination to complete an associate degree and working 15 hours per week on campus was complicated when the state ended Food Stamps for students attending full-time and working less than 20 hours. He subsequently received additional hours in his Work Study job to maintain the state food assistance and completed his associate degree within two years of full-time attendance.

Many students held two jobs, either one Work Study on campus or two off campus. Scott helped his step dad with his carpentry business on weekends and also worked up to 20 hours per week at a gas station during the week. Claire worked part-time at a restaurant and also took 18 credits at the college. She was very clear about why she initially chose a two-year college: “My choice of community college was for economic reasons”. Claire candidly summarized her perspectives on college choice, college costs, and the loan debt of one of her friends, thoughts that accurately reflected the ideas of many other participants. There was significant evidence of anxiety and fear over the unstable status of the economy and the potential of large loan debts. Several times in our
interview Claire’s deep ambivalence and concerns about money at moments throughout her life were palpable through the anxious tone or her words. When it came to college choices, that ambivalence impacted her decisions:

I really can’t, I am not the kind of person that would take out loans. I get stressed out so easily over money. Whichever [college] that would give it to me in the cheapest and fastest way possible was the one I was looking for. Just listening to her [friend] talk about, “I have $500 to pay this month [loan payment] and am making minimum wage”. I know how I handle money. I would be on just pins and needles constantly. So not just her but those kinds of examples specifically were really what influenced my decisions.

Mary was driven to complete her associate degree quickly, using her Pell Grant awards and honor’s college awards while working and living with her sister to attend classes year round. “I’ve been going to school for almost two years without more than a week or so as a break and it’s starting to catch up to me” she said candidly and with humor in her voice. Mary recalled the repeated efforts in submitting, correcting, and resubmitting her FAFSA and financial aid office applications, emphasizing the anxiety it caused: “I actually have nightmares from my memories of the financial aid office.”

Not only was transfer college choice constrained by financial considerations, among others, but all participants chose community colleges for their first college experience, and many for financial reasons. Dean expressed his own experience as a first-time college student at his local community college in matter-of-fact terms:

I kind of personally knew that I was going to have to start out at a community college. I wouldn't say there was too much influence from others on that. Maybe
the financial aspect was more of an influence of my parents, that I got from my parents. Just from where my family was at that point.

Jeff’s community college and transfer choices were specifically influenced by a desire to avoid debt. Despite Jeff’s strong interest in attending colleges with a nationally competitive football program, he chose Local State University because the scholarships he earned combined with Pell Grants, work, and living with his parents meant that he could earn a baccalaureate with little to no debt. The recent recession – one that lasted more than ten years in Michigan and resulted in persistent higher-than-average unemployment rates – was also a factor in Jeff’s choices and shaped the experiences and choices of many other participants. As he described his choices he mentioned the influence of his dad on those decisions:

He was the one yelling all the time I was growing up. So he just operated on a high level of stress, I know that money issues were a big thing for him. So I guess he sort of instilled that in me. So I try to develop a plan where I don’t have to take on debt because maybe that was that fear again because there’s uncertainty of the market scene, the recession. You don’t know if you’ll get a job after you get out but I just didn’t want to take on debt. I’ve never liked being a burden, I’ve always liked being independent ever since I was young. I figured this way would be the best way for me to not have debt.

In summary, financial issues constrained participants’ transfer college choice in significant ways. Many participants were loan-averse and expressed anxiety about the prospect of accumulating significant college debt. This general sense of anxiety drove them to work an average of 23 hours per week in order to pay living expenses for
themselves and for six of them, for their children, while attending school full-time. As a result, participants were exceptionally busy and had little time to consider transfer college options beyond the familiar.

4.5 Motivation and Ambition as Factors Influencing Transfer College Choice Considerations and Decisions

An overarching theme that emerged from all participants in this study was a sense of focused self-determination to achieve their educational or career goals. Whether they were 20 years old or 51, there was an internal forward-moving momentum among the participants, collectively, propelled by academic successes they had already achieved at their community colleges. Participants, as a whole, looked beyond their presumed bachelor’s degree toward the particular job or career they had imagined. Within that long-term perspective, the transfer college choice itself was uncomplicated, constrained in the number of choices by perceptions of high college costs or debt, and relegated to a minor role within the ultimate dual goals of postsecondary completion and career attainment.

Thus, self-directed motivation and self-identified career ambition arose as the most common combined factors in making transfer college choice decisions. Several participants plainly stated that their four-year college choice was just another step toward their career goals, diminishing the importance of where or which college that step would be taken. Furthermore, for several who planned to attend graduate school, the baccalaureate institution often did not matter to them. Their academic record to date gave them confidence about not only completing a bachelor’s degree, but excelling and then applying to, in some cases, highly selective graduate programs.
The majority of interviewees were, as first-generation college-goers, quite literally self-motivated because they lacked specific guidance on college choice from parents or counselors. They independently identified and crafted a plan of advancement and had achieved success in their first stage of college despite a variety of obstacles that might impede their way. Those obstacles include a lifetime of limited financial assets and financial literacy and the limited opportunities that follow; few adults able to provide robust college knowledge guidance, including limited contact with high school or community college counselors; and lack of high-achieving siblings or peers who may have shared and discussed similar ideas and ambitions. They appeared, as a group, to be singularly focused on their educational and/or career goals despite having so few examples of their chosen path within their immediate familial and social networks.

In review, the students I interviewed for this study demonstrated remarkable honesty and forthrightness in responding to the initial set of questions and the multiple follow-up questions I asked that probed more deeply into the reasons for and factors related to their college choices. They did not hesitate to discuss their fears, worries and their plans regarding the next steps in their college journey, particularly the financial costs of a four-year college. And they were clear that remaining near their current home to complete their bachelor’s degree was a logical response to financial constraints. Many were close to their families, had children to care for, or held existing jobs that they wanted to keep by staying where they were and enrolling in a local four-year college. Even for those who moved to their transfer college, they did not go far, remaining within 100 miles from their two-year college.
Two-thirds of the students in this study applied to only one transfer college. They could not find reason or justification for broadening their transfer college search when local or nearby options accomplished their goal of completing a bachelor’s degree. Under financial and family constraints, it was simpler and less stressful to reduce transfer college choices by focusing on local options. With the growing number of articulation agreements between two and four-year colleges, it was also cheaper to attend a four-year college that offered up to two-thirds of course transfer credit toward their bachelor’s degree.

The next section of the chapter divides the motivational factors that influence transfer college choice considerations among participants into four sub-themes including (a) motivation to transfer and succeed from prior workforce experience; (b) motivation to transfer and succeed with or without family guidance or support; (c) motivation to transfer from intellectual curiosity and; (d) motivation to transfer from counselor or instructor support or lack of support. Following the motivation theme will be further findings associated with geographical and financial factors that influence transfer college choices.

4.5.1 Motivational factors in college choice: motivation to transfer and succeed from prior workforce experience. For some participants, workforce experience prior to attending college provided a clarifying and motivating perspective on choosing a college pathway. These students had experienced what the workforce had to offer them without postsecondary credentials, and had, in most cases, quickly tired of their experience. Both Mark and Scott discussed their transfer college and career choices with a sense of purpose and drive to get past college and jump into careers. Both were succinct and
unwavering in their interview responses. Scott enrolled in his local community college in the fall after high school graduation with unclear goals in mind and he lasted only one semester before dropping out to work in a local factory. While there, Scott had plenty of time to think about his regrets and his future – about how little effort he had put into his college classes and the waste of time and money that he now felt about it; and about his long childhood fascination with detective work, which, according to his research, was best achieved with a bachelor’s degree. He soon became restless, describing his feelings after only a few months on the job: “Oh, yeah, almost every day I was thinking, because I worked in the factory, ‘I can’t do this’.” Scott quit the factory and enrolled full-time at another community college while living with his mom, taking full loads for four consecutive semesters and applying to only one four-year college near his grandparents.

Mark also worked in a local factory, starting full-time the summer after graduating from high school and joining his mother, who had worked there for many years.

I worked there the whole summer pretty much and I hated it and it made me realize that I need to start going to college. I put more effort into college because I really don’t want to be stuck in a factory all my life, working places like that.

When he eventually quit the factory job and enrolled in the community college, he had already decided on transferring to a four-year college after completing general education requirements. He had driven to Big State University on a whim with some friends when he was a senior in high school, and liked what he saw. Mark was very busy balancing a full course load and working 20-25 hours per week. Big State was the only four-year university application Mark completed and sent.
Carol dropped out of high school in her junior year and began a job cleaning motel rooms. That experience propelled her to re-enroll for her senior year of high school, study hard, and enroll in her local community college the following year. Motel work, she said, 

[r]eally woke me up to know that “I do not want to do this; I do not like this kind of work at all.” So, that’s why I went back to school. I actually went to one extra day class and two night classes for the year to make up for the missed time and I graduated with my class.

Carol excelled in math and was emboldened by the hard work and success she achieved when she re-enrolled in high school her senior year and graduated with her class. Describing these events from more than 30 years ago, Carol easily evoked the happiness she felt about her on-time high school graduation, the excitement she felt in enrolling in her nearby community college for an accounting major, and the sadness she felt about dropping out after one semester when she became pregnant and sick with the flu. Like Pam, she raised two children alone and maintained a determination to reach her educational and career goals. At age 51 and with two associate degrees behind her, Carol was now completing prerequisites at the community college for an online bachelor’s degree program in accounting while serving as president of her college’s honor society. She was upbeat about the improving state of the economy and her career prospects locally after receiving her degree.

Mary, who was home-schooled on a farm in the South through high school, initially had no thoughts about college in mind. As the oldest child, she took on many chores and responsibilities that amounted to a part-time, and eventually full-time job.
Mary was open and friendly from the start of our interview, trusting the interview process without question and talkative throughout. Mary became the primary academic and music teacher for her youngest siblings and also regularly treated the various sicknesses, cuts, and bruises occurring regularly among her siblings and farm animals. She naturally warmed to nursing responsibilities and was eventually asked to care for her great aunt in Michigan, who needed home care due to advanced cancer. Soon after arriving, her aunt died, and she decided to enroll in a medical technician certificate program nearby, her first experience with college at age 22.

I felt even in high school that I would never get the opportunity to go to college. I was home schooled and got a very good education, but I was never expecting to go to college, it didn’t seem practical to me. But then as I was getting older, I started thinking there’s a lot of things to do in life that need a college degree, and one of the things I thought I wanted to do with my life was to be a nurse and there is no way of becoming a nurse without college.

Mary applied to only one public university nearby her home in the South and expected to matriculate there in September 2012, once her in-state residency tuition was established and the transfer and merit scholarships she won would be assured to cover the majority of her costs. Kim, age 28, had worked progressively up the middle management ladder at a large retail chain since graduating from high school and was thoughtful, balanced, and straightforward when she discussed the serious changes that occurred in her life in the past two years, including divorce, foreclosure on her house, and a her decision to stop the steady upward climb within her company’s management team in order to pursue higher education full-time. After eight years in retail, Kim had reached a
point in her life, with both herself and her daughter getting older, that caused her to reconsider her career goals within the company.

Once I realized I didn’t want to climb the leadership ladder, I didn’t want to be a line leader or store manager, I’m like, “OK what am I doing? This isn’t it.” And that’s when I started thinking about college again and that I needed to do something different. In that sense I was still in my 20s, that now was the time to make that change or I’d never do it and be stuck there like my mom.

4.5.2 Motivational factors in college choice: motivation to transfer and succeed with or without family guidance or support. Participants in this study demonstrated powerful resolve and determination to chart and complete their own educational course, some with strong encouragement from family members, but the majority with little or no guidance. Terri’s parents had not attended college and when she transferred from a small Catholic school to a large public high school in 9th grade, her grades suffered while she focused on a new boyfriend and friends rather than school. Describing her thoughts about college attendance, Terri said “my mom and dad had just gotten a divorce, so they weren’t really there for me, telling me what to do so I was just doing what I thought I should do.” Her older brother had initially attended the local community college when he graduated from high school, but accumulated only 15 credits before dropping out to work full time. When she ultimately enrolled in her local community college and was subsequently recommended by an instructor for the honors program, she said,

At first I was kind of skeptical about the whole thing because I was like, Ohh…I didn’t really think I was that smart, I don’t know. I just kind of always, you know,
I never really had someone to tell me, you know, “I’m proud of you” and this and that.

Terri was tentative at the beginning of the interview, but soon began honestly expounding on relevant details and responses to follow-up questions. She had excelled at the community college, had applied and was admitted to two selective colleges, but expressed a lingering feeling of surprise at the success she had achieved, and the many choices and opportunities ahead of her.

Anne’s parents had also divorced and had attended but not completed community college. They remained largely unavailable to support her college goals. Other family members, however, stepped in for critical support.

My dad and mom they only went to a little bit of college. I don’t think they understand anything about how hard it is. But my grandparents they watch my daughter a lot. So I think if I didn’t have them, I don’t think I could be here.

Neither of Pam’s parents nor her five siblings attended college. When she finally enrolled in a local private two-year business college three years after graduating high school, she recalled the warning her dad gave her about her plans to attend college. “And when my dad learned I was going to take those classes, he said to me ‘you are not focused. You don’t know what you are going to do’.” After completing her second credential, she found a job in the tool and die trade but her inflexible work schedule conflicted with child-care needs. She could not secure help within her large family to fill in child-care gaps and could not afford to pay for it. Pam was eventually laid off after missing too many days of work. Unemployed, Pam and her children fell in and out of homelessness several times, and when the state initiated a workforce retraining program
to address the unprecedented decline in the manufacturing sector she realized that she needed to go back to school a third time.

I was working with the state rehabilitation services and I knew I needed to get job and they weren’t helping get a job. They were saying, “you’ve got to do all that work by yourself, you’ve got to do it yourself.” And I was like, “You know what? I don’t have the skills that are marketable anymore for any field.” So I picked up the phone and started calling colleges and found out about the computer applications specialist certificate program.

Upon graduating in the spring 2012, Pam said about her dad, “I called him up and said, ‘You know what dad, I’m graduating and I’d like for you to be there.’ And he said, ‘I’ll see what I can do’.” Pam was enthusiastic about her father’s somewhat ambivalent response to her graduation invitation, interpreting it as a victory of sorts, his acknowledgement that she was focused and she did know what she was doing.

Lou, age 38, had attended and dropped out from two different community colleges before enrolling again part-time and planning to attend graduation services, after eight years, with an associate degree in education. He was driven over those years to complete college, knowing that he was good at school but feeling unprepared to understand the family and identity dynamics that impeded his college goals. As community college graduation was approaching, Lou struggled to decide on transfer college choices to pursue a bachelor’s degree in education and a teaching certificate in elementary education. One of his education instructors pushed him to transfer to Local State University in the same city, and he had applied and was accepted there – his only transfer application. But he felt conflicted, longing to attend Major State University ever
since high school, yet, for a variety of reasons feeling he could not do so despite his academic honors status. For example, when discussing his enthusiasm about attending Major State University, Lou expertly juxtaposed the college preparatory touchstones of playing in the marching band and reading English literature with the socio-cultural peer imperative of rap music knowledge and affiliation.

So I believed I could go to Midwest State but my community let me know “you don’t belong there”, and I needed to make sure that I was accepted by my community. So I put down the bassoon and the trumpet and quit reading all this Shakespeare, “‘tis noble in the mind” stuff and learned NWA [rap music group].

In addition to financial and family barriers that explained, in part, his uncertainty about applying to Major State, Lou repeatedly emphasized social barriers influenced directly by factors of race and his African American identity. He touched on – but never used as an excuse – the fact that he had a son when he was 17 and claimed sole parenting responsibility for him. As a parent, Lou was determined to change the educational dynamic – especially for college – he had experienced growing up. He expressed immense satisfaction in saying that he regularly sent portions of his Pell Grant and scholarship funding to his son who was a sophomore studying business at an Historically Black College (HBCU) in the South. Lou explained that even though his mother recognized his academic gifts and emphasized the need for him to go to college, she “didn’t know the lingo” of college access and was too wrapped up in her own personal “mayhem and drama” to effectively guide him. In rapidly unfolding sentences, his voice betrayed a sense of regret and bitterness when describing his mother’s “shenanigans”.

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Speaking of his early perceptions of college, and the influence of family and race, he said:

Since elementary school I was introduced to the concept of college through the parents and my family members and the attitude I took from them was that it’s a something I need to do, but it’s a place I can’t get to. So I never really thought it was something for me even though I had known from my mother, aunts, uncles who had attempted college and didn’t succeed or dropped out of high school, that school is the best way to provide for your family and yourself but school isn’t something that people of color get to do. I got that message from right inside the home. From the failure of the people in front of me. From my mother and aunts and my surrogate father, from them failing at it and maybe some of their social experiences. They came home and tried to make me feel like they felt, so to speak, their version, through their filter, and I believed it. I am graduating next week and they won’t be there. My mother and father and family has not helped me whatsoever.

Conversely, several participants described strong and direct support from their family toward the ideal of completing college, even if they were unable to provide specific guidance or financial support. Karen was always encouraged by her parents to think about college from middle school onwards, and they took an active role in discussing her transfer college options with her. Her mother had completed a cosmetology certificate and her dad had taken some classes but never completed a program. Attending the local community college was not in question because both her sister and brother had attended while living at home and had costs fully covered by Pell
Grants. For her transfer college choices and even her degree majors, her father’s opinions again weighed heavily on Karen’s decision, both for financial reasons and cultural and traditional ones. When Karen suggested an interest majoring in psychology in high school, her father pointed out that there weren’t many jobs available in that field and that several of her cousins had opted for psychology and were not yet employed. This job and career-oriented advice from her father seemed logical to her and she accepted it. Karen described the reasons she decided to pursue nursing.

Well my parents both said the medical field is high right now, like get, do something in the medical field. So I thought okay I’m not that good in sciences, it interests me but I’m not good in it. So now that I took that stuff in college and that I’ve actually paid attention, did all my homework, studied, I’m so interested in it that I understand it. I’ve always had that, like, attitude about what I really wanted to do.

Karen applied to only one four-year nursing program to complete her baccalaureate. She had considered three options, all relatively close within one hours drive from her home. Both her father and her mother encouraged her to select the closest one, a private college only twenty minutes away, despite its higher tuition. The decision was based on Karen living at home. There was never an option to live in a dorm or an apartment at a distant college, it was not part of her family’s cultural traditions. Karen and her family were bolstered in their decision by a merit scholarship of $4,000 awarded by the private college. She also received $5,300 in Pell Grant (close to the maximum of $5,500), and $7,500 in subsidized and unsubsidized loans.
A clear sense of pride, love, and respect for a parent was articulated also by James, whose mom left her abusive husband when James was nine years old to raise her four children alone. James’ oldest sister absorbed child-care responsibilities in their home and helped the three younger children with their home-school assignments while his mother worked. The family also benefited from a supportive, tight-knit church community. His mom encouraged James to follow his brother and sister to the local community college, pushing him to complete a GED there before enrolling full-time.

She’s had to be both mom and dad to me. She has been very influential in my academic career and helped me to pursue excellence. She herself never went to college. I don’t think she finished high school even. It’s a hard burden on her to be supporting four kids in this economy where you at least have to have an associate’s to get a good paying job. I respect her a lot, more than any other woman I’ve met. She’s helped me be who I am today. She’s always used her life example as “don’t become like me, pursue what you want through education.” She recently started pursuing her own education herself. She started here at CC. She has overcome so much adversity and she’s still sane and active and very vibrant.

James’ transfer college choice was also very clearly identified. He only applied to Local State University, where his brother currently attended and where his sister was also headed. All three would continue to live at home with their mother.

4.5.3 Motivational factors in college choice: motivation to transfer and succeed from intellectual curiosity. The intense level of motivation to enroll and complete in the face of obstacles was also driven by an intellectual motivation fed by the joy of learning.
Inner intellectual motivation and fulfillment appears in all interviews with the participants. Unlike many of their peers, and in some cases, their siblings, participants largely enjoyed academics and took courage and additional motivation from excelling in their classes. Many participants found a sense of good fit or natural order while enrolled in their community colleges, a departure from their experiences in high school, at their jobs, or at home. Asked how it felt to be back in college after dropping out during the first semester at another community college, Scott replied, “It felt really good to be back in school.”

Terri had more doubts after enrolling in the honors literature class as her first venture into more rigorous courses. The syllabus included a total of 21 books to complete for the semester, which was daunting. Through focus and determination, and while working 35 hours per week as a waitress, Terri excelled. “I was really, really motivated in the beginning and, I was like, I got a 4.0 in the class, I was happy, my mom was happy, so I just kept going from there.”

Mark initially enrolled in auto repair courses thinking that working on cars would provide secure employment. But, like the factory job he took after graduating high school, he quickly tired of the idea of fixing cars for a living and focused on the idea of inventing things, which lead to enrolling in pre-engineering courses. Getting involved with alternative energy now appealed to him, helping to invent sustainable energy products. He said that no one counseled or advised him in this pursuit, and he followed his idea by looking up top engineering programs online. When he discovered that Big State University, only an hour away, had a highly rated engineering college, he decided to focus his attention and apply there. Mark was accepted into Big State’s engineering
college and was making plans to move there with his girlfriend, who was expecting a baby in September. When asked about juggling a newborn alongside full-time engineering studies, he said, “Right now I am really busy, like I am at school from 10 sometimes to 9 at night. Because I got a class in the morning plus I work during the day and a class at night. So I wouldn’t be able to take care of the baby.”

In speaking about becoming a father, Mark remained even-tempered, not registering any visible or audible signs of excitement in his speech. It appeared to be another event that was coming up that needed to be addressed along with finding housing in the fall at his new college for him and his girlfriend and his new baby. Mark’s girlfriend still received cash assistance as a ward of the state’s foster care system, but he was unsure how this assistance would be impacted when she had a child. He remained optimistic, however, suggesting that he knew several people who went to school full-time and had kids. If they could do it, he was confident that he could too.

Kate’s determination to pursue her specific college goals was tested when she was 19 and teaching English abroad. A young man she knew from high school flew to their home abroad and proposed marriage to Kate. Even though her father disapproved of the early engagement, he allowed Kate to make the decision, and she accepted. After her teaching contract expired, she came back to the U.S. to enroll at community college and to prepare for married life. She discovered, however, that her studies were the primary force in her life and the confidence she gained from her success in college became an issue with her fiancée.

He thought that I put him as, like, second best, because I just focused on school all the time. Me and him would be fighting and I would be like, crying over my
books, studying. I didn’t care and I would be, like, “leave me alone, I just want to study, this is the most important thing for me”.

Jane, age 23, also developed a career ambition in her first year at her local community college, to become a community college math and accounting instructor. She had originally chosen her local community college because of their allied health tech prep outreach program she had joined as a senior in high school. Jane had done well in high school scholastically and liked both her math and biology teachers. She was attracted to nursing and the idea of earning a certificate at the community college as a nursing assistant after graduating from high school appealed to her. With a 3.6 GPA in high school and an interest in health, Jane had considered a career as a doctor, explaining “that was actually my first thought, and then I thought that I really didn’t want to be going to school for that long.”

Jane enrolled full-time in the community college after graduating, but on the first day of her microbiology class, she realized she did not want to study nursing anymore. She rearranged her class schedule, enrolled in math and accounting classes, and began a Work Study job with her accounting instructor who soon became her mentor. Her bachelor’s degree choice was clear. Local Private College accepted all her community college credits due to a strong articulation agreement and the accounting degree program it was entirely online, allowing her to continue living at home. With guidance from her mentor, she planned to teach part-time at the community college after completing her bachelor’s and to immediately enroll in the same college’s masters degree program in accounting so that she can pursue full-time teaching at the college.
4.5.4 Motivational factors in college choice: motivation to transfer and succeed with or without counselor or instructor support. The self-motivated participants in this study were, in some cases, directly encouraged by high school or college counselors or instructors to pursue their studies in a particular direction or at a specific college. In other cases, participants absorbed motivation from them indirectly based on what they said or what a counselor or instructor had already achieved. Conversely, some participants were further driven to succeed by a negative experience with counselors or advisors. But in many cases, participants had little to no advice about college choice and academic direction, due primarily to the few counselors available and the wide array of responsibility they held.

Anne seemed to be driven by obstacles themselves, growing more confident about her college goals as more potential barriers confronted her. When she became pregnant during her senior year of high school, the counselors in her school were unhelpful. When she described their reaction to her pregnancy Anne’s voice was pained. It was clear from her voice inflections and the emphasis on the words italicized below that she was still hurt by their actions:

They looked at me and laughed. The dean of students would laugh at me because he thought I wasn’t going anywhere. He was so mean, such a jerk. I saw him last year and told him I was in college and they were like, “no way”, and now they want to add me as friends on Facebook.

Several participants had very little contact at all with high school counselors and relied on their own instincts and research to make academic and college choice decisions.
Jeff was succinct in describing the limited roles that the few counselors in his large high school could perform.

When I started high school there were two counselors then that got cut down to one. So I talked to her briefly, she was a nice enough lady but she couldn’t handle everyone. That’s the way it was there was far too much for her to do. She didn’t really have much time as far as speaking about college.

Sue’s experience was similar. She had some guidance from her older sister about college, but as a junior and senior in high school her attention shifted as the primary caretaker for her father after a car injury left him immobile. Guidance about college choice did not come from school counselors at her school either:

We only had one counselor for about 500 students so it was always, no time, always something else going on, especially in senior year the students wanted to do other things, they wanted prom.

Carol’s perception about high school counselors was that “they were there if you got in trouble.” Trying to remember any college choice counseling from her own large high school, Terri struggled to recall any meaningful contact. “Not really, I mean I did have one, we had a counselor, I don’t know, I don’t really remember, talking to her about many things.” And in other larger high schools, counselors seemed to offer only generalized information to lots of prospective college students of all abilities. Karen recalled a difference between what some classroom teachers were encouraging students to do after high school compared to the advice of her school counselor.
There were some teachers that told us to go to universities right away but our counselor, like she is the one who mainly told us it’s better to come here [community college] first, it’s cheaper.

Dean took advantage of an opportunity to take high school courses at a local tech center, staffed by current or former professionals in engineering or industry of several kinds. The tech center teachers had a strong impact on him and he used their example to guide his college decisions.

When I heard their life stories and how they got to be successful, you know, they were kind of, well, I guess you can say idols. What's common about them is that you find out that they do have a college degree.

Once at their local community college, participants had direct influence, conflicting influence, or no influence from their counselors or instructors on transfer college choice decisions. Sue was motivated to overcome odds or, in her case, her instructor’s low expectations of her academic achievement based on past experiences with students of color. Sue’s explanation of her motivation begins with a rationale, of sorts, for her instructor’s attitude.

They deal with so many other students that don’t come to class and they don’t care to do any other work, and especially me being an African American. It’s weird because some teachers look at all the other students and see how they are behaving and think that you are going to behave the same way. I did have that problem this semester in a speech class. It was very tedious because the teacher thought that all the Black students were going to be delinquents and there was
nobody that would really take the class seriously. You just have to put your all in to that class, and I ended up coming out on top in that class.

For several students, including Sue, Karen, and Lou, counselors at their colleges did not have time to fully comprehend the intricacies among major prerequisites, including the various college and career pathways for nursing and education specifically. Sue and Lou both felt that they had been given advice that caused them to take classes they didn’t need. Karen and Mary both decided on their transfer to a bachelor’s of science in nursing (B.S.N.) program rather than remaining on the Nursing waiting list at their community colleges, despite being counseled to take general education classes while they waited. Once Mary joined the honors group at her college, however, she felt that she received excellent advice about the career and transfer options available to her because advising was a critical part of honors instructors’ responsibilities. The majority of students made their own decisions on coursework and transfer college choices, abetted, to some extent, by family as described above, and also peers.

4.6 Summary

17 high-achieving lower-income students from three community colleges were interviewed to determine the factors and influences on their transfer college choices. Twelve of the 17 participants in the study completed only one four-year college transfer application and five completed two applications. Only one student sent an application to an out-of-state four-year college (which she did not select after being admitted). Nine participants’ chose a four-year college within short commuting distance from their own or from their parents’ home. For those moving to a four-year campus, the distance from their own home or their parents’ home was under 100 miles. Thus, geography, more
specifically, the need or desire to be at or near home, was a clear pattern of transfer college choice among participants.

Second, financial concerns played a decisive role in the transfer college choice of all participants. For many, fear of college loan debt directly shaped their college choice considerations, reducing the decision to colleges within commuting distance from home. For others, the transfer college choice was directly shaped by the strength of credit transfer agreements and transfer scholarships between their community college and their chosen four-year college. If the four-year college accepted the bulk of their community college credit toward earning the baccalaureate, and also offered a merit-based transfer scholarship, the financial incentives to transfer to that college became decisive. Some four-year colleges, particularly those located nearby the community college or directly serving that community college through online degree offerings, were especially prevalent and visible to the participants.

Third, participants expressed high levels of motivation to complete their postsecondary journey and attain their career ambitions. Their motivation was reinforced by academic excellence at their community college – for many, their first experience with high achievement – and further boosted by a sense of urgency to transfer. However, there was little anxiety or concern expressed around their transfer college choice. Completing the baccalaureate was, fundamentally, an expectation among all participants as the necessary step toward their career or intellectual aspirations. The four-year college choice itself was subordinate to their primary career goal. The intensity of their determination to transfer and succeed also weakened the impact of obstacles and disadvantages that thwart
college success for the large majority of lower-income students. For many participants, challenges, or beating the odds, inspired even greater effort.

The next chapter interprets and analyzes the dynamics of the findings and provides recommendations for further study and for low-income student access policy.
Chapter 5

Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine and describe the factors influencing transfer college choice among high-achieving, lower-income community college students in Michigan. 17 enrolled students from three community colleges in Michigan were interviewed following an identical protocol of questions that probed for individually-specific detail about factors in their transfer college choice considerations and decisions.

Conceptually underpinning the purposes of this study were college choice models and cultural capital networks that influence lower-income students’ college choice decisions, an influence that often overshadows factors of pure academic high-achievement or merit. This study fits into research scholarship on equitable access to college.
Chapter Four described the findings from the data, drawn inductively from 34 codes and reduced to three themes and four sub-themes, which are discussed here in relation to the research questions and the research literature. The 17 students I interviewed grew up in all four corners of Michigan’s lower peninsula, representing rural, suburban, and urban environments. Among these students six were male, eleven were female and they identified their race or ethnicity as White, African American, Latino, Native American and Arab American. All of them had financial need and received federal Pell Grants and all of them, except for the two Arab American women, worked outside their homes. In short, these students reflected the national picture of higher education in the U.S. – increasingly diverse, majority female, non-traditional college students with financial need.

What distinguished these students, in addition to their kindness and openness to discuss details of their lives with me, was their high academic achievement at their community college. Given their honor-status academic performance, they had a wide array of choices to make when deciding where to transfer for their bachelor’s degree and would be strong candidates for receiving merit aid – in addition to need-based aid – at any four-year institution. What I found, however, was that most of the talented students I interviewed – two-thirds – did not leverage their high GPA’s toward a wider set of transfer college choices: they applied to only one four-year college within commuting distance from where they lived or within 100 miles from home. Both their first college choice – community college – and their transfer college choices were constrained by several factors, discussed below. Within a broader context, these constraints present a set of challenges to higher education institutions and to the national agenda focused on
increasing degree completion rates. The most basic challenge is financial and can be addressed with a question: how can a growing majority of diverse, non-traditional, lower-to moderate-income students afford to complete a bachelor’s degree when tuition continues to rise above the rate of inflation, when working class and middle class wages have decreased over time, and when state subsidies to higher education have been substantially reduced? This question is not fully addressed within my study because all of the students I interviewed are just beginning their bachelor’s degree journey, accompanied by significantly higher costs. However, the financial concerns of transferring to a much more expensive institution are addressed in this study, alongside the students’ robust academic and career ambitions and generally hopeful outlooks on their futures.

The next section explores the major influences that carried the students in this study to the cusp of successful transfer to their chosen four-year college. Persistent reserves of internally-derived motivation, ambition, and tenacity to succeed were prominent among all participants despite a number of disadvantages that prove to be barriers to success for the majority of lower-income community college students. After discussing the various modes of motivation that drove participants’ academic success, the variety of constraints on their first college (community college) and transfer college choices are discussed, as reflected in the research literature and in the specific findings of this study.

The research questions that guided this study are listed below. These questions were originally conceived to provide understanding and clarity on the transfer college choice considerations of participants within a narrow window of time, i.e., between the
time the participant began considering a transfer college while still attending full-time as a community college student up to the time they made their final decision on attending a four-year college. The semi-structured interviews, however, explored a much broader timescale that probed for thoughts about college, credentials, and career goals much further back into high school, middle school, and even elementary school. Probing for first thoughts about college allowed for a greater depth of understanding about the influences and networks each participant experienced as they progressed toward high school graduation, G.E.D. attainment, associate’s degree attainment and plans for a bachelor’s degree and beyond.

To more clearly address the specific intent of the two research questions, then, a listing of findings for each question is necessary.

5.1.1 Research question one. What are the factors that influence low-income, academically talented community college students when considering transferring to a four-year college or university?

The research literature reflects a number of common constraints on college choice for high school students, but is lacking for students transitioning from community college to a four-year college. In this study, I found that, even for academically high-achieving and experienced college students with multiple transfer options, transfer college choice was constrained by many of the same demographic and structural factors that also constrain low-income and minority high school students, including geographical, financial, and sociocultural constraints. For 16 of the 17 participants, colleges within 100 miles of their home were the only ones considered. For nine of the 17, only colleges within commuting distance from home were considered.
5.1.2 **Research question two.** What are the factors that influence low-income academically talented community college students when deciding to attend an admitting institution?

There was considerable overlap in the findings for this question, since for many participants, the critical factors that influenced their consideration of transfer colleges remained in place when they ultimately made their transfer decision. Geographical/financial importance remained intact and guided their decisions. Sociocultural influences, specifically those focused around racial, ethnic, or cultural constraints or traditions also remained in place. A clear differentiation in question two was found in the ways that many colleges strategically positioned themselves to influence and increase community college transfer through aggressive articulation agreements that accept two-thirds to three-fourths in transfer credit toward bachelor’s degree completion. As several participants approached graduation from their community college, it became increasingly clear to them that their transfer choice was not a choice at all: they were compelled to choose the college that accepted the most transfer credit.

Finally, it was clear that the final decision about transfer college was constrained to such an extent that it was not even a choice for 12 of the 17 participants. Those 12 only applied to one college. All were admitted and planned to enroll and were highly motivated to complete a baccalaureate.

Following the discussion section is a summary conclusion and then implications and recommendations for future practice and future research.

5.2 **Self-Motivation and Ambition as Major Influences of Transfer College Choice**

Barriers to educational achievement and completions are significantly greater for low-income students than for students from higher-income families. As I have
documented in Chapter Two of this study, on average students from lower-income families attend K-12 schools with lower per-student subsidies, lower teacher pay and higher teacher turnover (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002). They disproportionally attend community colleges and the majority are placed into developmental courses that are themselves barriers to course and degree completion. Despite the structural barriers confronting them, participants in this study successfully negotiated the first stage of their baccalaureate quest, demonstrating very high levels of individual motivation and ambition that buffered the negative and accumulative impacts of economic disadvantage. In addition to the structural disadvantages they faced, participants also managed the necessities of work and family care that competed for attention with the time demands of full-time college attendance. They were fully aware and fully committed to the sacrifices they were making to achieve their goals and ambitions. Unlike many full-time students at four-year residential colleges, participants had little to no faculty contact outside of class, co-curricular engagement, or social lives with college peers, metrics that matter in national college learning studies. The students I interviewed can be characterized, as Kahlenberg (2010) has done for many low-income students, as motivated *strivers* who have set ambitious goals for themselves and are hard at work accomplishing them. In my interviews, all 17 students were earnest, honest, modest, focused, and clearly hard-working. They had successfully completed a general education curriculum through a two-year college with little or no loan debt while also working (15 out of 17) an average of 23 hours per week, and in some cases (6 out of 17), providing for school or college-aged children. Fifteen of the 17 students I interviewed were the first in their family to apply to a bachelor’s degree granting (four-year) institution. Three of these 15 students had one or
two parents who had attended, but not completed any type of college credential, and one student’s mother had completed a cosmetology certificate. As many studies have determined (Deil-amn & Rosenbaum, 2003; Goldrick-Rab, 2006, 2007; McDonough, 1997), low-income students who lack guidance from experienced adults, peers, or counselors are most disadvantaged in navigating the courses and costs of college yet the students in this study remained focused and successful.

Motivation to succeed for these high-achieving students, however, was not always present. Half of the students in this study were unmotivated high school students, accumulating a grade point average below 3.0 upon graduation. (Three others were home schooled and were ungraded.) For these nine students, most found a strong sense of motivation by their senior year of high school or when they took a job after graduation and realized an adult life was upon them. Except for Scott, Pam, and Lou, whose first experience in community college directly after high school was not successful, the students were highly motivated to achieve their academic or career ambitions once enrolled. These ambitions included specific careers such as nurse and nurse anesthetist, federal law enforcement, CEO of a large business, accountant, and engineer. Ambitions also included graduate or professional school such as psychology, business, and law.

Intellectual abilities and ambitions also had a strong impact on interview participants’ motivation to pursue a baccalaureate. Several participants initially enrolled for short-term terminal credentials, but grew motivated by their academic success to consider transfer to a four-year college and beyond. James only enrolled in his local community college to attain a G.E.D. (general equivalency diploma) credential, but found classes stimulating and upon obtaining his high school credential immediately enrolled
full-time in a general education transfer-oriented curriculum. Terri was surprised to be asked to join her community college’s separate honors college, saying, “I didn’t really think I was that smart, I don’t know. I never really had someone to tell me, you know, ‘I'm proud of you’ and this and that.” Several participants had first considered attaining a two-year associate degree in nursing (Mary and Sue) or certificates as a teaching aid (Lou), automobile mechanic (Mark), or computer technician (Pam), but subsequently enrolled in courses preparing for a bachelor’s degrees in nursing, education, engineering, and accounting, respectively. Only 39% of entering community college students nationally indicated a baccalaureate as the primary reason for enrolling (Calcagno et al., 2008). The majority of students who do transfer made their decision to do so while enrolled at a community college, not before enrolling, and that was true for 14 participants in this study (Jenkins & Weiss, 2011; Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

Awareness of their own intellectual ability and the career possibilities available to them as they advanced seemed to emerge as successes accumulated. One interpretation of the participants’ delayed discovery of their academic abilities and future possibilities is that they were simply “late bloomers”. However, a variety of specific constraints – over and above the structural school and demographic inequities described above – acted, initially, as barriers to attainment. The next sections explore the dynamics of those specific constraints impacting their transfer college and career ambition choices.

5.3 Geographical and Family Constraints on Transfer College Choice

A clear constraint on transfer college options for participants in this study was geographical. Their busy lives as full-time college students, their existing jobs, and a variety of family considerations often precluded, in their minds, the option of applying to
a non-local college. As Paulsen and St. John (2002) found in their high school student study, more than half decided on their first college based on proximity to their existing jobs or to their home, or both. Both Lang (2008) and Ehrenberg (1994) found similar results in their studies of two-year college attendance. None of the 17 high-achieving community college student participants in this study planned to transfer to a four-year college more than two hours away, or about 100 miles, from their home. Nine of the 17 planned to commute to their transfer college from either their own or their parent’s home. The other half of participants planned to move to their chosen transfer college but all were still within 100 miles from their childhood home. Terri was the only participant among 17 who had applied to an out-of-state college for transfer, and in contemplating the idea of transferring there, she reflected the types of concerns heard from other participants as well: “I’m just nervous going away, knowing no one, even if it’s only five hours away. So that’s kind of my worries.” Terri eventually chose the nearby college option.

Participants’ desire to stay near home was informed by several factors. They were often embedded within a known network of family and work connections that provided a sense of security and ultimately prevented consideration of transferring to a distant college. For many, it was simply easier and less stressful to commute from home. In Karen’s case, for example, access to the family car for her and her sisters was a concern and living outside her home in a residence hall or apartment was not an option in her tight-knit Arab American family. Claire had taken 18 credits and then 16 credits during her last two semesters at community college, and was working part-time off-campus. She also reflected a common reality among many participants, the lack of time to research
and consider a distant college, and the ease of choosing a nearby college. In describing the local private college she eventually chose to attend while living at home, she said “It’s just that it seemed so like it was there. It was so much easier.” For those with children and/or existing jobs, moving away to college seemed an unnecessary difficulty. For Kim, whose child custody agreement mandated remaining within 100 miles of her ex-husband, more distant college attendance was a violation of the law. Participants rarely left the state for any reason, with the notable exception of all three home-schooled students, who had done mission work either in other states or abroad.

5.4 Financial Constraints on Transfer College Choice

Financial issues are one of the central constraints impacting the transfer college choices among participants in this study, reflecting findings in the research literature on low-income college access for graduating high school students (Lang, 2008; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2006b; Titus, 2006). Financial considerations included college attendance strategies to minimize loan debt or obtain scholarships, to work on campus and/or off-campus for an average of 23 hours per week, and to live with one or both parents or grandparents. Studies of low-income high school students have found that most students attended public and two-year colleges, a decision shaped directly by cost of attendance considerations, and only a small percentage lived on campus (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Mullen, 2010; Paulsen & St. John 2002).

Like the high school students in the studies cited above, all of the community college transfer participants in this study not only chose to attend a two-year college, their transfer college was directly shaped by financial considerations. None of the three community colleges in this study provided on-campus housing so all participants
commuted and needed access to cars. For the nine participants who planned to continue living in their own home or apartment, or with their parents after transferring, the range of choices was bounded by proximity to home.

Secondly, concerns and even anxieties about college costs and the economic recession were plainly evident in the voices of the participants and also constrained their choice considerations. Those anxieties reveal a sense of uneasiness specifically about financing their transfer college costs, the financial aid process itself, and the potential dangers of accumulating high loan burdens. Jeff referenced a sense of fear associated with the unprecedented 10-year recession in Michigan as an influence in his transfer plans: “So I try to develop a plan where I don't have to take on debt because maybe that was that fear again because there's uncertainty of the market scene, the recession.” Another participant, Karen, changed her choice of major while at community college from an interest in veterinary school to a focus on nursing courses as a result of fears about the poor economy and the availability of jobs. The vocational aspirations of students, driven by economic concerns, was clearly evident among participants like Karen, Mary and Sue, all of whom were pursuing nursing bachelor’s degrees. When I asked if she had ever considered medicine as a career, Mary said that becoming a doctor was one of her first thoughts, but she reconsidered upon realizing the length of training required. Entering community college for the first time at age 23, Mary said “even two years to me just felt like a really long time.” Jane told me a similar story when I asked if she had considered medicine. She described how much she “absolutely loved” her math teacher. “And I had a biology teacher who I liked and I really wanted to be a nurse as a result. Science does interest me.” When I asked about studying medicine, though, she
said, “[t]hat was actually my first thought, and then I thought that I really didn’t want to be going to school for that long.”

These nursing students reflected the ambitious, almost impatient energy of all other students in the study – they knew what they wanted and they wanted to get there quickly. Part of the reason for their haste, it was clear to me, was their dual concern over cost and debt. Mary and Jane knew that going to medical school meant not only taking much longer but also taking on significant debt.

Mullen (2010) describes the different life and career tendencies between upper and lower-income college students in her comparative study at two different colleges and the constraints on both college and career choice for lower-income students: “[w]hile most of the privileged students adopt a liberal arts approach to their education, reinforcing their sense of intellectual merit and entitlement, their less fortunate peers take a vocational approach, resulting in a more limited set of future occupational choices (p. 13). This vocational approach was very clear in my interviews. Jane excelled in math and was already helping to teach sections of math at her community college. She also liked science and had the ability and drive to excel academically, go to medical school, and become a doctor. However, neither Jane nor Mary could see themselves in school so long and take on so much debt – they felt compelled to work and to earn.

A tenuous grasp of the ways college costs are financed and misunderstandings about how need-based aid, in contrast to merit-based scholarships, are awarded is reflected within the research literature, especially among low-income and underrepresented minority high school students (Baum & Schwartz, 2012). Students in these groups consistently overestimate cost of attendance and underestimate both need-
based and merit-based awards which acts to both constrain college choice and to decrease the odds of attendance and completion. Despite their significant experience in college already, the same tenuous grasp and misperceptions about financing transfer college attendance was apparent within the large majority of the students in this study as well. As academic high-achievers and Pell Grant-recipients, these students were eligible and often received extensive need-based grant and merit scholarships from their transfer college but the very low number of applications they submitted diminished the potential for higher awards. Participants also regularly cited examples of relatives, friends, or news stories demonstrating the danger of accumulating high loan burdens. Many also assumed that a particular four-year college was not feasible for them without having investigated the potential net costs, even via any college’s net cost calculator. As Claire said, “I would just look at the websites and see the cost of attendance and kind of like, well, I will move on to something else.” The financial fears and anxieties raised by many participants and shown in Chapter Four are critical to understanding the influences on college choice.

Finally, the extreme busy-ness of their lives, a result of their need to work while attending courses full-time, left little time to consider a broader number of transfer college choices, fill out multiple application essays, or engage in co-curricular or social activities. Anne balanced 15 credits and over 20 hours of work per week, along with caring for her 2-year old daughter. Two prospective in-state colleges that interested her – one private and one public – were eliminated based solely on time availability: “I don't have the time to really sit down and think of huge essays then not get accepted.” For the older students, like Kim, time itself was a consideration in her pathway to a baccalaureate
when she reflected on her college goals: “I’m already this old already. I don’t want to start something and then not finish it.“

Suggestions for why participants – like many of their cohorts across the country – did not broaden their application pool to seek lower costs will be addressed below.  

**5.5 Racial and Ethnic Constraints on Transfer Choice**

Sweeping changes in demographic trends across the U.S. suggest the need for critical discussion about the college experiences and transfer considerations of underrepresented minorities in any higher education study, i.e., African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans. Wide gaps in both college attendance and completion rates continue to persist nationally between majority White students and underrepresented minority students in higher education and there are clear lines of stratification in the types of colleges attended by underrepresented minority students. Furthermore, as Gándara, Alvarado, Driscoll, and Orfield (2012) have found, completion and transfer rates for underrepresented minority community college students are lowest of all groups.

Because low-income and underrepresented minority students are over-represented at community colleges compared to the four-year sector relative to their national population, it was not surprising that my interview recruitment flyers attracted students representing five racial or ethnic groups. A close examination of the factors contributing to college choices for the eight minority students in my sample revealed unique constraints and pressures on them, within the larger societal context of persistent racial divides and discrimination (Massey, 2007).

Sue described experiences in both her classes and at her cashier job at a large retail store of negative racial attitudes and what Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, (2000) have
labeled microaggressions – casual comments or actions that may be offensive and that reveal a sense of ignorance or prejudice. She described with a slight sense of annoyance in her voice the ways that customers and other employees at her job avoided her at times.

In one of her community college classes, she recognized the larger social picture that influenced her instructor’s attitudes toward the majority of African American students in her class, resulting in low expectations for all students of color:

   They [instructors] deal with so many other students that don’t come to class and they don’t care to do any other work, and especially me being an African American. It’s weird because some teachers look at all the other students and see how they are behaving and think that you are going to behave the same way. I did have that problem this semester in a speech class. It was very tedious because the teacher thought that all the Black students were going to be delinquents and there was nobody that would really take the class seriously. You just have to put your all in to that class, and I ended up coming out on top in that class.

   Understanding the specific nature of barriers for underrepresented minority access and outcomes in higher education – over and above those barriers experienced by low-income students – requires engaging in a more “nuanced and complex debate about the various social, economic, cultural, geographic, legal, and legislative contexts that give rise to educational success for some and poor educational opportunities for others” (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006, p. 592). A clear limitation of this study’s analysis is the small sample size, both in the larger study and within the racial and ethnic groups that experience wide diversity and variation within each specific group. I make no claims or generalizations about the data on racial and ethnic groups in this study, however,
examining the lived experience of individuals as they navigate the college pathway illuminates specific issues that resonate with larger studies and can potentially reinforce recommendations for practice (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Creswell, 2008). For example, among all 17 participants in this study, only one African American student experienced failure in their first attempt at college due to unpaid balances and eventual default on their student loans or tuition. The Center for American Progress, (2012) found that 27% of African American college students with bachelor’s degrees held more than $30,000 in loan debt compared to only 16% for their White counterparts. As demonstrated above, financial considerations were significant constraints on college choice for most students in this study, but like the national data shows, African American students are disproportionately impacted.

There are other examples of specific constraints on college choice for minority students, and support is found in the literature in describing these constraints. Lou, age 38, was attracted to Midwest State University through the respect and reputation of their sports teams and also their marching bands that featured so prominently during football halftime shows. On a college preparatory track in high school toward his preferred college, Lou’s academic experience suddenly changed, including his plans to attend Midwest State, when confronted by the pressures at home and within his community.

I was dumbed down to fit it in. You got the bullying and the hazing. It wasn't cyber bullying it was just physical bullying and then I played instruments and I was so different from all the other Black kids. I was so different from my Black brothers and sisters. So I believed I could go to Midwest State but my community let me know ‘you don't belong there’, and I needed to make sure that I was
accepted by my community. So I put down the bassoon and the trumpet and quit reading all this Shakespeare, ‘tis noble in the mind’ stuff and learned NWA [rap].

Teranishi and Briscoe (2006) cite the ubiquity of a theory posited by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) on specific academic behaviors interpreted in the African American community as either “acting white” for good performance or “acting black” for poor outcomes. While this theory has been subject to criticism “it underscores the way in which students can and do bring their own social and cultural definitions to what skin color means” (Teranishi & Briscoe, 2006, p. 93). For Lou, dumbing himself down meant delaying his dream of academic accomplishment. It took him eight years to complete an associate degree and begin applying to transfer colleges. However, even as an honor student, Lou doubted his ability to be accepted at Midwest State and found himself making excuses about not applying, first for a summer fellowship offered to prospective community college transfer students, and then to the university itself for admission. Those excuses were rooted in his experience as an African American, ones reflected in the literature on the experiences of African American students on predominantly White institution campuses (Alon & Tienda, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007; Griffin & Allen, 2006).

I want to go to Midwest State, I have wanted to do that my whole life. I kept my record clean and I get A's in my courses and I lead. But I don't think that they are going to let me in. I don't think they like Black students. I don't know if I am accepted there. You understand what I am saying? But then I didn't know how to fill out the application and what they wanted and I didn't do it. And then I got back into the whole self-defeating behavior: “you don't know, you're not smart
enough, you're an idiot, you're not in your arena, you're out of your league.” So I
guess am going to go to Local State University. I don’t want to do it.

Citing a study by Freeman (1997), Teranishi and Briscoe (2006) write that “the
intimidation factor” felt by African American students about the college application
process and thoughts about attending predominantly white institutions “was the most
prevalent theme in her interviews with Black high school students when she asked them
about barriers to college access” (p. 608). Even a 38-year old father of two who had
struggled but finally succeeded academically in his second college experience expressed
a sense of intimidation in thinking about attending his dream transfer college. Another
well-known and oft-cited theory pertaining particularly to African American students is
Steele and Aronson’s (1995) concept of stereotype threat, a measurable psychological
phenomenon where African American students experience sudden self-doubt and
underperform on tests when told that the test explicitly measured cognitive ability, or
when they were asked to first give their racial identity before beginning the test. When
Lou said that he went “back into the whole self-defeating behavior” he seemed to be
citing Steele and Aronson’s (1995) study, describing ways that he self-confirmed a
negative stereotype about his race: he “didn’t know how to fill out the application”; he
was “out of his league”; Midwest State did not “like Black students”; and that he was
resigned to attend his second choice transfer college even though, as he said, “I don’t
want to do it.”

The first postsecondary experiences of the two Latino participants in this study,
Mark and James, reflected the experience of a majority of Latino college students
nationally in a variety of ways. Among all Latino undergraduate enrollments nationally,
55% attended community colleges, the only race or ethnicity above 50% for that category (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2012). Second, both Mark and James were first generation college students and both lacked access to highly educated adults in their family and community who could advise them about college options, a factor most pronounced among Latinos (Roderick et al., 2008). Third, both participants applied to only one transfer college, despite having numerous options because of their academic high achievement. Goldrick-Rab (2007) cites Turley’s (2006) findings that Latino parents, over and above other groups, prefer their children to attend nearby colleges, which constrains application options for other colleges. Furthermore, Bensimon and Dowd (2009) found, in their interviews of Latino community college students, that many were apprehensive about asking counselors or instructors for help in deciphering complex course pathways and transfer options. While Mark did not indicate concern or apprehension, he seemingly acted alone in almost all his college decisions. Due to a professed lack of time working and taking classes full-time, he told me that he rarely spoke with either instructors or counselors. The third child out of four in his family, he was the only sibling to be interested and to achieve success in college. And among his friends, he said, “I think I motivated myself more than my friends. They really didn’t want to go to college.”

Mark and James also diverged from the broad Latino experience in important ways. They were highly motivated to achieve a bachelor’s degree and beyond. Nationally, Latinos had the lowest aspirations-to-college attainment gap of all groups – only 60% who aspire to college actually enroll (Moore & Shulock, 2007; Roderick et al., 2008). The fastest growing minority group, Latinos are also the least well educated,
completing high school or postsecondary credentials at lower levels than any other group, an education deficit that threatens the economies of some the largest states in the U.S. with majority Latino populations (College Board, 2010; Moore and Shulock, 2007). Like the other high-achievers in this study, Mark and James were driven to succeed despite structural or family constraints on their college choice.

Family constraints on college choice were strong indicators for the two female participants who identified as Arab American. Before proceeding with participant discussion and scholarship on Arab American identity, values, traditions, and practices, it is imperative to note the ubiquity of discrimination and racial/cultural profiling for Arab Americans and for people of Middle Eastern descent, especially following the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Abu El-Haj, 2009). As in any large demographic group, the multiple expressions of identity, values, tradition, and practice within that group are astonishingly diverse. Within Arab American communities, for example, el-Aswad (2006) notes the “plasticity of Arab American identity” (p. 115), readily apparent to any interested observer. Deciphering the lived experience of Arab American women requires an expanded explanation of “the precarious position” they occupy and the multiple identifies they regularly inhabit. (Abu El-Haj, 2009, p. 1). Darraj (2005) described the specific spaces that Arab American women occupy:

In American society, women of Arab descent or ethnicity find themselves portrayed in two different ways: their family and the Arab community regard them in one way (the personal), while the larger American society, and especially the American government, regard them in another way (the political). Consequently, Arab American women face personal challenges within their own communities regarding education, sexuality, work, and marriage. At the same time, they face overtly political obstacles from the larger American community (p. 160).
The context of this competing personal and political dynamic for Arab American women is expressed most visibly in stereotypical media, television, or film portrayals of “Arab culture” that is “inherently backwards, uncivilized, and excessively patriarchal” (Abdulhadi, Naber, & Alsultany, 2005, p. 11). There is an “otherness” quality to life in the U.S. for many Arab American women, a grey zone between a public perception (and law enforcement perception) that racializes them as “non-white others” or “the enemy within”, and then designates them as White/Caucasian on the U.S. census (Abdulhadi Naber, & Alsultany, 2005, p. 12). To be classified as White immediately creates a sense of invisibility among many recent Middle Eastern immigrants, a feeling that one’s culture and values are “being erased” (Attia, 2005, p. 92).

Describing Arab American women’s lived experience from an outsiders perspective is also a “precarious position” because of the pervasive level of ignorance and misperception among Americans about the variety of Arab American culture and expression. The hazard I or any researcher, journalist, or writer faces is in reinforcing negative stereotypes about cultures and gender, i.e., the stereotyped hyper-patriarchy and sexism among Arab American men and the stereotyped submissive, often veiled women whose lives are sheltered and restricted. The extent to which these stereotypes have embedded themselves in American minds is described by a growing cohort of Arab American feminists who are leading mindful changes both within their own communities and in the public and academic sphere. These feminists remind us that, while it is imperative to speak out against familial and communal oppressive practices that are “intensified upon immigration, as Arab communities struggle with the pressures of
racism and assimilation”, it is equally important to acknowledge that patriarchal patterns and violence against women are all too prevalent within the majority population of the United States itself (Abdulhadi, Naber, & Alsultany, 2005, p. 19).

Returning to the lived experience of the Arab American participants in this study, there were specific ways that college choice and transfer college choice were constrained by familial norms and traditions. Karen and her adult siblings lived with her parents, following traditions that prescribed living at home until marriage. At this stage in her life, Karen told me, living on campus or away from home was not an option. As such, Karen’s transfer college choice was constrained by this necessity, and only nearby college attendance was possible. Financial considerations also played a part, as Karen described, because the family only owned two cars among five adults, compelling the siblings to attend the same institutions. Second, Karen’s academic trajectory was clearly informed by her father, who counseled her twice when she first took interest in veterinary school, and then an interest in psychology. At both stages, her father suggested that jobs were scarce or time was short, and thus nursing was the best option for her.

Another Arab American participant, Kate, described the ways her father respected both her and her mother. Her father treated her “like a son” and she was grateful for this because of the differing practices she saw within families of some of her friends, where she felt that brothers often occupied a privileged space. Another situation also acted initially as a constraint on her college choice considerations. She became engaged at age 19 to an Arab American man while teaching English abroad. Kate returned to the U.S. to attend community college and prepare for married life. As she began talking about and preparing to transfer to a four-year college, she felt great pressure from her fiancé to
attend a transfer college nearby his home and work, rather than the college she preferred which was located within 50 miles.

He was annoying me about going to City State University, and my advisor was saying aim higher than that, but he was very controlling, he wanted to be where he could see me, he wanted to watch me. He had that typical mentality and I think that’s what got us to separate. At the end of the day, I really understood that nothing else is going to have my back if I don’t have an education. And that’s what kept me going.

Kate’s experience is reflected in the personal experience of Darraj (2005), who was not allowed to date or talk to boys on the phone as a teenager but whose father, like Kate’s father, pushed her academically and toward any career that would provide financial independence, “something most of my friends’ fathers did not particularly encourage” (p. 162). The college pathways followed by the two Arab American women in this study also reflect the experiences of other women like them who are pulled between two different cultures but who persevere, succeed academically, and strive for professional positions and respect. Citing the experience of another Arab American woman in her study, Darraj (2005) submits this realistic expression of the two worlds they inhabit:

While we reject these patriarchal modes of thought and bristle at the limitations they try to impose, we similarly understand that our feminist self-definition is not as simple as the American model. We may be angry about being robbed of a “normal” teenager’s social freedoms, but we may find support and encouragement when we decide to apply to college. So we understand, but still we bristle. No one said it was easy (p. 162).
5.6  Social Class and Cultural Capital as a Major Influence on Transfer College and Career Choice

Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1986) two related concepts of cultural capital and habitus, Paulsen and St. John describe how “a student's social class and her related cultural capital and habitus consistently frame, constrain, and structure students' patterns of college choice” (p. 196). The clearest evidence for the differences between the participants in this study’s choice considerations compared to their higher-income peers is in the number of applications they completed and sent to transfer colleges. Twelve of the 17 participants completed only one transfer college application, targeting a college located conveniently near their home. Five others completed only two applications. According to College Board (2012) data, 79% of prospective college students submitted applications to three or more colleges, and Hoxby and Avery (2012) found that counselors at larger suburban, urban magnet, or private high schools advise high-achieving students to apply to at least eight colleges along a spectrum of selectivity (i.e., “reach,” “match,” and “safety” colleges) (p.14). Roderick, Nagaoka, and Coca et al. (2008) also found that many popular college admissions guidebooks recommend the same standard advice about applying to multiple colleges and using the same reach-match-safety criteria. Clearly, the lower-income participants in this study were on the extreme margin of these national application trends, and their reluctance to complete more than one or two applications also clearly constrained their transfer college choice. They relied mostly on their own ambitions – their habitus, or “internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions” (Perna, 2006a, p. 113) – to guide their college
pathway, in contrast to the multiple layers of support, guidance, resources, and expectations that their higher-income peers experience.

The findings of this study also underline and advance the findings of earlier scholarship on low-income high school students, specifically, McDonough’s (1997) and Roderick et al.’s (2008) college choice studies, along with a recent study of high-achieving, low-income high school student choice patterns by Hoxby & Avery (2012). The high-achieving community college students in my study had completed over 30 credits of general education coursework. Most of them were close to finishing the 60 credits required to receive an associate degree, and could therefore be considered experienced and successful full-time students. But like the low-income high school students in the studies cited above, the college choices of the students I interviewed showed the same patterns of college choice constraint, with potential impacts on their financial aid packages, their baccalaureate completion, and their prospective lifetime earnings. McDonough’s (1997) low-income high school students acted according to a “bounded rationality” that focused on “satisfactory alternatives due to time and resource limitations” and influenced by their “physical location, social networks, and environmental stimuli” (p. 10). There was clear evidence of the same kind of constrained or bounded rationality among participants in this study, suggesting that class origins continue to constrain transfer college choice of experienced and successful community college students. As I have mentioned above, there was a sense of urgency among the students I interviewed, an impatience to transfer, achieve their bachelor’s degree goals and move onward.
Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) found evidence that community colleges themselves – despite serving the majority of low-income students in the country – unwittingly construct bureaucratic barriers that frustrate many low-income students who lack the “social know-how” to navigate complex financial aid and academic systems and which drive many students to for-profits, which have eliminated the barriers to enrollment” (p. 121). Similarly, the low-income and underrepresented minority high school students in Roderick et al.’s (2009) study demonstrated almost exact alignment in their first college choice behaviors as the students I interviewed for this study showed in their transfer college search:

First, many students simply lack the information and guidance on what kinds of colleges to which they may be eligible to gain admission and how to determine what college would be a good fit. Second, many students do not apply to multiple colleges or look at a broad range of institutions. Third, *even the most motivated students constrain their college options*, because they do not understand financial aid, lack guidance on how to manage college finances, and do not apply for financial aid in a timely manner that maximizes their awards (p. 85, italics added).

The college-experienced, high-achieving, low-income students in this study also demonstrated transfer college choice behaviors similar to the national sample of high-achieving, low-income high school students in Hoxby and Avery’s (2012) study. Both sets of students applied to very few colleges – whether first college or transfer college - and furthermore,

the majority of high-achieving, low-income students do not apply to any selective colleges despite apparently being well-qualified for admission. These students exhibit behavior that is *typical of students of their income rather than typical of students of their achievement* (Hoxby & Avery, 2012, p. 29, italics added).
I saw this type of behavior multiple times among the experienced college students I interviewed. They told me that they didn’t apply to any in-state or out-of-state private or more selective public college because they assumed it would be more costly. They also didn’t have time: Anne and Mark both dismissed colleges that required more than one essay while Kim and Mary felt an urgency to complete because of their age (28 and 23, respectively). They also largely self-advised about college choices, coming to classes on campus from home or work and then leaving directly after classes end. “I rarely talked to my instructors”, Mark said. “I would only go to class, do work, and then leave.” Dean’s experience was similar, telling me “I wouldn't say that any instructors or counselors here really had any strong influence.” The nursing students, Mary, Karen, and Sue all expressed frustration with the conflicting advice they received from the counselors they talked to about nursing bachelor’s degree options and relied upon their own instincts to decide. The sense of bounded rationality in addition to what Mullen (2010) describes as lower-income students’ logic of efficiency seemed to prevent most of the students I interviewed from considering broader options for transfer. Yet, multiple applications and options for college choice is taken for granted by high-achieving upper-income students, often resulting in negotiations among competing merit aid offers and a strong willingness to attend college out-of-state.

One of the potential impacts of constrained transfer college choice for students in this study is in missing academic and career opportunities and extra funding that exists at selective colleges and universities, a phenomenon labeled undermatching (Roderick et al., 2008; Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2010). Selective colleges spend significantly more institutional resources per student than regional public or private colleges do, and
also have the unique benefit of offering many more research, internship and career networks regionally, nationally, and internationally that can translate to higher paying jobs and global leadership opportunities (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, 2010). The significant gap in per-student spending – another example of the ways that social hierarchies and stratification have been copied and converted into postsecondary hierarchies – significantly disadvantages the students who, I would argue, deserve higher subsidies the most (Baum & Schwartz, 2012; Karabel & Halsey, 1979). Highly selective colleges and universities simply offer richer financial aid packages to low-income admitted students, leaving those students with little or no loan debt (Baum & Schwartz, 2012; Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Yet, due to a lack of advice and a lack of understanding about differences between colleges, and financial aid misperceptions about “sticker” price versus net costs, the students I interviewed – all deserving of academic merit aid – and the high-achieving, low-income high school students in the national studies cited above send few overall applications to those wealthy, selective colleges.

Of the 17 students, only four had already sent applications to, or were filling out applications for, highly selective universities. Both students who had already sent applications received generous financial aid packages that included room, board, fees, and expenses. Dean completed two applications and the financial aid package at the less selective college left him with more than $10,000 in loans per year. His financial aid package from the more selective college left him with no loans, no expected family contribution (EFC), and only the obligation to work on campus via the federal Work Study program. Pell Grants provided the maximum $5,500 toward his package, but institutional need-based grant aid, drawn from the general fund of the richer, more
selective college, provided the bulk of his package. Similarly, Terri’s package from the less selective private university left her with $17,000 in loans, compared with $7,000 in combined EFC and loans at the more selective college. The packages surprised both participants and both attended the more selective, and cheaper, option. While Terri expressed shock at the difference between the two packages, I was similarly surprised by the tension she felt from her academic advisor and mentor at the community college, who pressured Terri to attend her own *alma mater*, the more expensive out-of-state private college. The advisor actually discouraged Terri from filling out more than one application.

My mentor didn’t even really encourage me to try at [selective public] just because she said that they are not very receptive towards transfer students. She didn’t want me to spend a lot of time on that application if nothing was going to come from it.

Like others in this study, Terri made her own decision. She disregarded the advice from her mentor, filled out the application, was admitted, and chose to attend the selective public college with the better financial aid package. It was clear in my interviews that none of the 17 students had been advised or personally understood that there was a correlation between their high academic achievement and their Pell-eligibility and that those combined attributes could translate into both admission and rich financial aid packages at highly selective colleges in-state and nationwide at private selective colleges.  

There is, as documented in Chapter Two, an abundance of evidence showing how class background foreshadows postsecondary attendance and outcome patterns, over and above the academic abilities of the students themselves due to wide funding gaps
between well-funded and under-funded schools. When considering these structurally imposed mechanisms that constrain choices based on income demographics, I think of the talented students who did not “play” the system to their advantage by applying to more than one or two colleges, including a “reach” college, that may have offered a richer financial aid package. More than 35 years ago, in 1975, Karabel and Astin released their findings on the relationship between social class and college attendance. Their findings are exacerbated in today’s even more stratified social and academic environment, and their words bear repeating:

Social class origin is an important factor in determining the rank of the college attended even when academic ability is controlled. In view of the likely link between college prestige and later income and occupational attainment, these class differentials in patterns of college attendance may be an important aspect of the process by which the educational system preserves status inter-generationally. (p. 388, italics added).

There are, of course, limitations to any conceptual framework. A class-based cultural capital framework does not explain all behaviors and outcomes within the findings herein. Within any qualitative sample of individuals interviewed for only 60-90 minutes, the multidimensional nature of any one participant can never be fully explored or expressed. A person’s socioeconomic status, like any particular demographic characteristic, does not drive their lives’ destiny. A clear example within this study is the case of the home-schooled participants. All three of them clearly articulated the major influences of religious practice in their lives, and how devotion to that practice included an expanded world-view, including a commitment to mission-related work abroad. Despite their family’s financial constraints, each had traveled on church-supported mission work and spoke about the impact this travel had on their college and career
choices. Thus, a narrow conception of class-based cultural capital as a constraint on college choice misses the critical influences of religious practice on choice considerations.

5.7 Four-Year College Recruitment Constraints on Transfer Choice

Recruitment among the thousands of four-year colleges in the United States and among the 46 four-year options in Michigan – especially for academically talented students who qualify for merit scholarships – is highly competitive. In seeking to better understand the one and two-college application behavior of the students I interviewed, I pressed for details about what happened after they applied and the details of the financial aid packages they received, if they had received it. One recruitment strategy that conspicuously arose, particularly among smaller private colleges, was rapid response time – within two weeks – for admissions and financial aid decisions. Quick response times provided a sense of relief among students I talked to, a sense that the choice process was now over and they could move ahead on their ambitious agenda to complete a bachelor’s degree. A second strategy was to include several small scholarships within the financial aid package that seemed to balance the loan amount. This strategy of balancing loan and scholarships amounts was especially attractive to many students I interviewed. They eagerly shared with me news of the scholarships they received from the colleges they were planning to attend. Most were small, in the range of $1,000 - $3,000 and left gaps still to be covered by loans. A third strategy employed by a growing cohort of colleges is establishing and promoting a generous articulation agreement with nearby community colleges. The clear advantage that liberal articulation agreements offer is significant cost savings. Transfer students like Pam, Jane and Carol were pleased that
so many of their community college credits would transfer to Private Local College, speeding their pathway to a baccalaureate degree constructed predominantly of courses taken at the community college and, most importantly, at community college prices. These types of strategies demonstrate two broad trends within higher education and also reflect a disconcerting reality at the majority of colleges in the country.

First, more states are creating centralized boards of higher education charged with simplifying the transfer process to increase completion rates in their states. Examples of policies that have simplified transfer routes are common course numbering systems, common core curricula and statewide articulation guides among all public two and four-year colleges so every prospective student understands which courses will transfer (Smith, 2010). Policies like this have long been implemented in California and have been adapted in large and influential states like Florida, Texas, Ohio, and New York. The students in this study were at a distinct disadvantage because Michigan was one of only three states nationally that had the least coordination between the two and four-year colleges and the fewest agreements and incentives for ease of transfer (Smith, 2010). With no state higher education board that coordinated policy, a highly decentralized environment created further difficulties for students – particularly low-income students – to navigate the complexities of the transfer process.

Second, there is significant competition among the 46 four-year colleges in Michigan – some with multiple branch campuses across the state – to maintain enrollment in a state with a declining population. Aggressive recruitment strategies to attract students include creation of a so-called “3 + 1” policy allowing students to transfer
up to three years (or three-quarters worth) of undergraduate credit and enroll for only one year of full-time attendance to earn a bachelor’s degree.

These types of transfer-friendly policies were influential to all four participants who chose to attend local private colleges while commuting from their homes. Claire was impressed by the two-week response time to her application and the two scholarships she received, leaving her with $7,000 in loans for tuition-only attendance. She had applied to a very selective college but did not wait for their response before confirming her first choice. The three other participants, Pam and Jane, (from the rural community college), and Carol, (from the urban community college), all made the same transfer choice, a private non-profit college with several branches dispersed across the state and a strong online degree program. Carol stated that two-thirds of her community college credit was accepted toward an online accounting bachelor’s degree. Pam and Jane were also planning to enroll in their accounting degree program, and indicated generous credit transfer policies as a deciding factor that would result in a savings of significant tuition costs. However, because Pam, Jane, or Carol did not apply to more than one college, they were not able to compare financial aid offers. The many small merit scholarships the college offered was attractive to all three participants. Carol mentioned three that she expected to receive: the Older Student Scholarship, the Phi Theta Kappa Honors Scholarship, and the Community College Transfer Scholarship. She expected to have loans, but was prepared to accept them.

The sustainability of aggressive college recruitment competition in an environment of continued fiscal uncertainty is in doubt. Traditional funding models relying on state subsidies for the majority of college revenues have disappeared, replaced
by ever-rising tuition models that attempt to find the balance between tuition discounting and needed revenue. There is particular concern in Michigan, which experienced a decade of continuous decline in the state budget and higher education subsidies. Due in large part to the 10-year recession, Michigan was the only state in the country with a net population loss during the first decade of the new Century. Projections for future prospective college students show continued declines (Prescott & Bransberger, 2012). Aggressive recruitment, rising college costs, and declining numbers of prospective students present significant challenges to the dozens of four-year colleges in Michigan seeking to sustain their institution for the long-term.

5.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze the transfer college choice considerations of lower-income, high-achieving community college students. Significant data exists on the college choice considerations of middle and upper-income high school students considering four-year college options. However, the transfer college transitions of low-income community college students are largely unexplained. The following five points serve to underline the major issues of discussion related to transfer college choice among the high-achieving, lower-income community college students interviewed for this study:

5.8.1 Class-based constraints. There is clear evidence of class-based constraints on transfer college choice. The 17 participants were college-experienced, academically successful, and older, yet 12 applied to only one transfer college, and the five remaining applied to only two, severely or completely cutting off transfer choice options. Hoxby and Avery (2012) identified this behavior among high-achieving, lower-income high
school students, and suggested that it is “typical of students of their income rather than typical of students of their achievement” (p. 29). Participants in this study also acted according to a sense of bounded rationality, grounded in a cultural capital framework, as McDonough (1997) found among lower-income high school students.

5.8.2 Competitive recruitment strategies. The intense competition to recruit and enroll transfer students among more than 46 accredited four-year comprehensive colleges in Michigan resulted in reduced choice considerations among the participants, due mainly to two recruitment strategies. First, many smaller colleges have committed to providing both admissions and financial aid package decisions within two weeks of receiving an application. Second, many colleges have aggressively pursued generous course articulation agreements with two-year colleges, such that two-thirds to three-fourths of credit toward a bachelor’s degree may transfer. These fast application response times and generous course transfer terms were very attractive to many participants.

5.8.3 Racial, ethnic and cultural constraints. Among the minority participants in this study, there was clear evidence of racial, ethnic, or cultural constraints in transfer college choice. Understanding these constraints, which are well-documented in research literature, is critical to increasing postsecondary degree attainment rates among the growing populations of minority groups in the U.S.

5.8.4 Transfer choice simplicity. The four-year college choice decision was relatively uncomplicated, simplified by a three-step ambition plainly articulated by the majority of participants. Enrolling and successfully completing community college transfer course prerequisites was their first step. Transferring and completing a bachelor’s degree was their second step. Attaining a job and beginning a career in their chosen field was the
final step. Thus, transfer college choice itself was an attenuated process, subordinate as it was to their ultimate career ambitions.

5.8.5 College is work, not fun. Considering the career and job-driven ambitions of the participants, and the extreme business of their school, work, and home lives, the traditional conception of college as a time of exploration, experimentation, socialization, and excitement was upended by the college life experiences of the nontraditional students in this study. There was a sense of urgency to finish this stage of their long-term vision. It was not fun, it was work, though many found satisfaction in the intellectual engagement and achievements they accomplished in college.

5.9 Recommendations for Practice

The following three recommendations revolve around issues of money and class, an appropriate area of concern due to the income and class-based focus of this study. First, community colleges are inadequately funded. State cuts to public higher education institutions nationally have disproportionally impacted community colleges which, in turn, disproportionally serve lower-income students. Unlike most four-year institutions, community colleges cannot regularly raise tuition to cover their losses without abandoning their founding mission of open access to all. Due to severe state cuts, there are now states, like California, where supply of community college courses fall far short of demand for enrollment. We currently have a highly stratified higher education system that mirrors national class stratification by giving lower state subsidies, on a per-student basis, to the colleges that serve students with the highest needs. In an increasingly credentials-based employment system, less funding for the highest need is unsustainable and regressive if the goal is achieving higher levels of degree completion and job
readiness (Grubb & Lazerson, 2007). Whether there is political will to equalize K-12 and postsecondary local and state subsidies in a political environment that seeks cost efficiencies and cuts is highly questionable (Darling-Hammond, 2010, Noah, 2010).

Second, and related to the need for better funding, is for community colleges to continue streamlining first-year college complexity and bureaucracy while increasing counselor/advisor contact with all students. As Stange (2009) and Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) have shown, the complexity of choice in curricular options and in the bureaucracy of admissions, financial aid, and advising are barriers to enrollment and completion for low-income students, increasingly driving them to enroll in for-profit alternatives that have eliminated bureaucracy but can cost up to five times as much as community college tuition rates. However, new models for community colleges that aim to contain costs, increase the frequency and intensity of academic and transfer advising, and increase completion and transfer rates may hold promise. For example, Bailey and Cho (2011) have also shown the ineffectiveness of the traditional developmental course sequences and provided solutions for streamlining operations while Scott-Clayton (2012) found chronic inaccuracies in the two common entrance exams that place the majority of entering community college students in those courses. New models that integrate developmental and credit-bearing coursework or require mini placement test preparation courses that reduce time spent in developmental courses are showing promise in improving completion rates within the few states that have reformed practices (Fain, 2012). Thus, streamlining these functions promises to advance more students through the higher education system successfully.
Third, a coordinated federal, state, and institutional effort to communicate accurate financial aid information to the prospective students who need it the most – low-income students – is vital in order to increase college attendance and to encourage students, like the ones in this study, to apply to more than one college and compare aid packages. Many colleges, including community colleges, establish complex processes rooted in class-based assumptions about what incoming students “should” know and do in order to apply, register for a meaningful sequence of courses, seek advice, and pay for college (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Kezar, 2011). To address part of this dilemma, all postsecondary institutions that receive Title IV federal funding have recently been compelled to add a ‘net-cost calculator’ to their websites. However, the personalized data used to determine net costs varies widely, making direct comparisons between colleges difficult (author’s study, 2012). Specific recommendations for college websites have also been developed that attempt to bridge the college knowledge gaps between low-income and middle and upper-income students, including the use of deliberate “how-to” application and financial aid procedures that deliberately walk students through complex processes (Perna et al., 2011).

5.10 Recommendations for Future Research

Kezar (2011) noted that scholarship devoted to success stories in higher education tends to advance knowledge and policy further than studies on program or student failures. This study has done just that – focusing on the choice considerations of high-achieving, successful, lower-income community college students as they select a four-year college. To better understand the issues, complexities and barriers, however, longitudinal studies of high-achieving, low-income community college students tracking
their progress and experiences over the two-year, four-year threshold and beyond would provide further evidence for data-driven policies that can further support low-income students. Longitudinal studies among this cohort of this low-income cohort would add balance to the existing national data sets that are heavily weighted toward four-year middle-to upper-income students who attend four-year colleges immediately after high school.

Second, as the Unites States grows increasingly diverse and as current minorities cluster disproportionately at community colleges, more focused research attention should be directed at the specific needs of lower-income minority students who continue to have degree or completion rates significantly lower than the majority population, often leaving those students in debilitating debt that can prevent any hope of moving up in social and financial status.

Finally, as evidenced by the growing popularity of the Common Application, web-only information and support (reducing printing costs), and online courses, examinations of the ways that the digital divide may further disadvantage low-income community college students is warranted.

5.11 What Did I Learn?

I have invested a significant amount of time studying, researching, and better understanding the higher education enterprise as a whole. Within the research process itself, I learned to pay significant attention to my personal or professional biases to ensure those biases did not disrupt the integrity of the research design and research findings. In expressing learned outcomes, I will focus here on a broad challenge in higher education and a potential opportunity to address that challenge using as a lens my investigation into
low-income transfer college choice. It was not difficult to recruit high-achieving, low-income community college students for this study. Within the community college honor society Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) itself, many hundreds of high-achievers across Michigan’s 28 public community colleges were prospective respondents. Estimates by PTK advisors of the percentage of eligible students (3.5 GPA and above) they enroll at their colleges ranged from 10-15 percent. Only four students I interviewed were members of PTK, but four others at one college had joined an honors unit that offered unique honors courses. There was also no shortage of low-income students at these colleges. Of the three community colleges I sampled, between 60-70 percent of the 36,000 students at those three colleges received Pell Grants. Furthermore, the students I interviewed contacted me independently from one another, except for Jane and Carol, who were co-presidents of their PTK chapter.

Thus, the students within this study emerged independently from a mass of students at three different colleges, and openly revealed details in their lives that contributed to their two college choices – first at community college, and then their four-year transfer college. I expected and heard 17 unique sets of details and contributing factors to the students’ college choices, most told to me with candor and earnestness. What I didn’t expect and did not discover until the laborious process of re-reading, re-sorting and re-writing the ultimate findings contained within the interview data, were the surprisingly few threads or themes that influenced their college choices and the common constraints that simplified their decision. The question arose for me whether it was accurate to describe study participants’ college choice considerations as a “choice” if they only applied to one transfer college. Their only decision, already made with steely
determination, was to go to college to get a degree; it was not, in most cases, which college.

The constraints on college choice for these high-achieving, low-income students, I have shown, are amply supported in the literature, though dominantly so for low-income high school students, not transfer students. What I found was little difference between the college choice behaviors of low-income high school students as reported in the research literature and the low-income transfer students in my sample, all with significant college experience behind them. These similar choice behaviors underscored the significance and lasting power of social class in determining college outcomes, specifically, the ways that cultural capital and habitus impact college choice. What became clear, finally, was that we know the specific constraints for millions of lower-income students, whether high school or community college. We know that the complexities inherent in applying for, matriculating, paying for, and graduating from college for lower-income students have grown in direct proportion to costs and the employment/earnings-related significance of a bachelor’s degree. We know, and this study has also demonstrated, that there are extra hurdles – cultural, psychological, structural, societal – for minority students as well. We also know that minimizing the complexities and simplifying college access and matriculation is achievable with strategic marketing, as demonstrated by the exponential growth of the for-profit postsecondary sector. Where the for-profit sector largely fails, for undergraduate students particularly, is in the next crucial steps of the process: costs, debt, retention and graduation.

Knowing the constraints for the millions of low-income students across the country, it is possible for non-profit private and public colleges to collaborate, mobilize
and produce the same strategic marketing efforts that the for-profit sector excels in, while additionally applying the same strategic marketing principles to erasing the college knowledge and financial aid literacy gaps. Most students need admissions and financial aid information that presents options clearly, simply, early, and often. If the national economic future of the United States is dependent upon an increased ratio of postsecondary degrees, then it is possible to imagine a national marketing strategy that transcends the current inefficient, regressive model of institutional competitiveness.
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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

1. When did you first start thinking about attending college?

2. Can you tell me about your reasons for deciding to attend (community college X)?

3. What has it been like to be a (full-or part-time) student here at (community college X)?

Research Question One: What are the factors that influence low-income, academically talented community college students when considering transferring to a four-year college or university?

Interview Questions:

1. When did you decide to transfer to a four-year college or university?

2. What were the things that you considered when you began applying to four-year college or university? How did you decide which four-year colleges to apply to? (Moved up from below)
3. Which four-year colleges or universities did you apply to?

4. Where there any schools you that you would like to have applied to that you didn’t?

5. Who helped you (if anyone) decide on a particular college choice?

Research Question Two: What are the factors that influence low-income academically talented community college students when deciding to attend an admitting four-year institution?

Interview Questions:

1. Which schools admitted you?

2. Can you tell me about your reasons for deciding to attend (four-year college X)?

3. Do you have plans for when you will finish your bachelor’s degree at (four-year college X) and what you will do after that?
Appendix B

Research Study Seeking Participants

Four-Year College Choice Considerations Among High-Achieving Pell Grant-Eligible Community College Students in Michigan

If you have:

- completed at least 25 credits and;
- been accepted to a four-year college for transfer and;
- qualify for Pell Grant (need-based) financial aid and;
- a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or higher

then you may qualify for this study.

The study requires sitting for one audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 90 minutes.

Upon completion of the interview, participants will receive a $30 gas card.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please contact the researcher at dadas@umich.edu or by phone at 734-763-7994.

If you qualify, your experiences may increase understanding about the issues that promote and limit access to college.

Thank you.

Contact: Dilip Das, Graduate Student Investigator

Email: dadas@umich.edu

Tel: 734-763-7994